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Abstract

Euthanasia is one of the most popular issues in medical ethics. Euthanasia means killing someone or allowing to die who is going to die soon anyway, at the person's own request, as an act of kindness. Concerning these questions "Is euthanasia morally right?", "Do an action that is merciful morally justified, where a patient is suffering from an incurable and painful condition?", "Is termination of life of a defective infant morally justifiable?", "If a person has a right to life, does he not have a right to take away his own life?", in this paper, the researcher shall stand from a negative point of view.

Key words: euthanasia, voluntary, non-voluntary, involuntary, morally justifiable

Introduction

Every society in the world today is discussing and trying to search the reasonable solutions for many moral issues and dilemmas, which they confront. Some of the contemporary moral issues concerning abortion, euthanasia and the organ transplantation are interesting all over the world. Among them euthanasia is the widespread popular moral issue nowadays. As there are great variations between cultural traditions, the response to the challenge of euthanasia may be differed. Some of the societies seem to accept euthanasia as morally justified in certain condition whereas other societies absolutely stand that euthanasia is morally wrong. In this paper the researcher will present and discuss the response to euthanasia from the standpoint of Buddhist society.

What is Euthanasia?

Euthanasia is a compound of two Greek words—*eu* and *thanatos*—literally means "a good or happy death". Today euthanasia is generally understood to mean the bringing about of the good death i.e., mercy killing, where one person kills those who are incurably ill and in great pain or distress for the sake of those killed in order to release them from further suffering or distress (Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 175).

Euthanasia comprises two important features of acts. First, that euthanasia involves the deliberate taking of a person's life; and, second, that life is taken for the sake of the person who is suffering from an incurable or terminal disease.

Euthanasia can take three forms viz., voluntary, non-voluntary and involuntary (Peter Singer, ed., *A Companion to Ethics*, p. 295). Voluntary euthanasia is the mercy killing with the request of the person who is suffering from incurable or terminal disease. Sometimes there is a close connection between voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide, where one person will assist another to end the life.

When a person whose life is ended is not capable of understanding the choice between life and death, this kind of euthanasia is known as non-voluntary. Briefly speaking, the case for voluntary euthanasia has some common ground with the case for non-voluntary euthanasia, in that death is a benefit for the one killed. The two kinds of euthanasia differ, however, in that voluntary euthanasia involves the killing of a person, a rational and self-conscious being and not a merely conscious being.

Euthanasia conducted against the will of the patient is termed involuntary euthanasia. In other words, the person wants to live but is killed anyway.

There are two ways in performing euthanasia viz., active or positive euthanasia, which means acting to die or killing; and passive or negative euthanasia, which means allowing to die by withholding or withdrawing life sustaining treatment. Here this means that killing as initiating a course of events that leads to death; and allowing to die as not intervening in a course of events that leads to death. All three kinds of euthanasia aforementioned—voluntary, non-voluntary and involuntary—can either be active or passive.

The Response to Euthanasia: For or Against?

Is euthanasia morally right? Do an action that is merciful morally justified, where a patient is suffering from an incurable and painful condition? Is termination of life of a defective infant morally justifiable? If a person has a right to life, does he not have a right to take away his own life? Such questions have aroused intense debate in the medical ethics.

As a real Buddhist, the answer is absolutely negative. The main reason is that refraining from taking life is one of the fundamental precepts in Buddhism.

From the Buddhist Concept of Kamma

The researcher shall defend, moreover, the answer according to the Buddhist concept of *kamma*, the central theme of Buddhism. Here the word '*kamma*' in Pāli, the language the Buddha used, and the word '*karma*' in Sanskrit, literally means 'action' or 'doing'.

The word '*kamma*', as a technical term, is used in the early Buddhist texts to denote volitional actions (*cetanā*). The Buddha said, "Mental volition (*cetanā*), monks, is what I called *kamma* (action)" (F. L. Woodward., and E. M. Hare, *The Book of Gradual Sayings, Translation of Anguttara Nikāya*, Vol. II, p. 82). Having volition one acts by body (*kāya*), speech (*vacī*) and thought (*mano*). Volitional actions may be good or evil. It should be, therefore, noted that all *kammas* can be regarded as actions; but not all actions can be recognized as *kamma*.

According to Buddhism, *kamma* does not necessarily mean past actions. It embraces both past and present deeds. So, in one sense, we are the results of what we were, we will be the result of what we are. In another sense, it should be added, we are not totally the result of what we were, and we will not completely be the result of what we are. However, there is no doubt that the present is the child of past and is the parent of the future.

Moreover, *kamma* is a law in itself, which operates in its own field without intervention of any external, independent ruling agency. Inherently *kamma* is the potentiality of producing its due effects. For Buddhism, happiness and misery, which are the common lot of humanity, are the inevitable effects of such causes. They are not rewards or punishments assigned by a Supernatural ruling power. Buddhism believed in natural law and justice, which cannot be suspended by either an Almighty God or all compassionate Buddha. According to the natural law, actions bring their own rewards and punishments to the individual doer whether human justice finds him or not.

From Buddhist point of view, our present mental, moral, intellectual and temperamental differences are, for the most part, due to our own actions and tendencies, both past and present. *Kamma*, therefore, is one of the causes that determine the nature of one's future life. So, in order to get noble and happy life in future existence, as a Buddhist, it is necessary to establish good actions and abstain from doing evil things. It is evident that no Buddhist should perform not only ending life himself but also asking someone to terminate his life, which are evil actions.

According to Buddhism, man himself is responsible for his own happiness and misery. He creates *Nibbana* and hell by himself. Actually he is master of his own destiny. Therefore the Buddha said thus:

"All living beings have actions (*kamma*) as their own, their inheritance, their congenital cause, their kinsman, their refuge. It is *kamma* that differentiates beings into low and high states." (I. B. Horner, *The Middle Length of Sayings, Translation of Mijjhima Nikāya*, Vol. III, p. 203)

Kamma is action, and *vipāka*, a fruit or result, is its reaction. As *kamma* may be good or bad, so may *vipāka*, the consequence, be good or bad. This correlation between action (*kamma*) and consequence (*vipāka*) constitutes the doctrine of *kamma* in Buddhism.

According to Buddhism, *kamma* is a force by virtue of which reaction follows action; it is energy, which makes it that way out of the present existing life; new life in an inexhaustible stream continually flows forth.

Every action, for Buddhism, produces an effect and it has a cause first and effect afterwards. *Kamma*, therefore, is the law of cause and effect or moral causation. It relates to the physical, cosmic or universal causality.

As the shadow follows the object, and as smoke comes after fire, so effect follows cause, and suffering and bliss follow the thoughts, words and deeds of men. Men reap a harvest of sufferings because in the near and distant past, or in the present

life, they have sown the seeds of evil; they reap a harvest of bliss as a result of their sowing the seeds of good. Therefore the Buddha, the Enlightened One, said;

“According to the seed that’s sown,
So is the fruit ye reap therefrom.
The doer of good will gathers well,
The doer of evil, evil reaps.
Sown is the seed and planted well,
Thou shalt enjoy the fruit thereof.”

(C. A. F. Rhys Davids; and F. L. Woodward, *The Book of the Kindred Sayings, Translation of Samyutta Nikāya*, Vol. I, p. 227)

This endless play of *kamma* and *kamma-vipāka* continue in perpetual motion and this is becoming, continually changing process of psycho-physical phenomena of existence i.e., *samsāra*.

Man is a mixture of good and evil actions. He is always changing either for good or for evil. The changing is unavoidable and depends entirely on his own action (*kamma*) and on nothing else. By our own actions (*kamma*) we make our character, personality, individuality. Through our actions (*kamma*) alone we must change for the better, remake ourselves and win liberation from ill.

Today there is widespread popular support for some cases of euthanasia that is mercy killing for a hopelessly ill and suffering patient is morally defensible. The supporters of euthanasia, including physicians and doctors, say that they accept that to kill someone or deliberately to let someone die is, by and large, a bad thing. Under normal circumstances, persons value their lives and to continue to live is in their best interest. In case of euthanasia, however, death alone—not continued life—is the person’s interest. This means that an agent who kills, or an agent who lets die, is not harming but benefiting the person whose life it is. But in Buddhism committing the euthanasia will not become any benefit but, in deed, both the killer and the killed will suffer from great distress.

No matter how they give the reason for euthanasia, as a matter of fact it commits taking life intentionally, according to Buddhism. Intentional actions either wholesome or unwholesome, for Buddhism, create *kammic effects*. The effects of our action, thus, come back to us just as the waves. If we are kind and keep ourselves peaceful, the returning waves of trouble will grow weaker and weaker till they die down and our good *kamma* will come back to us in blessing.

Moreover, it is clear that the Hippocratic Oath states “I will neither give a deadly drug to anybody if asked for it, nor will I make a suggestion to this effect” (John H. Piet., and Ayodhya Prasad, ed., *An Introduction to Applied Ethics*, p. 267). This is the sway of every doctor. Euthanasia, therefore, is in deed morally wrong.

It is found that some of the societies have accepted euthanasia as morally justified. It is evident that, for instance, in Greek and Roman times such practices as infanticide, suicide and euthanasia were accepted (Peter Singer, ed., *A Companion to Ethics*, p. 294). In Buddhist society such cases, however, were regarded as morally wrong. The Buddha, the Enlightened One, has strictly prohibited not only the taking

life of the others but also destroying himself. It is evident that can be seen in the text, “*The Questions of King Milinda*” as follow:

“Monks, let no one destroy himself, and whosoever would destroy himself, let him be dealt with according to the law.”

(T. W. Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda*, Vol. I, p. 273)

Hence one can say that such practices as infanticide, suicide and euthanasia are morally unjustified. Therefore, no matter what situation is occurred no Buddhist should commit suicide and euthanasia.

From the Buddhist Concept of Death

Here it is necessary to comprehend the Buddhist concept of death. One generally understands that the last phase of life-continuum in one becoming (*bhava*) is called death. According to Buddhism, furthermore, death is the temporary end of a temporary phenomenon; it is not the complete annihilation of the being (Ashin Thittila, *Essential Themes of Buddhist Lectures*, p. 187). Because although the organic life has ceased, the *kammic* force which hitherto actuated it is not destroyed.

Buddhism accepts that our forms are only the outward manifestations of the invisible *kammic force*. This force carries with it all characteristics, which usually lie latent but may rise to the surface at any moment. When the present form perishes another form takes its place according to a good or bad volitional impulse (*kamma* that was the most powerful) at the moment before death.

At death, according to Buddhism, the *kammic force* remains entirely undisturbed by the disintegration of the physical body, and the passing away of the present consciousness conditions coming into being of a fresh one in another birth.

The continuity of flux at death, according to the Buddha, is unbroken in point of time, and there is no breach in the stream of consciousness and so there is no room whatever for an intermediate stage between this life and the next or between any two lives. The only difference between the passing of one ordinary thought moment to another, and of the dying thought-moment (consciousness) to the rebirth consciousness is that in the former case, the change is invisible and in the latter case, a marked perceptible death is visible. Rebirth takes place immediately.

According to Buddhism, birth is the cause of death. Therefore, in *Samyutta Nikāya*, the Buddha, the Victorious One, said:

“All creatures have to die. Life is but death.

And they shall fame according to their deeds,

Finding the fruit of merit and misdeeds:

Infernal realms because of evil works;

Blissful rebirths for meritorious acts.”

(C. A. F. Rhys Davids; and F. L. Woodward, *The Book of the Kindred Sayings, Translation of Samyutta Nikāya*, Vol. I, p. 96)

Moreover, the formula of *paticcasamuppāda*, the theory of Dependent Origination, describes the process of rebirth in subtle technical terms and assigns

death to one of the following four causes: (Nārada Thera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, pp. 333-334).

1. The exhaustion of the reproductive *kamma* (*kammakkhaya*).
2. The expiration of the span of life, which varies in different planes (*āyukkhaya*).
3. Both the simultaneous exhaustion of the reproductive *kammic* energy and the expiration of life span (*ubhayakkhaya*).
4. The opposing action of stronger *kamma* unexpectedly obstructing the flow of reproductive *kamma* before the life span expires (*upacchedakakamma*).

The first three are collectively called ‘timely deaths (*kālamarana*)’ and the last is known as ‘untimely death’.

Figuratively speaking, an oil lamp, may get extinguished owing to any of the causes namely, the exhaustion of wick, the exhaustion of oil, or the exhaustion of both wick and oil, some extraneous cause like a gust of wind.

Buddhism accepts that life is beginningless, that it has no ultimate origin, and in the circle of cause and effect a First Cause or beginning is inconceivable. In other words, for all beings, the cause becomes the effect and the effect becomes the cause, and thus birth is followed by death and death is followed by birth. According to Buddhism, birth and death are two phases of the same life process. Hence everybody has to face death one day. So everybody should have recourse to something in facing death. For the Buddhist how to die is more important than how to live.

In Buddhism there are many instructions of how to confront the King of death. Basically no one knows when the *samsaric* journey starts or when it stops. In the *samsaric* circle we have to establish good *kamma* because the only thing every being owns, according to Buddhism, is their actions (*kamma*). Day after day everyone should practise to be more noble, more pure and more excellent.

Peter Singer has differentiated the degree of euthanasia that killing a disabled infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person who is rational; and killing a self-conscious being is more serious matter than that of a merely conscious being (Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, p. 191). But nevertheless Buddhism regards the killings by intention of any living beings, whether the killed may be disabled infant or rational self-conscious being or merely conscious being or even animals, as equally evil or morally bad. That’s why euthanasia is strictly prohibited in Buddhism.

Concerning the case of any types of euthanasia the response or the solution of Buddhist Society may differ from other societies. Because the Buddhists’ aim is not to release from this present temporary suffering but to get the ultimate liberation, *Nibbana*.

In order to face successfully, however, the unpleasant situations like suffering from incurable diseases, the Buddhists need to keep and understand the three characteristics of the true nature of mind and body—the nature of impermanence (*anicca*), the nature of unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and the nature of non-substantiality

(*anatta*)—before these situations appear. Because of this understanding of true nature and the understanding of the law of *kamma* lead to self-reliance, for in proportion as we understand its operation we cease to complain of our circumstances.

Moreover, the Buddhists believe that there are altogether thirty-one planes of existence in which beings are born according to their *kammic* energies, that is, according to their creative energies generated by their thoughts, words and deeds. The four lowest planes are known as the Four States of Unhappiness: the plane of woeful states which are temporary, not everlasting; the animal kingdom; the plane of ghosts; and the plane of demons. Just above the four lowest planes are the Seven Happy States made up of the human plane and the six planes of the lower heavenly beings. These eleven lowest planes are all planes of desires. Above them are the twenty planes of existence of the higher heavenly beings.

No Buddhist wants to reach the lower unhappiness realm after death. They always expect to be in higher realms. Therefore, no Buddhist would ask to anyone to terminate his or her life to release suffering from incurably ill. The Buddhists think that performing euthanasia in whatever conditions cannot give the benefits for both the mercy killer and the killed. Because in doing so the Buddhists believe that both will suffer the consequences of that action in this life or in the next. This does not mean that there is no other reasonable solution for that situation. The better solution for that situation is facing the death with the cultivation of patience.

In order to get patience, one needs to practise the meditation strenuously. Here meditation means *vipassanā* meditation. *Vipassanā* means scrutinizing and realizing natural phenomena as they really are. Simply speaking, *vipassanā* meditation means insight meditation. There are three types of *vipassanā* meditation viz., *anicca vipassanā*, it is the way to scrutinize impermanence; *dukkha vipassanā*, it is the way to see the truth of suffering; *anatta vipassanā*, it is the way to penetrate and realize the true nature of having no self or soul. I here admit that everyone can face the unpleasant situation fearlessly and overcome it, without committing the euthanasia and suicide, by the practice of *vipassanā* meditation.

Conclusion

It is the law of *kamma* and the practice of *vipassanā* meditation that give moral courage to the Buddhists. When the unexpected happens, and they meet with difficulties, failures and misfortunes, an incurable cancer, coma, the intolerable pain etc., the Buddhists realize that they are reaping what they have sown, and they are wiping off a past debt. Instead of choosing euthanasia, they will make strenuous efforts in accord with the law of *kamma*. The Buddhists who are fully convinced of the law of *kamma* and who have practised *vipassanā* meditation can face any unsatisfactoriness and response them objectively.

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