

**International Congress on Decisions of ending life, Intensive care and
Euthanasia in Europe: Real social-cultural confrontations**

UNIVERSITA' DEGLI STUDI DI ROMA
"LA SAPIENZA"
Facoltà di Sociologia
(Rome, Italy, September 22, 2003)

Euthanasia and Life in Buddhism
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Euthanasia

On September 22, 2003, I took part in an international congress about "decisions of ending life, intensive care and euthanasia in Europe" held at the congress centre and organised by the faculty of sociology, Rome University 'La Sapienza'.

In fact, I have prepared a separate paper presenting the Buddhist concept of life. It is supposed to clear up the meaning of life according to Buddhist philosophy. I was astonished by the proficiency of the speakers looking at the issue from a political, medical and social point of view. Their presentations were clear and practical.

To shorten my talk which lasted 15 minutes (5 minutes longer than the scheduled time for each speaker).

My speech just came out of my heart while I was on stage after having listened to all those very professional and systematic speeches. I began my speech by reflecting within myself and by reading my thoughts at that moment of time. Somehow the result of all this - considering my personal experience in terms of euthanasia - came out as follows:

"When I first received the invitation to the congress about euthanasia, I did not have any idea about the term euthanasia. So I decided to consult the internet and to look for some material related to euthanasia. Then I took some days to study the subject. I discovered that the history of euthanasia began with a Greek medical doctor's discipline code. Obviously the subject was brought up within western civilisation and its evolution process. Today the practice of euthanasia has reached a level which is subject to discussions of legalisation and exemption from punishment for its practice in modern Europe. I feel that these situations are caused by a high standard of life and the multi-facility of living in this continent. Such social discussions are facilitated through the high development, the conditions and the richness of all resources of living. As I was brought up in a different society and world, I had never heard about such things being discussed.

From a Buddhist point of view, a human being is made out of six elements: earth, water, wind, soil, space and consciousness. The processes of birth and death are defined by the act of composing and decomposing of the related elements. Death in Buddhist terms is like shifting house or a dress, simply a passage of changing from one body to another or from one life to another. This is what Buddhism calls rebirth or reincarnation.

Buddhism always recommends a peaceful death, as this is crucially important in order to give a positive influence to the next rebirth or the new life. A peaceful death causes a peaceful separation between the elements and it causes a natural leave to the elements to their right destiny. For an individual with spiritual experiences, a peaceful separation of the elements could bring a deliberate de-composition and re-composition of the elements. This is the definition of the freedom of death and birth.

When it comes to assisted suicide and acts of euthanasia in Buddhist terms, I doubt whether it can be defined as an act of killing in a negative sense, meaning a harmful act, if those actions are always followed by a strong attitude of altruism. However, I found that each country, group and individual have got their own definition of euthanasia and assisted suicide. So, it depends on the case whether it would be considered a harmful act of killing or not. Anyway, I can see that here Europe, there are so many choices of how to face the dying process, which is quite interesting for me! Thanks.”

Life in Buddhism

Life in Buddhism, is called Samsara, which is the world of confusion, characterized by three factors: the pain of dissatisfaction /Dhukha, the changes of impermanence/ Anicha and the no-self nature “I” / Anatta. The main cause of Samsara is ignorance / avidya. Samsaric beings perceive samsaric things to be satisfactory, permanent and self-existing because of confusion and ignorance which leads to the misunderstanding of things and events. The realisation of those three principles is called abhidharma, which means the direct vision of the truth which eventually leads an individual to personal liberation mokhya and to the fully awakened state of Buddhahood.

The teaching about the conditionality of everything in the world, about the five aggregates, can lead to the realisation of the essence of Buddha’s outlook on life. So, if the Buddha’s explanation of the world is to be understood correctly, this must happen through a full grasp of the central teaching summed up in the dictum: whatsoever things process from a cause, referring to the sutra of dependent arising.

‘Dependent on ignorance (of the true nature of existence), arise karma formations.

Dependent on volitional-formations, arises (rebirth) consciousness.

Dependent on consciousness, arises mentality-materiality (mental and physical combinations).

Dependent on mental-materiality, arises the six fold base (the five physical sense organs with consciousness as the sixth).

Dependent on the six fold base, arises contact.

Dependent on contact, arises feeling.

Dependent on feeling, arises craving.

Dependent on craving, arises clinging.

Dependent on clinging, arises the process of becoming.

Dependent on the process of becoming, arises ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. Thus does this whole mass of suffering arise. This is called the noble truth of the Arising of Suffering.

‘Through the entire cessation of ignorance cease volitional formations; through the cessation of volitional formations, consciousness ceases.....(and so on). Thus does this whole mass of suffering cease. This is called the Noble truth of the Cessation of Suffering.’

Thus this doctrine of Dependent Arising, in its direct order, makes plain how suffering arises due to causes and conditions, and how suffering ceases with the removal of its causes and conditions. The doctrine of the middle path, Depending Arising, which avoids the two extremes, explains that all things or phenomena, are causally dependent on one another and interrelated. This conditionality goes on uninterrupted and uncontrolled by self-agency or external agency of any sort. In this teaching both the physical environment and the moral causation (psychological causation) of the individual function together. The physical world influences man’s mind, and mind, on the other hand, influences the physical world. Obviously in a higher degree as the Buddha says: ‘the world is led by the mind’.

Dependent Arising shows the impossibility of a first cause. The first beginning of existence, of the life stream of living beings is inconceivable. And as the Buddha says: ‘Notions and speculations concerning the world may lead to mental derangement. O monks, this wheel of existence, this cycle of continuity is without a visible end, and the first beginning of beings wandering and hurrying round, wrapt in ignorance and fettered by craving is not to be perceived.

In this fact, impossible to conceive of a first beginning. None can trace the ultimate origin of anything, not even of a grain of sand, let alone of human beings. It is useless and meaningless to seek a beginning in a beginning past. Life is not an identity, it is a becoming. It is a flux of physiological and psychological changes.

No sensible man will deny the existence of suffering or dissatisfaction in this sentient world, nevertheless it is difficult for him to comprehend how this craving or thirst brings about re-existence. To do this one must understand the two principle teachings of Buddhism: karma and rebirth.

If our present birth here is the beginning, and our death is the end of our life, we do not need to worry and to try to understand the problems of suffering. A moral order in the universe, the reality of right and wrong, may not be of any significance to us. In this view,

the general man is conscious of a moral causation. Hence the need to seek the cause of this ill. Karma means literally 'action' or 'doing' activities with moral significances. Not all actions, however, are considered as karma.

'Volition, O monks, I declare, is karma' is the Buddha's definition. Volition is a factor of the mind, a psychological impulse which comes under the group of formations. So volition is part and parcel of the five groups of grasping that constitute the 'individual'. Having willed, man acts by deed, word or thought and these volitions may be good or ill, so actions may be wholesome, unwholesome or neutral according to their results. This endless play of action and reaction, cause and effect, seed and fruit, continually changing process of psycho-physical phenomena of existence (samsara).

Karma is volition which is a will, a force. Having willed, man acts, through body, speech and mind, and actions bring about reactions. Craving gives rise to deed, deed produces results, results in turn bring about new desires, new craving. This process of cause and effect, action and reaction, is a natural law. It is a law in itself, with no need for a law-giver. Man is always changing either for good or for evil. This changing is unavoidable and depends entirely on his own will, his own action, and on nothing else. 'This is merely the universal natural law of the conservation of energy extended to the moral domain.

Karmic force and acts of will, bring fruit in another birth after the dissolution of his body, is hard to grasp. There is no life after death or before birth which is independent of karma or acts of will. Karma and rebirth go arm in arm, karma being the corollary of rebirth and vice versa. Though man comprises a psycho-physical unit of mind and matter, the 'psyche' or mind is not a soul or self, in the sense of an enduring entity, something ready-made and permanent. It is a force, dynamic continuum capable of storing up memories not only of this life, but also of past lives.

This psycho-physical organism undergoes incessant changes, creates new psycho-physical processes every instant and thus preserves the potentiality for future organic processes, and leaves no gap between one moment and the next. We live and die every moment of our lives. It is merely a coming into being passing away, a rise and fall, like the waves of the sea. This change of continuity, this psycho-physical process, which is patent to us in this life does not cease at death but continues incessantly. It is the dynamic mind-flux that is known as will, thirst, desire or craving which constitutes karmic energy. This mighty force, this will to live, keeps life going. According to Buddhism it is not only human life, but the entire sentient world that is drawn by this tremendous force-this mind with its mental factors, good or ill.

The present birth is brought about by the craving and clinging karma-volitions of past births, and the craving and clinging acts of will of the present birth bring about future rebirth. According to Buddhism it is this karma-volition that divides beings into high and low.

Beings are heirs of their deeds; bearers of their deeds, and their deeds are the womb out of which they spring, and through their deeds alone they must change for the better, remake themselves, and win liberation from ill. It should, however, be remembered that according to Buddhism, not everything that occurs is due to past actions. Many things are a result of our own deeds done in this present life, and of external causes.

There is no permanent substance of the nature of self that reincarnates or transmigrates. It is impossible to conceive of anything that continues without change. All is in a state of flux. What we call life here is the functioning of the five aggregates of grasping or functioning of mind and body which are only energies or forces. They are never the same for two consecutive moments, and in the conflux of mind and body we do not see anything permanent. The grown-up man is neither the child nor quite a different person; there is only a relationship of continuity. The conflux of mind and body or mental and physical energy is not lost at death, for no force or energy is ever lost. It undergoes change. It resets, reforms in new conditions. This is called rebirth, re-existence or re-becoming. Therefore Shantideva says in his *Bodhisattvacaryavatara*,

(chapter no. 8, verses no. 98)

The notion “ It is the same me even then”
is a false construction,
since it is one person dies,
quite another who is born.

(chapter no. 8, verses no. 101)

The continuum of consciousness, like a queue,
And the combination of constituents, like an army, are not real.
The person who experiences suffering does not exist.

Karmic process is the energy that out of a present life conditions a future life in unending sequence. In this process there is nothing that passes or transmigrates from one life to another. It is only a moment that continues unbroken. The ‘being’ who passes away here and takes birth elsewhere is neither the same person nor a totally different one.

There is the last moment of consciousness which belongs to the immediately previous life; immediately next, upon the cessation of that consciousness, but conditioned by it, there arises the first moment of consciousness of the present birth which is called a re-linking or rebirth-consciousness. Similarly the last thought-moment in this life conditions the first thought -moment in the next. In this way consciousness comes into being and passes away yielding place to new consciousness. Thus this perpetual stream of consciousness goes on until existence ceases. Existence in a way is consciousness - the will to live, to continue.

According to Buddhist theory, by the conjunction of three factors does conception take place: parents come together, mother’s proper season and presence of re-birth

consciousness. It should be clearly understood that the rebirth consciousness is not a Self or an Ego-entity that experiences the fruits of good and evil deeds. Consciousness is also generated by conditions. Apart of conditions there is no arising of consciousness.

We give names, such as birth, death, thought-processes and so on, to a stream of consciousness. There are only thought moments. The last thought moment we call death, and the first thought moment we call birth; thus births and deaths occur in this stream of consciousness, which is only a series of ever continuing thought-moments.

So long as man is attached to existence through his ignorance, craving and clinging, to him death is not the final end. He will continue his career of whirling round the 'Wheel of existence' samsara. This is the endless play of action and reaction kept in perpetual motion by karma concealed by ignorance propelled by craving or thirst. As karma, or action, is of our own making, we have the power to break this endless chain. It is through the eradication of ignorance this driving force, craving, this thirst for existence, this will to live, that the cycle of existence ceases.

Such principles are described also in the 26th chapter, analysis of the Twelve Links of Becoming of Fundamental of Wisdom treatise (mulakaritamadyamaka) by Nagarjuna. In this light, I will leave it with professionals like professors, doctors, politicians and others about what position Buddhism should take regarding the practise of euthanasia in our society. Generally, what teacher Shakyamuni used to suggest was the Middle path, the madhyamika!

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