Death is an inevitable fact of life. For the religious as well as for some others, its occurrence does not necessarily imply life’s termination or the final end of conscious being. In most traditional, and even in some post-traditional cultures, death is regarded as a transitional experience, a rite de passage: the deceased leaves behind the familiar vicissitudes of human life and enters into a new modality of being beyond. Funeral rites, perhaps the oldest religious rites known to human-kind, serve as a means to facilitate this transition. In this article, it is not my intention to speculate upon the metaphysical truth of this almost ubiquitous pattern of belief and rite. Generally, I am more interested in determining how religious interpretations of death valorize the human meaning of life. For reflection upon the meaning of death is but another way of reflecting upon the central significance of life. Specifically, I will focus upon early Indian Buddhist conceptions of death: their cultural origins, cosmological significance, philosophical rationale, and social implications.

Buddhist interpretations of death did not originate in an historical or cultural vacuum. Conceptions of the after-life, and the prescribed behavior relating to the dead, were modified adaptations of prevailing Brāhmaṇical patterns of belief. This is especially apparent when we examine the beliefs and practices of the early Buddhist laity.

While Buddhist monks were intent upon gaining release from the cyclical samsāric pattern of death and rebirth, the laity were fundamentally concerned with performing meritorious actions in this life that would improve their condition in the next. Eventually, a lay person might embark upon the renunciatory monastic path leading to nirvāṇa. But until that step was taken, performing moral acts of auspicious karmic efficacy provided the best assurance that
life after death need not be feared. According to this basic Buddhistic understanding, one of the most meritorious acts that one might perform consisted of giving gifts to the monastic community and transferring the merit of that action to one’s deceased kin. Psychologically and philosophically, giving material amenities to the monastic community and merit to one’s departed kin was evidence that the giver had cultivated a healthy mental disposition characterized by selflessness, compassion and charity. Cosmologically, the giver not only increased the likelihood of better rebirth for himself, but also provided an opportunity for deceased kin to share in the karmic benefits of merit. The Petavatthu, a popular collection of short sermons belatedly granted Pali canonical status, frequently describes how one’s suffering deceased kin are transferred to a more blissful state by meritorious deeds performed on their behalf. Socially, the effective material transactions involved in merit transfer sustained the monastic community and fostered a reciprocal relationship between the laity and the bhikkhusangha. In exchange for receiving material amenities, the sheer presence of virtuous bhikkhus presented the laity with an opportunity to make merit. In short, merit transfer was a practical and popular expression of Buddhist piety that was theoretically legitimate, cosmolically potent, and socially redeeming.

From the perspective of the history of religions, this complex of patterns associated with merit transfer also illustrates how the early Buddhist tradition accommodated and transformed fundamental Brähmanical conceptions concerned with the status of the dead and the behavior of the living in relation to the deceased. Before the appearance of Buddhist theories of karmic action, people of the Brähmanical tradition systematically engaged in the performance of rites designed to assist the dead in the nether world. The Buddhist incorporation and rationalization of this Brähmanical pattern reveals an emerging and uniquely Buddhistic conception of death which in turn reflects a changing regard for the significance of life. Buddhism has been frequently characterized by Western observers as pre-eminently given to other-worldly pursuits on the basis of its allegedly pessimistic view of this-worldly life. In the following pages, I will contend that Buddhist transformations of Brähmanical beliefs and rites concerning death portray a somewhat different pic-