

Assisted Suicide

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Bhante's Essays · 9 min read

Abortion, Suicide, Euthanasia, Assisted Suicide and Murder

I think the title just about covers different words we have for purposely bring to end a person's life, whether it's one's own or another's. The argument around this area boils down to what is called in religious circles the sanctity of life or the preciousness of human birth. Murder, the wilful taking of another's life out of greed, hatred and delusion, would, I think, be considered clearly unethical by most of us. The others present a variety of ethical dilemmas. The purpose of this essay is not to go into the intricacies of all the arguments. Here I wish only to lay the platform of ethic upon which we can base our actions, specifically around the recent topic of assisted suicide. Approaching these issues by way of the Noble Eightfold Path, with clarity around Right Understanding, the Right Attitude or Intention arises and so Right Action should then follow suit.

We need to establish the meaning of life and death according to the Buddha's teaching and then to understand the law of kamma. Rarely is any decision to be made a simple choice between right and wrong since ethical decisions are tempered by circumstance and context. That is why the Buddha states the ethical law not as commandments but as 'training rules' *sikkhapada*, literally 'footsteps of a trainee'.

The Vinaya, the rule established for the Sangha of bhikkhus and bhikkunis, is not something the Buddha thought out, but practical and wise as he was, it was only when someone acted unskillfully, did he declare a rule. Some rules are to do with the definition of an institution and others with moral law. The first four are a group known as *parajika*, end of life or defeat. Should a monastic transgress these rules they are no longer a member of the order whether they confess or not. Even should they continue to live deceptively in the order, they will know in their hearts that they are no longer a bhikkhu or bhikkhuni.

The rule that is of interest here is the third *parajika*:

Should a member of the Sangha intentionally deprive a human being of life, or search for an assassin for them, or praise the advantages of death, or incite them to die saying for instance, 'Friend, what use is this wretched, miserable life to you? Death would be better for you than life,' or with such an idea in mind, such a purpose in mind, should in various ways praise the advantages of death or incite them to die, that is a defeat and they are no longer in communion.

Please note: life according to Buddhadhamma begins at conception.

This Rule states the highest form of moral rectitude and is expected of a monastic. What then would

be the arguments against abortion, euthanasia, suicide and assisted suicide? The answer lies in the meaning of life.

A young man came to see me once and told me his partner wanted a child, but he saw no reason why he should bring another being into samsara, a world of dukkha, an ever ongoing becoming that cannot deliver any real happiness. I reminded him that the Buddha spoke of human birth as the most advantageous of all in order to make spiritual progress because here we have that mixture of joy and woe and the intelligence to see where the escape lies. In which case I said to him, in my opinion, apart from attaining one of the four spiritual paths and fruits, there was no greater act of compassion than to bring another being into this life and educate them in the Buddhadhamma. I didn't see him again! I dare say it was a bloke thing about commitment to marriage.

The Buddha gave an image to show how rare a human birth is. He asks us to imagine a vast ocean with one log floating on the surface. Every hundred years a turtle rises to the surface. What would be the odds of it hitting its head on that log?

Although I am a Theravada monk, I warm to the later Mahayana teaching of the Tathagatagarba Discourse for the accent here is on that which seeks its liberation, called rather mysteriously in

Theravada the Nibbanic element, nibbana dhatu. It gives a positive spin to our quest. It points not to the experience of Nibbana, which admittedly is the Buddha's own preference in teaching, but what it is that experiences Nibbana. The Buddha referred to himself as the Tathagata which translates as Thus Gone or Thus Arrived. He refers to Nibbana as the 'other shore'. The Buddhas and the arahants are the ones who have arrived 'over there'. They are the ones who have transcended this life form. And what is it that has transcended this life form but that which knows, our intuitive awareness, satipanya.

Therefore, when we really grasp that this life, the whole of this life from the moment of conception to the moment of death is a training ground, where not a moment is wasted so long as we understand there is always something to learn – even in the most severe pain, in the most terrible depression, despair and anguish – all of it offers us an opportunity to grow in wisdom and compassion. It cannot, therefore, be seen as a skilful act to end one's life prematurely or to help another do so – even at conception.

Now that's the ideal! But the relative world rarely offers an easy, straight forward situation and I am sure you can think of many occasions where a persuasive argument could be made for abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide and suicide. It is important here to understand that unskilful does not mean evil in the way that word is commonly used. It is evil to murder someone, but hard to call it evil to assist someone in their suicide – someone, for instance, who may be driven to distraction with pain or perhaps to put an end to a so-called vegetative state for we cannot know that person's inner state. Yet it is still unskilful to terminate a life for whatever reason for it takes away the potential for spiritual understanding to arise within the person's lifetime and who knows when such an opportunity may arise again. This may seem very harsh when our dominant purpose is compassion

and indeed the wholesome result from compassion may outweigh any unwholesome result from ending life whether it's our own or of another. It may be a case of a willingness to bear any unwholesome results out of compassion for another.

So from our understanding comes our intention that imbues an act with wholesomeness or unwholesomeness. And according to the law of kamma, if we think, say or do something unwholesome, then we will reap some unwholesome result. The same law applies, of course, to wholesome acts. It is, then, up to us to be very clear as to our motivations should we find ourselves in a situation where the premature ending of life seems to be an answer. It may be a smoke screen for other subliminal intentions to argue for the alleviation of suffering, such as not wanting to suffer pain or unable to be with someone in pain. Just because we are not aware of underlying intentions doesn't mean they will not affect our conditioning. We know from Western psychology that suppressed or repressed wishes cause psychological damage. In Buddhaddhamma these are our anusaya, proclivities, inclinations, tendencies. And should we think our intention is benevolent, but is in fact unwise and morally wrong, that will also produce unwholesome kamma. For instance, I knew someone who was a-when-it-suits-me-communist – any way he took to Proudon's declaration that that all property is theft with fierce logic. He built up quite a library, thieving books and for some reason never saw the irony! But then any unskilful act that is seen as skilful by the perpetrator reinforces their delusion. I lost contact so I don't know if he was ever caught or suddenly seeing the self-deception under which he was amassing volumes had pangs of conscience and felt obliged to pay for them. So we need to make sure that our main intention is ethically correct. Often it is only through insight meditation, vipassana, that we become aware of our anusaya, subliminal intentions and the strength of these ignored conditionings.

Nor would it be right to think that in committing suicide or assisting someone to do so that thereby they escape the consequences of the act or of past actions. At the Birmingham Vihara one of our members committed suicide and I asked Ven. Dr. Rewata Dhamma, our resident teacher, what happens to such a person. He said he would go on committing suicide through a hundred lives. 'Rubbish!' was my first reaction – not out loud of course. But after some thought, I realised to commit suicide was a very strong act of will that would produce a very strong conditioning. It was plausible to say that every time that being came across great difficulty that would continue to be their escape. Only when they turned around on that conditioning and refused to obey would the real escape manifest – calling for courage and patient endurance.

These days there is often confusion between illegal and immoral. In a liberal society more and more ethical decisions, more of personal than those of wider social effect (or so it is thought) such as divorce, abortion, suicide, all of which were once criminal offences, are laid at the door of the individual. Unfortunately in making unethical behaviour legal, it takes away the social stigma and such actions soon become normal and ordinary – and easily accepted as 'moral'. The consequence of this is to blind people to the effect of harmful behaviour especially within themselves. In denial of

shame and guilt, there is no possibility of remorse. This turbulence in the heart is repressed by self-righteousness which becomes ever more callous. Witness the philosophy supporting eugenics that lead Nazis to justify killing people with mental and physical disability. So should we find ourselves in a position of advising someone or indeed having to make such decisions for ourselves, we must be rigorous in honesty and not fool ourselves.

Let us for the sake of discussion take three cases: those that involve the doctrine of double effect, those that terminate life by turning off a life support machine and those that involve a patient's desire to die. The doctrine of double effect concerns in the main doctors, but the patient and relatives may be part of the decision making. A patient is in a terminal condition. A doctor administers medicine to alleviate suffering of a dying patient knowing it will kill the patient. The patient may have asked for this or may not know it. Should the medicine be administered with the purpose to hasten death that would be unskilful – and a criminal offence. Should it be to ease the condition of the dying that would be skilful.

In the case where a family is asked permission to turn off a life support machine, they have to be sure that the advice given is clearly one of no hope of survival. If there is hope of survival, then it would be unskilful to end that person's life, no matter what their situation. Here, of course, the questions around so-called 'vegetative states' and artificial life support machines loom large. It is well to remind ourselves that there are no absolute moral laws in a relative world. Each case will have to be dealt with according to the circumstances. And 'best intentions' have to arise out of Right Understanding.

Where a person is terminally ill, should they wish to die out of aversion, depression, sense of pointlessness to suffering and so on, it would be unskilful to stop taking the medicine or sustenance or receive other life supportive measures. However, should they see the futility of further treatment, even though they want to live, to ask that no further life supportive measures be taken, that would be skilful.

Now we all know that such situations can be far more complex than this. But hopefully such clear standpoints give us a basis from which we can act as skilfully as the situation will allow us.

I have here tried to point to the highest ideals of Buddhadhamma. I aspire to them, yet hope I am never tested. And should I fail, there will surely arise another opportunity for growth! In the teaching of the Buddha, even unskilfulness, fully acknowledged, can become a cause for spiritual advancement. If you want to find a good web based source for discussion the BBC has a very readable site on all the important ethical issues www.bbc.co.uk/ethics

The site that best covers ethical issues from the point of view of Buddhadhamma is:
www.buddhistethics.org