
world

An Interview With A Former Sky Burial Operator

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Tenzin Dorjee was a sky burial operator in Tibet for 15 years. He arrived in America 6 years ago and currently lives in San Francisco, CA. Now he is able to give insightful answers to burning questions about Tibetan sky burials and share the beauty of Tibetan culture to the world.

To start off, could you explain what a sky burial is to those who don't know?

In simple terms, it's a popular funeral practice in Tibet where the corpse is cut up and fed to vultures.

How did you get your job as a sky burial operator?

I am happy you asked this question because most people don't know exactly how sky burial operators get their job. Most of the time, it is a family job and is passed down. All of the people I know that have the same job as me, had it passed down from their family.

What is a normal working day like?

Since sky burials are usually performed in the morning, I get up around 4:00. If the family wants a traditional sky burial, then I go to the family's house to pick up the corpse I wrapped before and I start driving to wherever the corpse is meant to have the sky burial performed. If it's not traditional, I have the body brought to me. I usually deal with about 10 bodies every day. One of my friends at the Drikung Til Monastery normally deals with "...up to 20 bodies every day and could adroitly dissect, smash, and feed the bodies to the vultures within two to three hours" ("Sky Burial Lives on in Tibet as Traditional Way for Dead").

Do you ever feel repulsive when cutting the body?

In my first year, I constantly felt nauseous but later, I grew accustomed to it and I was fine once I learned what good I was doing to the Tibetan culture. As the chief sky burial operator at Drigung Til Monastery put it, "...I'm willing to live like this because sky burial is an important part in Tibetan life" (qtd. In "Sky Burial Lives on in Tibet as Traditional Way for Dead").

