



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)

A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal

ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)

ISJN: A4372-3142 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3143 (Print)

Volume-IX, Issue-IV, July 2023, Page No.85-91

Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

DOI: 10.29032/ijhsss.v9.i4.2023.85-91

Euthanasia and Compassion argument: A Buddhist Approach

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Abstract:

Euthanasia is one of the most controversial ethical issues of our contemporary life. There are some general arguments for and against euthanasia. . The present paper is an endeavor to apply the Buddhist cult in the context of moral issues related to euthanasia. From our general point of view of Buddhism, we may say that Buddhism goes against euthanasia. Buddha teaches us noble eight-fold path and panchasilas. One shila says that no animal can be killed. But we may argue that if someone is in extreme pain which is incurable, from compassionate ground can we not make end of his life? In this paper we will try to find out whether Buddhism will accept this compassion argument in favor of euthanasia. We cannot be sure that it is only compassion behind that wish for death of the fellow member. There may be hidden greed, hatred or delusion. Sometime compassion mixed with aversion to the patient's pain, which disturb the doctor, family member etc.

However, it is not possible to discuss the matter from entire Buddhist cult in one paper. So the paper would discuss from few of them to show the Buddhist view on the euthanasia and compassion argument.

Key words: Euthanasia, Compassion, Buddhism, Intention, Killing.

Introduction: Some recent painful incidents have forced us to think about euthanasia. Such as Aruna Shanbaug case. In 1973, while working as nurse, Shanbaug was brutally raped. She remains in coma for over 37 years and her case attracted wide public attention in india.¹Shanbaug died after being in a persistent vegetative state for nearly 42 years. Now the question is, can we morally support euthanasia in such circumstances? Answer for this question not easy, because euthanasia is one of the most controversial ethical issues of our contemporary life. There are some general arguments for and against euthanasia. However, the issue of euthanasia is not any unique issue of the modern age. In ancient texts we see the presence of mercy killing. In Buddhism, death is a crucial and problematic issue. Because death stands for transition from one life to another. Does Buddhism come to any ethical

¹ Priyanka,vartak.Euthanasia: Aruna Shanbaug and 4 others prominent cases in india where mercy killing was sought,freepressjournal.com,date-29.06.23

conclusion regarding euthanasia? However the very pertinent question here is: Why should proceed to search out the answer from Buddhism? It is because of the practical ethical nature of the teachings of Gautama Buddha. Human suffering was the priority to him. We see that metaphysical aspects of his philosophy were not the tool for that mission. That is why he kept silent whenever metaphysical questions regarding such issues were put to him. He was not only a teacher with practical wisdom, but also a philosopher with deep compassion for entire humanity. Compassion and fellow feeling are virtues which are important even in our contemporary context. They are the pillars of civility. The present paper is an endeavor to apply the Buddhist cult in the context of moral issues related to euthanasia. However, it is not possible to discuss the matter from entire Buddhist cult in one paper. So the paper would discuss from few of them to show the Buddhist view on the euthanasia and compassion argument. Before proving deeper into the Buddhist thought about mercy killing, a brief discussion about the issue of euthanasia seems imperative.

Part-I

At first we have to be clear about the very notion of 'euthanasia'. The term 'euthanasia' is derived from Greek word 'EU' and 'THANATOS'. The term 'EU' means easily and 'THANATOS' means 'death'. So the term euthanasia means good death. "According to the dictionary, 'euthanasia' refers to 'a gentle and easy death', but it is now used to refer to the killing of those who are incurably ill and in great pain or distress, in order to spare them further suffering or distress."²

We know that there are two types of euthanasia: Active and passive. Active euthanasia involves actively hastening the death of a terminally ill patient by injecting a lethal substance. As Peter Harvey shows, "... is intentionally hastening death by a deliberate positive act, such as giving a lethal injection"³. Here, with an attitude of Compassion, the doctor arranges for the patient's death to be painless. On the other hand, in passive euthanasia, nothing is actively done on the patient, but withdrawing the patient's treatment or life saving measures, death is accelerated. Here the patient is allowed to die. So "Passive euthanasia is intentionally causing death by a deliberate omission, such as by withdrawing food, including intravenously administered nourishment, or withholding or withdrawing medical treatment which would otherwise have delayed death."⁴ However euthanasia may be classified in a different way on the basis of volitional involvement of the person who dies by the euthanasia. The classification as follows:

- a) **Voluntary Euthanasia:** Voluntary euthanasia is that type of euthanasia which is carried out at the voluntary request of the person killed, but when requesting the person must be, mentally competent and adequately informed.
- b) **Pre-Voluntary Euthanasia:** In case of pre-voluntary euthanasia, a patient makes a 'living will' that in case of his or her mental incapability in the future, under such

² Peter.singer,practical Ethics,third edition,delhi:Cambridge university press,2015.p-157

³ Peter.harvey,An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics,new York:Cambridge university press,2000.p-293

⁴ U.p,Hammerli,A Definition from the view point of a physician,S.A.strauss(eds),capetown:oxford University press,1978,p-293

and such medical conditions, he or she is willing for the termination of his or her life terminated.

- c) **Involuntary Euthanasia:** Peter Singer consider euthanasia as involuntary where the person is capable of consenting to his/her own death but has not actually consented, either because his/her is not asked or because he/she is asked and choose to go on living.
- d) **Nonvoluntary Euthanasia:** In case of Non-voluntary euthanasia a human being is not capable of understanding the choice between life and death. So this kind of euthanasia is considered as neither voluntary nor involuntary, but nonvoluntary. A child or person who is severely disabled, severely mentally retarded or who, due to accident, illness or old age, has permanently lost the ability to understand the difference between life and death. Euthanasia of such people would be involuntary euthanasia.

The act of euthanasia being one of the most debated issues for gathered both- support and criticism. The arguments in support of euthanasia are as follow:

1. If someone is incurably ill and in great pain and going to die soon anyway, then we can ethically end her/his life by euthanasia. Example- “anencephalic infants (infants born without a brain); infants who had, usually as a result of extreme prematurity, suffered such severe bleeding in the brain that they would never be able to breathe without a respirator and would never be able even to recognize another person; and infants lacking a major part of their digestive tract, who could only be kept alive by means of a drip providing nourishment directly into the bloodstream”.⁵
2. We have right and liberty of our own life. We have right to live with dignity then we have right to end our live with dignity. Preference Utilitarianism also says this, “Count a desire to go on living as a reason against killing, so it must count a desire to die as a reason for killing”.⁶ Example- “Sorah has had a full and happy life, but she has a terminal illness that is attacking her central nervous system. Her doctor has told her that she will die from this disease, but that it will be slow and painful. By the time the disease finally takes her, Sorah will not be in control of her body anymore. She won’t be able to feed herself or wash herself or even go to the bathroom on her own”.⁷ In this situation Sorah will die with dignity by the help of euthanasia.
3. Euthanasia ensures that no one dies in painfully agony or unremitting suffering.

However the arguments against euthanasia are also stands on solid practical grounds. The most important amongst those are:

1. The slippery slope argument. What is slippery slope argument? “Slippery slope arguments , which are regularly invoked in a variety of practical ethics contexts, make the claim that if some specific kind of action (such as euthanasia) is permitted,

⁵ Peter.singer,practical Ethics,p-179

⁶ibid,p-170

⁷ Dying with Dignity.w.w.w.study.com,date-18.04.23

the society will be inexorably led (down the slippery slope) to permitting other action that are morally wrong”⁸. So if we allow euthanasia then it will be abused. If euthanasia were made legal, then elderly or physically and mentally disabled people will be killed.

2. Our life was composed by god. That’s why our life is sacred. For this we have no right to destroy our life.
3. Killing a person for any reasons is ethically wrong. It is a one type of murder.
4. Sometime the decision to die is not derived from the sound mind, it derived from depression.
5. Sometimes doctors made wrong prediction. “We cannot know for sure that a terminal patient is going to die as quickly as the doctors predict”.⁹

Part-II

Now we come back to our central question: can Buddhism provide us any moral support favor of euthanasia? The virtue of Compassion seems to play a key role in this respect. Can we provide an argument for euthanasia from the compassion ground? From our general point of view of Buddhism, it seems that Buddhism opposed euthanasia. Buddha taught us noble eight-fold path along with panchasilas. From two to six paths of the Astangikauas are five shila or right ethical conducts. There are one shila says that ‘pannog nno hane’ means no animal can be killed. But we have seen that patients are killed by the doctor in euthanasia. Especially in active euthanasia. Buddhist point of view criticizes killing. It is the Vinaya Tripitaka among the texts sources of Buddhist thought which relates most to the question of euthanasia though the term is not mentioned. If we have searched the texts, we could found one text in Vinoya which seems to directly address the question of euthanasia:¹⁰

If any monk intentionally deprives a human being of life, or search for a killer for them, or praises the advantages of death, or incites them to die saying, ‘what use is this wretched and miserable life to you? Death would be better for you than life’, or with a similar idea, a similar purpose in mind, should in various ways praise the advantages of death or incite them to die; he is excommunicated and no longer within the monastic community.

So we have seen from this precept that Buddhism is strongly against of killing a person or incite to die. But the question is why killing or incites to die is wrong in Buddhism? Killing is wrong because of negative intention. Unintentionally kill something has no karmic consequences because it is not intentional. Intention that makes an act right or wrong. Killing is derived from negative intention, that’s why killing is negative in Buddhism.

⁸ D, Benatar, A legal-right to die: responding to slippery slope and abuse argument. w.w.w.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov, date-18.04.23

⁹ Bhante, Dhamnika, Buddhism and Euthanasia, w.w.w.bhantedhammika.net, date-18.04.23

¹⁰ (Vin-1-III, 71-2).

Now the question is, always killing is derived from negative intention? When soldier kill the enemy to save his country's man. Soldier's intention is not derived from negative intention. So we can say that always killing is not motivated by negative intention. In the Mahayana tradition, it is said that the bodhisattva may even give his or her life for the sake of others. The most famous example of this is the story in which the bodhisattva cut his throat so that a starving tigers could feed herself and her cubs. In this context we may argue that if someone is in extreme pain and going to die soon anyway and if there are no medical treatment, then end their life is not derived from negative intention, but compassion. Some children born with birth defect known as spina bifida, in which the infant is born with an opening in the back, exposing the spinal cord. Some spina bifida children paralyzed in his lowers parts; they have no control with his bladder and accumulate liquid in his brain. There is no medical treatment for them. In this situation this children suffers extremely pain. Death is only one option that can be relieves this children. This is the case of Non-voluntary euthanasia. In Non-voluntary euthanasia out of compassion the nearest person may give consent for such euthanasia. On the other hand a morally good scenario of compassion in such when a patient with terminal illness think that his ailment in caving his family to pay too much amount for medical bills to keep them surviving and out of compassion decide to end his life by ceasing the sources of his life without pressure from others. So voluntary euthanasia of this kind may come under the compassion ground for euthanasia.

Now the question is, will Buddhism accept this compassion argument in favor of euthanasia? Compassion is highly valued in Buddhism. But compassion is not the ultimate ground for determine what's right or wrong. Intention has crucial part in Buddhism. Intention will determine the rightness and wrongness of act. The example of an unjustified act of compassion; written in vinaya:¹¹

When a monk request the execution for a hasty execution of a convict to reduce the limit of his suffering from the anxiety of awaiting death.

Motive of this act derived from compassion but the act is condemned. There are important distinction between intention and motive. "Motive concerns the ultimate aim of an action, while intention concerns the more immediate goal of an action, an objective on the way to attaining an ultimate aim¹²." So, compassion may be derived from negative intention.

From Buddhist perspective, an action is bad when it is rooted in greed, hatred or delusion. So killing with compassion is bad when it is rooted in greed, hatred or delusion. In Vinaya text we found a group of wicked monks become enamored of the wife of a layman. The monks spoke to the husband of the pleasures that would be his reward in heaven for having lived a life of virtue:¹³

¹¹ Vin.III.79

¹² Peter.harvey,An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics, p-295

¹³ Vin.III.71

Layman, you have done what is right, done what is virtuous, gained security from fear. You have not done evil, you have not been cruel, you have not been violent. You have done good and abstained from evil. What need have you of this evil, difficult life? Death would be better for you than life. Hereafter, when you die, when your body is destroyed at death, you will pass to happy bourn, to a heaven world. There possessed of and provided with five divine qualities of sensual pleasure, you will amuse yourself.

This kind of act of damage masked as help, not considered a compassionate act in Buddhism.

Out of compassion we thought that killing a person will end the suffering. But Buddhism believes on karma. "If the suffering of a sick person is due to karma, then killing him or her is unlikely to end the suffering, as the karmically caused suffering will continue after death until its impetus is used up."¹⁴ So in buddhist perspective our suffering cannot stop by euthanasia. Because suffering is due to karmic cause.

Buddhist's philosophy says that everything is impermanent- body, mind everything. Dying is an opportunity to see clearly the error of attachment to anything. So enforced death cuts short this opportunity. So this is not derived from compassion.

Buddhism believes that life as an ultimate value, or basic principal is life should not be sacrificed for other values. In Buddhism, life is fundamentally valuable and never be surrendered for any reason or value may it be compassion, amity or anything. Compassion can never sew the purpose of reason for endorsing death. That's why Buddhism not allows voluntary euthanasia. When these were intends to death. So kill a person intentionally, even he/she requests this, is wrong in Buddhism.

Pre-voluntary euthanasia, where a patient makes a living will, also be not accepted from compassion ground. Because Buddhism says that there is no cerinity, patient will change her mind in later. Buddhism also says that there are no permarent self, that's why people's intention are changeable. There are other types of killing, involuntary and Nonvoluntary euthanasia. Wher doctor,s motive of compassion is good, but this compassion mixed with aversion to the patient,s pain, which disturb the doctor, family member etc. In Therevada Buddhism, says that, "no act of killing can be carried out the thought of ill-will or repugnance towards suffering".¹⁵

Conclusion: So we can say that, from Buddhist perspective killing a person not end his suffering. We suffer because of our due karma. Killing a person does not save him from karma. He has to suffer even after death for karmically caused. So it can be said that euthanasia is not the right way to avoid suffering from Buddhist perspective. Rather dying process is opportunity to know that body, mind everything is impermanent. We cannot know this truth if we enforced death by euthanasia. And euthanasia or killing a person is not derived by compassion alone. Compassion mixed with aversion to the patient's pain, which

¹⁴ Peter.harvey,An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics,p-297

¹⁵ Ibid,p-296-297

disturb the doctor, family member etc. So euthanasia with compassion is delusion. Here compassion is unwise. Buddhism also believes that life as an ultimate value. Life should not be sacrificed for other value, like compassion.

So euthanasia is not derived from compassion and euthanasia not ends our suffering from Buddhist perspective. That's why there is no moral support for euthanasia from Buddhist perspective. Euthanasia is not compassion but delusion.

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