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# Asia Pacific: **PERSPECTIVES** *an electronic journal*

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*Asia Pacific: Perspectives* is a peer-reviewed journal published twice a year in May and November. It welcomes submissions from all fields of the social sciences and the humanities. In keeping with the Jesuit traditions of the University of San Francisco, *Asia Pacific: Perspectives* commits itself to the highest standards of learning and scholarship.

Our task is to inform public opinion through a broad hospitality to divergent views and ideas that promote cross-cultural understanding, tolerance, and the dissemination of knowledge unreservedly. Papers adopting a comparative, interdisciplinary approach to issues of interrelatedness in the Pacific Rim region\* will be especially welcome. Graduate students, as well as established scholars, are encouraged to submit their work.

\* 'Pacific Rim region' as used here includes North America, Pacific Central and South America, Oceania, Australia, New Zealand, Southeast Asia, East Asia, South Asia (India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka), and the Russian Far East.

# Buddhist Perspectives on Contemporary Ethical Issues Regarding Life and Death

by Alison Burke, M.A. candidate

## Abstract

How do our cultural views affect our decisions on such controversial issues as abortion, capital punishment, and euthanasia? And what effect would Buddhist perspectives have on the surrounding arguments? Assuming Buddhism brings awareness to the fruits of compassion, material detachment, and the theory of mutual co-existence, in what capacity would this awareness influence the issues at hand? This paper focuses on controversial, contemporary medical issues affecting and affected by the modern world. Our understanding of what life in the face of death stands for is largely dictated by the culture in which we live. In this paper I seek to incorporate Buddhist viewpoints regarding the issue of life: bringing it into and keeping it in the world, and taking it away from others.

The trouble with death is that it happens to everyone. We can't escape it and we do everything during our living years to deny it or pretend—at least in our youth—that it only happens to other people. It is a tragedy that ends the stories to other's lives, not our own. We each harbor a silent pleading, a voice inside that begs an invisible force: "I don't want to die." Fear creeps up at the thought of it, and even more so at the thought of losing our loved ones. We perceive it as the ultimate humiliation to our constancy. What else in the world could negate our lives so fully, bring to an end everything we've gained, attained and fought for? We do all *this* just to lose it in the end?

In our denial and indignation lies a cultural pre-occupation with death in all its ugly, violent forms. On the evening news and in the papers, it manifests as so much pain wherein lives are taken by murder, car accidents, plane crashes.

It's the ultimate punishment of life. No matter how hard we try to pretend it is a disease that afflicts others, or pray that it will take us mercifully in our sleep, it keeps coming back, reminding us that it is *the* door at the end of the tunnel and you can't avoid walking through it. As Bardwell Smith states in his essay, 'Buddhism and Abortion in Contemporary Japan,' "the human problem is not that we are finite but that we have trouble living with our finitude" (Smith, 1992, 65).

How do we reconcile? How do we learn to accept this inevitability rather than live in fear or denial of it? Assuming it is culture that shapes our views, what can we learn from other cultures and religions? Would we learn through study of other viewpoints that our fear of death keeps us clinging obsessively to life? What, for example, could Buddhism teach us that would somehow allow us to live more positively?

## Buddhist Concepts

*Karma* affects us individually and as a cultural and world community. It is the consequence of mental or physical action,

the chain of cause and effect in the world of morality. Hate breeds hate. Acts of goodness breed more virtue. True knowledge and deep understanding of *karma* could radically change the way we live as members of society. Awareness of other Buddhist tenets such as dependent co-origination (*pratitya samutpada*), and the Four Noble Truths (life is suffering; suffering is caused by craving; enlightenment is achieved through liberation from suffering; liberation is achieved through the application of the Eightfold Path) could, in principle, create a wiser, more compassionate society.

In Tibet, where Buddhism is inseparably linked to its culture, death is a part of everyday life. Tibetans "look on death as a threshold, as an entrance to a different existence. And for centuries they have taught people to conduct their lives so as to be prepared for the most important and significant transition" (Mullin, 1998, preface). In Buddhism life and death are regarded as mutually co-existing in a cycle called *samsara*, and Buddhists regard themselves as dying from the moment they are given life. They are inspired to live each day as if it were their last, to "perform deeds that will accumulate happiness in this lifetime and in lives to come" (Mettanando, 1991, 203). According to Tibetan Buddhism, when a human dies, the mind enters the *bardo*, or the "in-between state." The content of one's mind at the moment of death is believed to be of the utmost importance in determining the continuation of the samsaric cycle. "If we enter the *bardo* in a negative state of mind we trigger the negative karmic instincts and are led to a miserable rebirth; similarly, to enter the *bardo* with positive thoughts triggers positive instincts, and results in a positive rebirth" (Mullin, 1998, 32).

Death awareness is a concept found in all schools of Buddhism. Central to the teaching of Theravada death awareness is the development of moderation and non-attachment in life. Non-attachment is key since both attachment and aversion to life and death give rise to negative karmic action. Training in Theravada death awareness teaches us to see things with a sense of clear, calm detachment. Mahayana death awareness focuses on the concept of compassion. "When the trainee has a deeply rooted awareness of death it is easy for him/her to feel patience toward the harm caused by others, and to feel love and compassion toward them" (Mullin, 1998, 36).

To understand death in Buddhist terms it is helpful to look at Buddhist views of life. In Buddhism, death is marked by the moment that *prana*, our vital life energy, leaves our physical bodies. The question, then, is when does it enter?

## Japanese Buddhism and Abortion

Buddhism teaches that life begins at the moment of conception. William LaFleur states in *Liquid Life*, "...Buddhism will hold to the end that a fetus is 'life'...all forms of life deserve our respect. We may not turn them into our private possessions" (LaFleur, 1992, 170). In the West, the abortion argument rages on, both sides arguing over the definition of "life." It seems we can't agree and are all looking for that exact moment in embryonic or fetal development when life begins. It is interesting then to see how modern societies historically influenced by Buddhism treat the matter of abortion.

In Japan, Buddhism still holds some influence in the way people view life and its conception. Unlike Western society, the Japanese are less likely to use terms such as “unwanted pregnancy,” or “fetal tissue.” From conception, the embryo is referred to as a child, “even when there are plans to abort it. Many Japanese Buddhists, committed by their religion to refrain from taking life, will nonetheless have an abortion and in doing so refer to the aborted fetus as a child, one that clearly has been alive” (LaFleur, 1992, 11). This perspective seemingly creates more of a dilemma for those involved in the issue of abortion than for the individuals or society who hold that the “child” is a mass of tissue with merely the potential to create life.

Japanese Buddhism holds that being born is an act of gradualism. Being born into this world is simply a step among many of moving away from the world of gods and buddhas. And it is the largest step; the one that takes us into the realm of humans. Yet even this momentous event does not make one fully human. The Japanese engage in a coming-of-age ritual for every child at the ages of three, five and seven. The annual *Shichi-go-san* (seven-five-three) Festival in Japan is held to celebrate the child’s successful transformation into a full human. Thus, becoming human is gradual and begins at a time well before birth.

If an unborn child is lost to either natural or willful causes, it is called a *mizuko*. This literally means, “water child” and is named so upon the belief that we emerge into human life from “the great watery unknown” (LaFleur, 1992, 24). The traditional belief is that the *mizuko* returns to its watery origin, the world of gods and buddhas. Whereas most people proceed through life in one direction, the *mizuko* “(is) thought to make a quick (move) to a point still near at hand. And it could do so, after all, because its entry into the human world (is) still so tenuous, so uncertain, so unfixed by social ritual. It (is), in that sense, possible for the powers of the sacred realm to pull the *mizuko* back into itself” (LaFleur, 1992, 37).

Since the *mizuko* is considered life, it is only natural for the Japanese Buddhist family to pay their respects to the unborn. According to LaFleur, in many Japanese households, a simple rite is often held in honor of the *mizuko*. In homes, a small icon of Jizo (the bodhisattva for children), can be placed on the altar and reverential bows can be made to it. If a bit more pious and concerned for such things, members of the family may also recite the words of the ‘Heart Sutra’ or a prayer addressed simultaneously to Jizo and the invisible dead fetus (LaFleur, 1992, 148).

Often, *mizuko* are addressed in letters of apology — written by the mother or parents—that are then placed outside temples memorializing Jizo. The folk belief runs even deeper with the superstition held that the child, not having been granted the opportunity to be born may, in spirit-form, seek retribution. If proper respects are not made, the *mizuko* may seek reprisal by bringing great harm and misfortune to the rest of the family. Buddhists in Japan have addressed this issue, stating that the “notion of such retaliation is a delusion,” brought upon by the individuals’ feelings of guilt. Hiro Sachiya, a journalist in Japan, states, “the belief in retaliating spirits is simply false Buddhism; it is even contrary to

Buddhism” (LaFleur, 1992, 165). The cure to fears of retaliation is to make amends with the past. It is important to respect and acknowledge the life that was taken, but more important to face the future positively without a heavy conscience.

Buddhism states that life is created upon conception, and the greatest sin is to break the first of the five precepts (the Buddhist code to living wisely and compassionately). The first precept states that no human should intentionally kill other living beings. Yet, socially-engaged Buddhists around the world do not seek to re-criminalize abortion. The object of Buddhism is not to impose behavior upon others, but to enlighten individuals on such issues so that choices can be made freely but wisely, with compassion and mindfulness.

### Medical Ethics

Buddhism’s emphasis on the impermanence of life is a very interesting concept when it comes to quality-of-life issues in medical ethics. In the West, where the belief in a transcendental deity “has been severely eroded, denial of impermanence still persists, and other saviors, such as medical technology, function to allow denial of the reality of impermanence, finitude, and death” (Gross, 1988, 148).

Our collective fear of death and denial of our impermanence may be the driving force behind the extraordinary measures taken to prolong life in today’s medical world. Many individuals, when faced with their finitude via terminal illness, seek to prolong what they have left. A fear of death or the unknown must trigger this desire to stave off the inevitable. When it is finally time for that person to pass on, when no amount of resuscitation or life support can keep them here, it must be a very fearful experience. Death then is done in ignorance, with that pleading voice inside the head at its absolute loudest; “I don’t want to die.” Hopefully, many individuals do find peace before they pass on, but what, according to Buddhism, lies ahead for those clinging desperately to living in this world? In accordance with the *bardo*, in which direction does that person’s mind go? Buddhism speaks of six realms, each realm representing the state of mind of the person at the moment of their death. The six realms are the hells, the ghost realms, the animal world, the human plane, and the two heavens of the demigods and gods.

To die in a state of anger produces a mental content similar to the hells and results in a rebirth in hell. Similarly, the nature of the ghost realms is unfulfilled craving, and this corresponds with the delusion of attachment. Thus to die with heavy attachment leads to rebirth in the ghost world. The nature of the animal world is suffering due to lack of intelligence, and consequently dying in a state of...mental cloudiness or narrow-mindedness leads to a rebirth as an animal, insect, etc. (Mullin, 1998, 32)

If the terminal patient is experiencing a negative state of mind (craving, fear, anger, attachment) at the time of death then he or she will have to face the negative consequences. It is important to understand though, that our personal states of mind are within our power, and we must decide how we want to continue in the cycle of *samsara*.

It is also helpful to be surrounded by compassionate human beings who understand the importance of passing on with a clear, positive state of mind. According to Mettanando Bhikkhu in, "Buddhist Ethics in the Practice of Medicine," it is of the utmost importance for the doctor of the terminal patient to act wisely and with compassion. He states that the doctor has a responsibility to be available emotionally for the patient and to teach him or her the best way to accept death. A Buddhist doctor is likely to teach the patient the practice of meditation, a technique that initially trains the mind to stay still, resting upon things that are happy and virtuous. As they die, meditators can recollect all their virtuous deeds and maintain mental happiness as they step through the doors of death. If the patients master meditation, they will have a happy after-life destination, and will side-step all the difficulties in dying that arise from negative attitudes toward death. The meditation technique can lead deeper still and allow the patient to enter upon the eternal dimension of existence inside called Buddha Nature. Patients who master meditation to this degree can have full control over their after-life destination (Mettanando, 1991, 207).

More controversial an issue regarding death and dying is the act of euthanasia or assisted suicide. Here, the *karma* of the doctor is at stake if he or she assists or encourages suicide in this form. In accordance with the first precept, assisted suicide is considered as sinful as murder and will generate the same amount or type of *karma* for the people involved. A Buddhist doctor understands the value of life and that, "death itself is one of the main experiences that are conducive to enlightenment if the dying person is detached and mindful" (Gross, 1988, 149).

### Capital Punishment

It goes without saying that Buddhism would never support capital punishment as a method to curb violence and crime in society. Capital punishment is just another form of violence and affects the *karma* of everyone involved. It is an act created to seek revenge against those initially victimized. Proponents for the act argue that it is a form of retribution for the lives lost and that it provides closure for the victims' loved ones. Buddhism teaches that this sense of closure is a fallacy for it only creates more suffering. Further, the continued legislation of capital punishment implies that death is in and of itself, a punishment. A society that seeks to implement death as a punishment must then be the same society that clings stubbornly to living and fears death in the worst way. As an act, it indicates just how much violence, anger and lack of compassion lie at the heart of that society. Robert Thurman states in 'Nagarjuna's Guidelines,' "Taking of life is the worst violence, especially in enlightenment-valuing nations, where the precious human life, hard won by struggle up from the tormented lower forms of evolution, is the inestimably valuable stage from which most effectively to attain freedom and enlightenment. But to take a second life to avenge the first is to add violence to violence" (Thurman, 1988, 138). Adding violence to violence serves no one. Those involved must then deal with the heavy karmic burden of having taken a human life to avenge the first. Buddhists would in this case

advocate for the non-violent treatment of capital offenders. The enlightened society would not seek revenge but would instead instate measures of reform. Compassion must be extended to every living being, most especially to those lacking their own sense of compassion, and those who, due to their actions, are difficult to love (Thurman, 1988, 139).

### Conclusion

The Buddhist concept of living in the face of death is very useful for individuals and society. Buddhism never underestimates the value of life or the importance of proceeding through the cycle of *samsara* with positive *karma*. We learn from Buddhism that all that surrounds us is impermanent and that attachment to it creates suffering. Our perspectives determine the path taken to the lives that follow. We learn from Buddhism not to cling so resolutely to life or conceive death as the final act of negation. Buddhism teaches us that all facets of living and dying are within our power to change. Our minds are ready to be turned to positive thoughts and intentions. *Karma* is not pre-determined; every moment brings with it the opportunity to create positivity for ourselves and for those around us. Buddhism embraces death and does not shy away from it.

(Death) occurs every single moment of our lives, and also in every daily cycle. Each moment's consciousness is said to be a product of the fading out and re-arising of a previous moment's consciousness. The present mind is thus a unit born from the death of the last moment's mind. This is an important concept in Buddhism, and because of it enlightenment is possible. It is due to this continual death and rebirth of the mind on a moment to moment basis that change and transformation can operate within our personality (Mullin, 1998, 35).

Finally, Buddhism values life, and not just living, but also the continuous journey we have been making through the cycles of *samsara*. It teaches us to appreciate the struggle we have made to reach this point in existence. As Mettanando states in his essay,

The probability of being born as a human is so rare, that it has been compared to the probability of a turtle surfacing at random in the wide ocean and accidentally popping its head through the center of the only yoke (harness) floating in the ocean. (It) is not a random event, yet it is exceedingly rare for someone to accumulate enough virtuous karma to be born as a human being (Mettanando, 1991, 203).

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