

Bio ethics essay



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? Bioethics is a very diverse and subjective issue in Buddhism that bases its self around fundamental Buddhist laws such as the five precepts, the four Noble Truths and The Noble Eightfold path. Each Buddhist variant approaches bioethics differently based on the variants primary goal, ideals or practices.

However all Buddhists views of bioethics are somewhat influenced by the universal goal of Buddhism to become liberated from the constant cycle of reincarnation or samsara. In conjecture with Buddhism, the occurrence of samsara allows for one to attain a new view on everything including bioethics allowing for the chance to discover or come to an ultimate realisation which in turn allows for the ultimate realisation of issues relating to bioethics. A Buddhists view of bioethics has many influencing factors but all stem from the main ideal of doing good, avoiding evil and meditation to clear the mind and allow for unbiased or untainted thought.

Buddhism is a religion based on ethical equality, which goes hand in hand with views on bioethics. However being an ancient religion, the bioethics of the modern day complicate the judging of an action as good or bad and leaves it to the knowledge or esteem of an individual's mind to decide what is right and what is wrong. This then brings into play basing judgement on what kind of consequences will occur from the decision, and how that will in the end be of benefit or of least ill consequence to the bioethical issue as well as keeping true to Buddhist law as much as possible. Abortion (the terminating of a foetus) is a highly controvertible issue and is approached by all Buddhism forms of Buddhism in a very serious manner. The central questions concerning abortion however are approached in the same manner;

when does the foetus acquire human status and is abortion ever justifiable? Mahayana Buddhists in particular have adopted a classical Hindu view that state that consciousness occurs at conception, and therefore that all abortion is killing.

But before modern embryology, however, ideas about conception were scientifically inaccurate, and often associated the beginning of life with events in the third or fourth month of pregnancy. Based on the findings of modern embryology, Buddhists today might maintain that the foetus does embody all five skandhas (constitutions of a human being) until after birth, thus abortion is acceptable. This neurological interpretation of the skandhas may be more consistent with Western Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism argues that murder can be a compassionate act with positive karmic consequences, taking into account factors such as the health of the foetus or mother, the population crisis, and the readiness of the parents to raise a child. The XIV Dalai Lama was quoted to say “ Of course, abortion, from a Buddhist viewpoint, is an act of killing and is negative, generally speaking. But it depends on the circumstances. If the unborn child will be retarded or if the birth will create serious problems for the parent, these are cases where there can be an exception. I think abortion should be approved or disapproved according to each circumstance.

” The attitude and motivations of the pregnant woman are hence taken into account and this would determine the ethics of an abortion. Abortion in this light is related to whether the person became pregnant and made her decision to abort without serious mindfulness Although this violates the first Buddhist precept of not to kill, it is a view that takes into account the modern

world and its issues and supports the Buddhist belief of relieving suffering and pain, being in the end, more beneficial to parent and child. The much discussed Japanese Zen tolerance for, and reutilization of, abortion appears to combine both utilitarian and virtue approaches. The Japanese believe that abortion is a “sorrowful necessity,” and Buddhist temples sell rituals and statues intended to represent parents’ apologies to the aborted, and wish for a more propitious rebirth.

The Japanese have reached these accommodations consensually, with little debate, and without discussion of the rights of women. The Theravada commentator Buddhaghosa held that “killing produces karma through the mental effort and intensity of the desire to kill, and the virtue of the victim”. Since killing big animals required more effort, and was therefore “worse than killing small animals”, the karma of killing a foetus would be “less than murder of adults”, and less in earlier stages of pregnancy. On the other hand for Buddhaghosa, the killing of a foetus would be “greater than that of killing villains in self-defence”. This view implies upon a hierarchy within the living world and the state of consciousness and physical development is what is used to determine the justification of abortion. Abortion in many Buddhist positions appears to be justifiable when it conflicts with bodily autonomy or maintain the idea that a foetus is closer in status to a small or undeveloped animal. Although most views conflict with the first Buddhist precept of not bringing harm to sentient beings, living humans seem to be the most important when considering this and preference is given to the mother of a foetus as well as a foetus not being fully recognised as a human being by

some Buddhist variants. Abortion in a Buddhists view however, is seen as a last resort by all variants.

Euthanasia (assisted suicide) is another issue that conflicts with Buddhism's first precept of not killing. Buddhist literature, particularly the Tibetan Book of the Dead emphasises the importance of meeting death mindfully since the last moment of one life can be particularly influential in determining the quality of the next rebirth. In spite of this, the primary goal of the act of euthanasia is the relieving of a person's suffering, and is ultimately seen as the right thing to do. A number of issues in medical ethics turn upon the problem of defining death, but few writers have addressed the question of a Buddhist definition of death directly. Only monks van Loon (1978), Keown (1995), and Mettanando (1991) have argued for a specific definition. This has resulted in the definition of death in Buddhist terms being the "lack of all consciousness" in spite of functioning body parts, which is the lack of a judgemental or perceptive mind even with working organs. Consequently, euthanasia in Buddhism both violates the first precept of not harming sentient beings, and aids against the first Noble Truth- Life is suffering, "Dukkha". Buddhist tradition, especially in Japan, is very tolerant of suicide and euthanasia.

Evidence of this is the Buddha's tolerance of suicide by monks and tells of many different stories praising euthanasia by monks, samurai and laypeople. This suggests that Zen Buddhism values self-determination and praises those who decide when and how they will die when they do so in order to have a dignified conscious death. It appears that Zen Buddhism bases the justification of euthanasia on the significance and moral impact that the

death will have. Euthanasia within this Buddhist variant comes across as a personal decision of self sacrifice for the greater good in an attempt to embody a specific ideal or point that in turn relieves their suffering and allows for the continuation of the samsara cycle.

However the effects of karma still play an important part in the decision to commit euthanasia and Zen strongly emphasises that euthanasia is only acceptable if voluntary as every action will affect the transition of samsara, even the motive of euthanasia. The Pali Canon, or Tripitaka, is the primary sacred text in Buddhism, especially the Theravada tradition. There are three instances of suicide in the Pali Canon: those of the monks Channa, Godhika, and Vakkali. All three monks are seriously and painfully ill and turn to euthanasia. This evidence is highly suggestive towards the use of euthanasia to relieve suffering as it is demonstrated by Buddhist holy men or spiritual influencers. Theravada Buddhism focuses on the medical implications of dukkha and supports the act of euthanasia in attempt to aid the release of the mind and induce the effect of samsara. They put forth the idea of euthanasia generating negative karma only if it is used improperly or involuntary.

The issue of euthanasia from a Buddhist perspective is based upon the effects the act will have on the karma of the individual in question. The cycle of samsara traditionally is affected by euthanasia, but in modern context people turn to the significance of consent and intention. Euthanasia is primarily supported if conducted under the right circumstances. The true definition of death in Buddhism is ultimately the defining factor of Buddhist euthanasia morality however in the event of being able to relieve suffering,

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euthanasia is primarily an accepted practice. Stem cell research (the harvesting of particularly embryonic cells) is seen in a similar light to abortion by Buddhists. It brings into question two sides of relieving suffering of people, and the hapless embryos which, if not deprived of the chance to live, will develop into human beings.

In Theravada Buddhism, the offence of killing is actually not established on the basis of what happened to the victim; rather it depends on the person who causes the death. That is to say, it all depends on whether an individual has the intention of killing. If an act is done with the malicious intention toward a sentient being, then the successful act of killing constitutes an offence of killing.

All accounts of stem cell research from the Theravada point of view place responsibility upon intention, not necessarily the way in which the research is done or the action undertaken. The intention then brings about either positive or negative karma. According to Mahayana Buddhism, it is very normal that when sentient beings are oppressed by sufferings of sickness, etc. great Bodhisattva would sacrifice their own life to succour thousands. From the Buddhist viewpoint, the karmic consequences resulting from the use of stem cell research depends upon the intention of use. If the goal of stem cell research is only to liberate mankind from the throes of sickness and pain and if the active persons view is free of personal bias in the process of embryonic selection, then the action is that of a Bodhisattva, offering life to benefit sentient beings. This in turn is encouraged and deemed deserving of support as it will benefit mankind. Cultivating stem cells to eradicate illness as a

means to prolong life is just the modern man's answer to the age-old desire to prolong living.

This desire to live longer and healthier itself is not wrong from the Mahayana Buddhist perspective, but one should see the meaning of life in what an individual achieves, the length of one's life does not really mean much apart from individual perception. Tibetan Buddhism is primarily against the use of stem cells and they are only to be referenced as a last resort. They believe if stem-cell research starts off from the vision to liberate all beings from the suffering of sickness, then stem cell research does not contradict the Buddhist spirit of social engagement. However the Tibetan Buddhist standpoint focuses on the emphasis of the proper use of embryonic stem cells. Even in situations of life and death, until and unless all other possible options have been exhausted, Tibetan scriptures believe people should avoid transplants of tissues or organ cells derived from cultivated stem cells. Misuse of stem cells is frowned upon and in the case of people exploiting stem cells for the mere objective to prolong life, it will not only immoral but downright deplorable.

Tibetan Buddhists strongly highlight that “ the very nature of human life is impermanence, without an immutable self and is heir to birth, old age, sickness and death” and harming living beings to gratify one's obsessive attachment to life will only aggravate one's karmic obstacle. Stem cell research from a Buddhist point of view focuses on using the stem cells in a proper manner and only as a last resort, thus making the practice in this circumstance acceptable. In order to maintain positive karma in regards to this issue, Buddhism promotes that selfish or biased intentions should be

eliminated and the research should be handled in a knowledgeable and respectable way. Animal research and testing (testing products on animals to test for side effects) from a Buddhist point of view ultimately depends upon the interests or beneficial factors that the testing will have for humanity. This issue is split between the factor of testing every day products such as cosmetics and cigarettes and the factor of testing things such as life saving medicines and immunisations.

All Buddhist doctrine holds that animals are part of the reincarnate chain of being, being potentially both former and future human beings, and moral subjects whose behaviour accrues karma. Many of the Jataka tales, about the Buddha's previous lives, concern his lives as a courageous and self-sacrificing animal; for instance as a deer that convinces a king to stop his hunt. The murder or testing of animals in the eyes of Buddhists in general is therefore karmically unskillful, and Buddhists have considered vegetarianism as praiseworthy, opposed hunting and animal sacrifice, and frowned on butchery and leatherworking as inappropriate occupations.

Overwhelming, traditional Buddhism supports the protection and welfare of animals hence completely nullifies and discourages the backing of animal testing. In spite of this, modern Theravada, Mahayana, Tibetan and Zen Buddhism all support the act of appropriate animal testing if it is possible to benefit a human life. A Buddhist view and understanding of animals has proven to be surprisingly negative at times in regards to an animal's rights, abilities and status. Buddhists in the past have supported the idea that animals are not believed to have a moral conscious as humans have and therefore cannot make self improvements or work through their negative

karma. This idea then put forth the notion that the only way for animals to work through their negative karma was to suffer physically, including the modern day punishment of being tested on in laboratories. Animal's inability to work through their bad karma on their own has led Buddhists to agree that they are spiritually inferior to humans and thus are entitled to fewer rights. However, Buddhists still support the ethical treatment of animals in sentient beings although they are of lower status. Metta or "loving kindness" is meant to be demonstrated at all times as both animal and man are believed to possess the "Buddha nature" and have an equal chance of becoming enlightened.

Organ donation (freely giving an organ to another person) is arguably the least controversial subject in Buddhism. There are no rules in Buddhism for or against organ donation, but central to Buddhism is a wish to relieve suffering. This is something that can be achieved through organ donation. According to Tibetan Buddhism, the consciousness may remain in the body for hours or occasionally days after the breath has stopped. During the time between the cessation of the breath and the departure of the subtlest consciousness from the body – which is the actual moment of death – it is important for the body to be undisturbed so that the consciousness can naturally absorb into subtler states. If the body is operated upon, the consciousness may be disturbed and this could adversely affect the person's next rebirth. After the consciousness has gone into the state of samsara however, it is karmically beneficial to both donate and accept an organ if it is done freely. In Mahayana Buddhism the decision for or against organ donation relies very much on an individual's decision.

People may decide for or against it, without one choice being seen as right, and the other wrong. The needs and wishes of a potential donor should not be compromised by the wish to save a life. The death process of an individual is viewed as very important, and a body should be treated with respect. However, there are no beliefs that say the body should be preserved in its entirety, so removing organs is not an issue from this point of view and organ donation is seen as an act of charity. Central to Buddhism is a wish to relieve suffering and there maybe circumstances where organ donation may be seen as an act of generosity.

Where it is truly the wish of the dying person, it would be seen in that light. A dead body, however, should only be disturbed for appropriate reasons, and with special care. It is also important to consider the consciousness of the dead person, and whether this might be adversely affected by organ donation, as the surgery takes place immediately after the donor takes their last breath. While there is some debate about the right ime and manner in which to take an organ to donate, Buddhists primarily feel that this final act of generosity can only have positive ramifications for ones karma and rebirth. Buddhism believes fundamentally in the cycle of birth and re-birth- samsara. Buddhism as a whole teaches that if capital punishment is administered it will have compromising effects on the karma of both offender and the punisher in future incarnations.

Although generally opposed by Buddhism, different variants base this issue on the circumstances of the crime. The opinion of Tibetan Buddhism on capital punishment is that all human life is to be treasured. It matters not how lowly such life may seem.

Treasuring the lives of those who, in many cases, have not valued lives of others is an act of spiritual courage. This notion supports nonviolence/non-harming (ahimsa) which leads to the advocating of such ideas and causes as world peace and vegetarianism. Taking a strong stance against the death penalty is a logical outgrowth of any religion or philosophy based upon nonviolence, in particular, Buddhism. Mahayana Buddhism holds the firm belief that society should strive to rehabilitate all prisoners to enable them to awaken to their inherent potential for goodness and spiritual growth.

Rehabilitation should be used instead of capital punishment as it is not believed by Mahayana Buddhists that murder ever justifies another murder in any kind of circumstance as people do not have the authority to take life.

Furthermore, retribution, which would arguably be the strongest reason for retaining the death penalty, is not in keeping with the compassionate spirit of Buddhism, or metta. The view of Zen Buddhism is that in Buddhist religious life, the philosophy of maitri and avihimsa, universal love and non-violence, goes against the first precept of not harming sentient beings and is against any form of capital punishment. Furthermore, as Zen Buddhism looks at it, a living being's progress in the "upward way" to perfection ought not to be interfered with lest it have negative karma on the person being punished and the person committing the punishment. In general, Buddhist groups in secular countries such as Japan, Korea, and Taiwan tend to take an anti-death penalty stance, while in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan, where Buddhism has strong political influence, the opposite is true. Almost all Buddhist groups, however, oppose the use of the death penalty as a means

of retribution and capital punishment in the mentioned countries are based on political reasoning.

The Buddhist ethical imperative throughout the ages is based on love. It is specifically referred to as loving kindness (metta) or compassion (karuna) which is manifested in of the practice of loving care. The viewpoint of Buddhism on bioethics is in support of whatever consequence will be the best or most influential conclusion for humanity while doing it in the most peaceful way possible.

Loving kindnesses is therefore at the heart of all Buddhist views and beliefs of bioethics, in hopes of achieving the best possible karma and develop towards enlightenment.