

Buddhist Robots to Perform Cheaper Funeral Services in Japan



When experts predicted that robots will take most of our jobs in the next few decades, priests were probably among the least concerned humans on the planet. After all, machines and spirituality don't exactly go hand in hand. But one Japanese company is showing everyone that no job is safe, with a line of "Buddhist robots" that can perform funeral services at a fraction of the cost demanded by human priests.

Pepper, a humanoid robot developed by SoftBank Robotics, has taken on several jobs since it hit the market two years ago. Advertised as the first robot capable of reading human emotions, Pepper has been deployed to banks, sushi shops and nursing homes, where it acts as a receptionist, identifying visitors with its facial recognition software, offering information, or just chatting to people. But Pepper's creators have recently come up with another job for the big-eyed robot – Buddhist priest for clients looking to cut down on funeral costs.

Nissei Eco, a company that has been involved in the funeral business since 2000, recently launched a new campaign targeting budget-conscious customers that don't mind having a robot chanting mantras and reciting sutras, instead of a human priest. The incentive is quite attractive, as a funeral service performed by a Buddhist Pepper robot is priced at just ¥50,000 (\$460), significantly cheaper than having a real priest do it.

Nissei Eco has its Buddhist robots wear traditional priest clothing and garments, but admits that their service is primarily aimed at secular-minded customers in search of cheaper alternatives to the traditional rituals associated with death. This endeavor is apparently part of a large-scale campaign to bring innovation to an industry struggling to adapt to changing times.

Buddhist robots will be making an appearance at next week's International Funeral and Cemetery Show in Tokyo, where hundreds of funeral-related businesses gather each year to display their latest product and services. Nissei claims their alternative to human priests will be the star of the show.

So, yeah, as if funerals weren't dark enough already, we now have emotionless robots performing last rites. It's really hard to imagine what's next ...

(370 words)