

# Euthanasia in Early Indian Buddhist Thought

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## 1 Introductory remarks

The main goals of this lecture will be 1) to describe the attitudes towards death in general and towards suicide in particular in the early literature of Indian Buddhism, and 2) to examine how the principles found there might be applied to modern discussions of voluntary active euthanasia.

## 2 General attitude towards death

No study of Buddhist attitudes towards suicide would be complete without some comments about Buddhist attitudes towards death in general. And no account of Buddhist attitudes towards death would be complete without some indication of Buddhist attitudes towards life.

- The central problem that Buddhist teaching addresses is the universal presence of either actual pain or potential pain. The Buddha observed that actual pain attends every phase of life: pregnancy causes pain and discomfort for both the mother and the fetus, and birth is painful for both mother and child. Throughout life, one is faced with the constant anxiety of sickness, injury, loss of property and loss of autonomy. From at least the time of adolescence onward, most people are aware of the inevitability of their own death, and this awareness is attended most of the time by anxiety, fear and worry. From early childhood onwards, most people are worried about their social status and the extent to which they have the approval of their peers. Beginning in adulthood, people become increasingly worried about their vanishing youth and the encroachment of old age. Inevitably, life ends in death, and this event brings anxiety to the person who is dying and grief to those who lose their loved ones.

Not only is every aspect of life unpleasant, but the cycle is repeated time and again, for after living beings die, they are reborn in some other form. This whole cycle of birth and death had no beginning, and it has no purpose and no deeper meaning.

- The only way to bring pain to an end for oneself is to stop participating in the process of life and death itself. Since rebirth is caused by the desire for continued survival, this final

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cessation (called *nirvāṇa*) is possible only for those who succeed in giving up the very desire to continue living in any form whatsoever.

- A person who has become completely free of the desire for further existence is called an arhant. This person is one who has achieved the highest goal of *nirvāṇa* through a combination of cultivating good character and a knowledge of the real nature of things.

The arhant is described in Buddhist literature as one who has no longing for life and also no longing for death. The following verses, attributed to the arhant Sāriputta (one of the Buddha's closest personal friends and most trusted disciples), are fairly typical of the tone of poetry written by arhants of both genders:

Having attained to non-reasoning, the disciple of the fully awakened one is straightway possessed of noble silence. Just as a rocky mountain is unmoving and well-grounded, a monk, like a mountain, does not tremble after the annihilation of delusion. To one who is without vice, always seeking purity, a speck of evil the size of the tip of a hair looms as large as a thundercloud.

I do not long for death. I do not long for life. I shall lay down this body attentively and mindfully. I do not long for death. I do not long for life. I just await my time, as a servant awaits his wages. (ThG 1002-1003)

On both sides of life there is only death. There is nothing but death either before life or afterwards. So enter the path. Do not perish. Don't let this opportunity pass you by. (ThG 1004)

According to Buddhist values, every moment of one's life that is not spent in the pursuit of becoming permanently free from the snare of beginningless existence is a moment wasted. And so Sāriputta could declare at the end of his long poem on the joy's of attaining *nirvāṇa*:

I have served my teacher; I have followed the Buddha's teachings. My heavy burden has been put down. That which leads to continued existence has been rooted out.

My advice is this: Strive with vigilance. Now my thirst is quenched. I am completely liberated in every way.

Death, then, in which there is no further consciousness of any kind, no further birth in any realm from hell to paradise, is the ultimate goal towards which the ancient Buddhist strived. For those who understood this, death could never be a matter of sorrow.

The Buddhist attitude towards death is most dramatically portrayed in the account of the Buddha's own death. According to tradition, he died at the age of about 80 and was in great pain in the last several months of his life. Eventually he died, apparently of food poisoning after eating a tainted piece of pork. The texts record three kinds of reaction to news of the Buddha's death:

- One monk actually rejoices, because he assumes that monastic discipline will become more lax now that the master is no longer there to enforce it.
- The majority of people 'wept and tore their hair, raising their arms, throwing themselves down and twisting and turning, crying "All too soon the Lord has passed away!"'

- The arhants remained quite calm and clearly aware, saying ‘Everything is impermanent. What’s the use of all this grieving and crying?’

The dispassionate arhants, who were unmoved by the Buddha’s death, were following the spirit of what the Buddha himself is supposed to have said in his poem on death.

Life is unpredictable and uncertain in this world. Life here is difficult, short and bound up with suffering.

Once a being is born, it is bound to die, and there is no way to avoid this. When old age or some other cause arrives, then death occurs. This is the way it is with living beings.

Both the young and the old, whether they are foolish or wise, are caught in the trap of death. All living beings are moving towards death.

Look, as their relatives are watching and wailing greatly, each one of the mortals is led away like a cow to slaughter.

Thus are people tormented by death and aging. Therefore the wise, knowing the way of the world, do not grieve.

In the same way that he might use water to extinguish a shelter that has caught on fire, the wise, learned and skilled man extinguishes grief as quickly as it arises, as the wind blows away a tuft of cotton.

The attitudes toward death expressed in early Buddhist literature is similar in tone to many of the discussions of death that occur in the dialogues of Plato. In the *Phaedo*, for example, Socrates is reported to say this:

Ordinary people are not likely to realize that those who pursue philosophy correctly study nothing but dying and being dead. Given this, it would be absurd to be eager for nothing but death all their lives, and then to be troubled when that for which they had all along been preparing finally came.

Phaedo 64a

Both Socrates and the Buddhist texts make a distinction between ordinary people (often called the foolish masses in Buddhist texts) and the few who have cultivated wisdom or a truly philosophical outlook. **Most of the apparent inconsistencies in Buddhist discussions of death can be resolved if one bears in mind that some comments are intended for the wise, while others pertain to the ordinary foolish masses.**

### 3 Cases of suicide reported in the monastic code

Love of life is most commonly focused on the physical body and the pleasures of the senses. In order to help his disciples break their attachment to physical pleasures, the Buddha prescribed meditative exercises consisting of dwelling on the distasteful and disgusting aspects of the physical body.

It is recorded in the monastic code of discipline of the Theravāda school that some monks undertook the meditations on physical impurity and became so disgusted with and ashamed of their own bodies that they desired to commit suicide. Some of the monks apparently took their own lives, but others approached another monk named Migalaṇḍika and asked him to take their lives. Migalaṇḍika honoured their request and killed the monks with a knife.

After killing the monks, Migalaṇḍika was overcome with remorse and felt that he had earned much demerit by taking the lives of virtuous and well-behaved monks. When he felt this remorse, however, a divine spirit approached him and told him that he had in fact done the right thing and earned much merit by helping monks pass beyond this evil life. Upon being encouraged by the divine spirit, Migalaṇḍika then made the rounds of the monasteries and began taking the lives of monks in order to help them pass beyond this evil life. The text that records this event reports that some monks, who had not yet given up their passions, were terrified by this inspired monk, but dispassionate monks faced him calmly and without fear.

Eventually the Buddha noticed that the number of his disciples was rapidly declining, and he inquired into what was the cause. He was told that the reason was that monks had become ashamed of their own bodies through contemplation of the disgusting aspects of the body. So the Buddha taught his monks a new practice. He also set down a new rule for his disciples:

Whatever monk should intentionally deprive a human being of life, or should look about so as to be his knife-bringer, he is also one who is defeated, he is not in communion.<sup>1</sup>

What this formula has been interpreted to mean is that any monk who deliberately takes the life of another human being, or who provides the means for another human being to take his or her own life, is expelled from the community of monks for life. Eventually this rule was expanded to include a ban on encouraging anyone to commit suicide in order to gain a better rebirth. The final form of the rule became

Whatever monk should intentionally deprive a human being of life, or should look about so as to be his knife-bringer, or should praise the beauty of death or should incite anyone to death by suggesting that this evil and difficult life is of no use, or who should purposefully praise the beauty of death in any number of ways; he is also one who is defeated, he is not in communion.<sup>2</sup>

Eventually this rule was understood to mean that a monk or nun could lose monastic status for any of the following actions:

- directly performing an abortion
- providing a woman the means by which to perform an abortion
- even giving a woman information on how to abort an foetus

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<sup>1</sup>*The Book of the Discipline (Vinaya-piṭaka)*. Vol 1. Translated by I. B. Horner. (London: Pali Text Society, 1949), p. 123.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. *The Discipline*. Vol 1, p. 126.

- giving a family the means to rid itself of a family member that had become a burden as a result of infirmity or physical injury
- even providing information to a family on how to end the life of an unwanted family member

Note that being expelled from the monastic community does *not* imply that a person is not qualified to achieve nirvāṇa. Rather, it means that the person (1) is no longer considered an example to lay people of Buddhist virtue, (2) no longer has the right to offer formal instruction in Buddhist doctrines, (3) no longer is entitled to receive alms from the laity as a religious mendicant, and (4) may no longer participate in meetings restricted to monks or be part of a quorum for ordination ceremonies.

Note also that these rules pertain explicitly to monks. We shall examine later what the implications of these rules were for members of society at large.

## 4 The suicide of the monk Channa

The story of the suicide of the monk Channa is outlined in Martin Wiltshire’s article and is described in detail in the *Majjhima-nikāya*, a canonical text for the Theravāda school of Buddhism. The most important points of this report for our purposes are the Buddha’s reasons for declaring that the suicide of Channa was not ‘blameworthy’ (that is, it was not something to be disapproved<sup>3</sup>):

- Channa was not simply laying aside his life in the hopes of gaining another more pleasant form of existence. Evidence that Channa was not simply seeking an escape into something more pleasant was given by three observations:
  - Channa had taken every reasonable measure to find a cure for his disease, but none of these cures had been effective. In other words, he was terminally ill.
  - His pain was unbearable.
  - Channa had no sense of self or property (‘I’ or ‘mine’).

It is noteworthy that in this narrative, the monks Mahācunda and Sāriputta took Channa’s word for his own state of mind. Once they had his self-assessment of his own mentality, they neither tried to discourage his suicide nor gave their blessing to it. Rather, Mahācunda simply gave one final reminder of the teachings of the Buddha:

For him who clings there is wavering; for him who does not cling there is no wavering; if there is no wavering, there is impassibility (imperturbability); if there is impassibility, there is no desire; if there is no desire, there is neither coming nor going, neither birth nor death; if there is neither birth nor death, there is no distinction between this world and the next world nor is there anything in between the two. This itself is the end of suffering.

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<sup>3</sup>The Pāli verb *upavadati* means to blame, censure, condemn or disapprove

It is also noteworthy that in another account of this same narrative, Channa's estimate of his own mental state was inaccurate. He believed that he was completely dispassionate, but when he actually cut his own throat, he experienced fear of dying, proving that he was not dispassionate after all. Nevertheless, it was his own sincere self-estimate of his mental state that determined the purity of his intentions and made his decision not blameworthy.

## 5 Applying these observations to modern ethical problems

At the outset, it should be noted that the issues under discussion in the Buddhist texts are not quite parallel to the issues associated with active euthanasia that are presently being debated in Canada and the United States.

- The issue being discussed at present is whether the laws concerning homicide ought to be changed such that administering a lethal intervention to a terminally ill person who has requested to die no longer constitutes a criminal action.
- The issues for the classical Buddhists were (1) whether a person spoils his or her chances of attaining nirvāṇa as a result of committing suicide, and (2) whether a monk or nun loses status in the monastic community as a result of deliberately bringing about the death of another person, even at that person's request.

The answers to these questions (in the Theravāda canon) are: (1) A person who is an arhant does not endanger that status simply by committing suicide, and (2) a monk or nun loses monastic status as a result of helping any other person achieve death, even when that person has requested help. (It is not at all clear whether the second decision would be different if the person making the request were an arhant.)

The question that faces us today is: what can we infer from the classical Buddhist texts as to what a Buddhist stance on the advisability of legalizing active euthanasia might be? This question is not at all easy to answer. The reasons a conclusive answer cannot be drawn are:

1. The prohibition against assisting another person in the act of suicide occurs only in the Buddhist monastic code. That is, it applies to the conduct considered acceptable for monks.

**This monastic code was never intended to be applied to the lives of people who had not voluntarily undertaken monastic vows.** Even in countries whose laws have been most strongly influenced by Buddhist ethical guidelines, the basis of the laws for ordinary citizens has never been the code of monastic discipline.

2. The principle issues in which the modern issue is discussed is framed in the language of rights. (Does a person have the right to choose the method and time of death? When this right cannot be exercised by oneself, does one have a right

to help from another? If so, does the right to die override the helping person's obligation not to take another person's life?)

The concept of rights was wholly unknown to people at the time of the Buddha and plays no part at all in Buddhist ethical guidelines. The Buddhist ethical guidelines are stated in terms of overall character; a person who wishes to develop good character should follow the counsel of the wise.

**Because the wise think in different terms from ordinary foolish people, their ethical standards can never be successfully imposed upon the foolish.**

To give but one example: the wise do not have any concept of ownership of property. If a sage king were to try to impose this sense of propertilessness upon people who are strongly attached to their possessions, the result would be social chaos. This has been the argument used most often by Buddhists against the strategies employed by Marxist regimes.

Indeed, there are Buddhist canonical texts that warn kings against trying to use coercive and punitive measures to make people conform to law. Law enforcement that is too coercive is said to lead only to increased efforts by criminals and to an eventual state of perpetual and dangerous warfare between the law enforcers and the criminal classes.

3. The sole Buddhist criterion for whether or not a suicide is permissible (or at least not to be condemned) is the mentality of the person choosing to commit suicide. Moreover, the underlying criterion of whether an action is advisable or not is whether the action is likely to result in further rebirth, and if so the quality of that birth.

It is impossible to imagine that any criminal code in a modern country would try to enshrine or give any credence to these presuppositions. (At the very most, a legal code might try to protect the rights of people who do give credence to those presuppositions.)

What policy, then, would a Buddhist living in a modern country advise the government to adopt in coming to terms with the question of active euthanasia?