

Euthanasia: The Buddhist Hermeneutics in the 21st Century



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Received: 2020-01-17;

Revised: 2020-02-04;

Accepted: 2021-01-06.

ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to apply Buddhist teachings to solve a controversial issue that is euthanasia. It is Mercy killing by a doctor which is divided into three forms of it. However, all forms are wrong according to the 1st precept in the way of Buddhism. This is an important issue in the 21st century. The study of this case uses Buddhist hermeneutics as theories of Interpretation by Intention to explain criteria and the factors of killing. It discusses the case of a doctor that helps a patient to die in peace by injecting some drugs or taking breathing apparatus away.

The results of the study show that Buddhists has a theoretical element what is right or wrong depends on Karma. This is divided into two kinds of Karma which is based on intentional actions through action, speech, and think. Intentions have two aspects which is good and bad. If there are wholesome intentional actions, there are good Karmas. If there are unwholesome intentional actions, there are bad Karmas. There by, Karma and intention of Buddhists are not separated. When Buddhists explain on actions of human beings, especially in the case of euthanasia it is wrong because it consists of unwholesome intentional action. There is the Buddhist hermeneutical theory to interpret the issue in the 21st century.

Keywords: Euthanasia, Buddhist Hermeneutics, Controversial Issue in the 21st Century

Introduction

Euthanasia is one of the ethical issues in Buddhism which is a conflict of ideas between religion and the modern world. For the idea of religion, the moral judgment of an issue is based on Buddhist precepts, whereas in a modern world, it is based on the welfare of human beings. Some issues are wrong in religious view but they are able to benefit the person, family members or society in the contemporary world. For example, in a terminal illness patient wants to die and the doctor believes that if he dies, he is able to avoid the suffering of pain and the doctor injects some drugs to relieve of the agonizing indication until he has life less. Another case is about abortion. This is helping the mother to survive from bearing a child, but this is killing a child who has a chance to live in the world.

In terms of the religious view, the above mentioned issues are wrong because these are not to enhance the power of the human spirit. For the modern world, there is an option to help the patients and relatives to live in peace. So, these issues are a conflict in the worldview of religion and modernity. Religion is concerned with ancient paradigm which emphasizes spiritual practice. But the modern world is concerned with modern and post-modern paradigms which emphasizes the development of science and technology. In this article I will discuss the issue as the post-modern paradigm which is not only to develop a materialistic value but also to mix the ideas of all paradigms together as relates to hermeneutics which is a theory of post-modernity. Also, hermeneutics is an epistemology of modern philosophy.

This article is about doctor's Mercy killing issue. It will be discussed through theory of Buddhist hermeneutics which is a science of explaining the euthanasia according to Buddhist ethics. The concept of post-modernity is a mixed concept of all paradigms (ancient until modern paradigm). Therefore, it is called post-modern paradigm in the 21st century which is related to the theory of Interpretation by Intention. This theory as developed during the Buddha's lifetime which is able to explain the ethical issues in the 21st century.

Forms of Euthanasia

Three forms of euthanasia are as follows: voluntary, involuntary, and non-voluntary euthanasia (Perrett, R.W., 1996: 309). Voluntary euthanasia deals with the consent of a patient who wants to die. This form is concerned with a request from the patient to die so that the doctor is able to decide for his death. Non-voluntary euthanasia deals with the patient who is unable to make a choice between living and dying. This form is concerned

with a decision of the people on behalf of the patient. On the other hand, it is an involuntary euthanasia which deals with unconsciousness of the patient. The patient does not request to die but the doctor makes a choice for him to die because of compassion.

All three forms of euthanasia can be either active or passive euthanasia (Perrett, R.W., 1996: 309). Active euthanasia deals with the cause of the patient's death directly and deliberately, for example, they give an overdose of drugs to patient. Passive euthanasia does not deal with the patient's death directly but they allow the patient to die by withdrawing or withholding treatment, for example, they switch off a machine which keeps the patient alive, this is withdrawing treatment; and they do not carry out surgery which is able to extend the patient's life, this is withholding treatment. If they deny both treatments, they are killing the patient by passive euthanasia.

What does Buddhism think about Doctor's Killing of Patient?

In the case of doctor's killing of patient, this case is concerned with compassion. There by, it is called Mercy killing. The question is whether the doctor's conduct is right or wrong, when it is considered with the 1st Buddhist precept. In Buddhism, there are five precepts: abstaining from killing, abstaining from stealing, abstaining from sexual misconduct, abstaining telling lies, and abstaining from intoxicants. So, the case of doctor's killing of patient is wrong because of violating the first of Buddhist precept.

According to Buddhism, whatever is right or wrong depends on one's intention? As the Buddha taught:

“cetanāhaṃ bhikkhave kammaṃ vadāmi cetayitvā kammaṃ karoti kāyena vācāya manasā.” (Pali Tipitaka 22/334/393)

“Oh! Monks, intent, I call the karma. A human was intent on doing by bodily, verbal, and mental.” (Thai Tipitaka and Commentary 76/334/771)

This message of Buddha described for all of human's actions is called Karma. When people do something by action, speech, and think, it is wholesome or unwholesome. All actions are called Karma because these deal with the intentional actions. In the case of killing, a killer definitely has an intention of killing if he knew that such an action results in death and then he decided to kill. For example, a doctor takes a breathing apparatus away. The doctor knew that such his/her activity could kill patient and then he/she decided

to work for that. Thus, he cannot avoid the intention of killing. According to the 1st of Buddhist precept can analyze that his intention is wrong. Also, his conduct is a bad intent (Akusala Karma) that he performs unwholesome action which violates as the precept through doing by physical harm.

However, the intention in Buddhism is divided into two aspects: good intent and bad intent. People do good thing that is concerned with good intent. If they do bad thing, it is bad intent. In this article, we consider the issues that are concerned with both good and bad intent.

Many issues in society are concerned with one's intention. But these have different results of a bad deed. Why do they different results? Because people have different intentions in activities, some have a strong intent, for example, they have a plan and try hardly to achieve the goal.

Objections of Euthanasia

In Buddhist view, it is possible to discuss with the objections of euthanasia based on two grounds: Karma and mode of death (Lecso, Phillip A, 1986: 55). Karma is a process of science. It depends on what people do by physical, verbal, and mental actions. In the case of euthanasia, it is based on the Karma too. When the doctor helps a patient to relieve the agonizing pain through increasing dosage of drugs until the patient reaches the lethal stage, the doctor's intention of killing is the Karma. The doctor has to receive the result of his Karma in the next lifetime because of this conduct according to the Buddhist rule of Karma. At the same time, the patient's agonizing pain, sometimes from a terminus illness, is the ripening Karma (Vipaka) that he has to receive. This pain is like a repayment of the Karmic debt.

The next ground is about the mode of suffering. In Buddhism, birth, old age, sickness, and death are sufferings. These are inevitable realities. Death is a terminus of each lifetime in the realms of existence. But it is not a terminus to escape from the pain. Until he got enlightened (Trassaru), it is a terminus of a lifetime. So, when people face death, like a terminus patient, they must practice mind cause to train the mind and cultivate virtue for the next lifetime. This is to create the mode of suffering in a positive way.

Buddhist Hermeneutics

Since the Buddha propagated the Dhamma for forty-five years until he got passed away (Nirvana), Hermeneutical theories were developed through his teachings. After the Buddha's period, many classic texts in Pali canon have been written by Buddhist scholars, for example, Ven.Buddhakosajarn, Ven.Anuruddha, Ven.Sirimanggalajarn etc. to interpret the Buddha's teaching. Furthermore, many Buddhist sciences are developed by these scholars, such as Interpretation by Dependent Origination, Buddhist science of Condition or Relation Interpretation, Interpretation by the Four Great Indicators, Interpretation by The Criteria of the Doctrine and the Discipline, the Apannaka Interpretation, Interpretation by Analysis, Interpretation by the Assessment of the Ten Faith Principles, Interpretation by Intention, Interpretation by Skilful Means, Interpretation by Simile, Interpretation by Tale, and Interpretation by Unthinkables. (Nimanong, V., 2009: 143-162)

This article will select the theory of Interpretation by Intention. It is about the Karma and how to interpret the killing. In the case of a doctor, it will be interpreted by understanding the meaning of criteria and the factors of killing.

Criteria for Moral Judgment on Killing

In Buddhist view, the five criteria for moral judgment on killing are as follows: living creatures, knowing that living creatures, intention of killing, effort to kill, and the living creatures die (Thai Tipitaka and Commentary 75/16/287; Mangkalatthadipani 1/202/202). What do these criteria mean? These criteria are similar to the process to judge what is right or wrong according to the 1st of Buddhist precept. Human beings and animals are the living creatures. When a person is killing some kind of living creatures, he knows that it is a living thing. Then, he has intention of killing the living creatures by himself. Sometimes he orders somebody to kill and such a person kills by accepting his order, so his intention is wrong and he violates the 1st precept definitely. In all criteria, the intention of killing is most important. It is concerned with the Karma. Without intention it is not called Karma in Buddhism and it does not have a result of the Karma. Sometimes non-intention is just called action, it happens automatically, for example, a person swats a mosquito while he is sleeping. His conduct is just an action, but not the Karma because he has no intention of killing.

Three Key Factors in Judgment on Killing

The above five criteria are rules to judge euthanasia which violates the 1st precept. If people complete all criteria it violates and it is a sinful deed. In the case of doctor, Buddhist text has a strong point that the case is wrong but it is a little result of bad Karma because it is just to do his duty. However, the doctor violates the 1st precept and feels bad because of his killing. How does Buddhism advise him to work or live a peaceful manner with the case of euthanasia?

This issue can refer to three factors of killing in Buddhism: object, intention, and effort (Kromprayawachirananawarorod, Somdej Pramaha Samanachao, 1995: 8-9). These are as follows:

1) Object: it is divided into two kinds: human beings and animals. In a monks' lifetime they cannot kill human beings or animals. Especially, if they kill human beings, monkhood has been broken by the Buddhist's precept. It is one of the four most important precepts of Buddhism. For the animals, if the monks kill it, it is wrong but they are able to retake a vow to practice precept again. In the case of laypeople, if they kill human beings, they will get the result of punishment more than killing animals because human beings have more important than animals. This is the reason that the killing of human beings is a sinful deed which is different from killing of animals.

In the case of doctor, it is considered that a doctor kills a patient, i. e. human beings. So, he makes a sinful deed in his life. But this result could not judge him as a murder because he kills for the duty of his work. Although he tries to help a patient to rest in peace in the next lifetime. Thus, this case should consider and compare with another factor to judge a doctor in proper way.

2) Intention: it is divided into two parts: intention of killing and intention of non-killing. Intention of killing is about destroying in the first time. Another one is intention of offending; not killing the first time, maybe it will be enjoyable but living creatures die later because of such situation. This second part is about an accidental.

For the intention of killing, it needs the doctors who have strong mind to do Mercy killing. Sometimes they make a plan to do for success. So, their minds are under intense hatred that is one of the roots of defilements in Buddhist science.

In the case of doctor, the result of his killing is a light punishment because he has a wholesome mind to help the patient relieving the agonizing pain. If his mind has some defilement roots: desire, hatred, and delusion, for example, he injects some drugs to

a patient because he wants more money from his relatives or insurance from his patients. His work has been defiled by desire. So, it is a sinful deed and his intention is wrong too.

3) Effort: it is divided into two aspects: killing by himself and ordering somebody to kill. In Buddhist view, both aspects of killing are wrong. Although the doctor kills a patient by accepting the order of relatives and a patient informs the doctor that he prefers to die (sometimes the law allows to kill too), the doctor is still wrong as killing the patient by himself. Also, the relatives who order the doctor to inject a patient have intention of killing.

By the order, six kinds of determinations of order are as follows: objective, timing, locative, instrumental, acting, and special ordering (Samantapasadika Nama Vinayapidakattakatha 1/545). If somebody orders to kill the human beings or animals, it is objective ordering. If he points to the parts of a day to kill such as morning, afternoon, evening, etc. it is timing. If he fixes the place to kill, it is locative. If he requests some kinds of weapons such as a gun, knife, bomb, etc. it is instrumental. If he mentions bodily movement to kill, such as standing, walking, sitting, and sleeping, it is acting. If he fixes a technical action such as hit, shooting, bombing, etc. it is special ordering.

In the case of doctor, if he kills by following the six determinations of order. Definitely, he has the intention of killing and it is a sinful deed in his mind. Also, a person who orders the doctor to kill has the intention of killing and it is a sinful deed like killing by himself. If the doctor makes a mistake, he does not follow some determinations of order, but still commits killing. A person who orders the doctor is not wrong because the doctor does not follow his order but the doctor is still wrong because he has committed killing by himself.

Conclusion

The issue which mentions above, as the Buddhist view, killing is wrong if it is complemented by five criteria for moral judgments of the 1st precept. These criteria like a discipline to judge what is right or wrong. And the result of this, how it gets more or less sinful deed, depends on the object, intent, and effort. These three factors are the component of theory of Interpretation by Intention to interpret the case of doctor's killing in the 21st century. Of course, Buddhism believes that a human is able to improve himself in the threefold learning: morality (Sila), mental cultivation (Samadhi), and wisdom (Panna). Abstaining from euthanasia is one way of practicing the morality of the 1st precept. It is

the way ‘to avoid evil’ and ‘to do good thing’ as practicing the mentality and ‘to purify the mind’ as practicing the wisdom. These are the teachings of the Buddhas which are able to develop human beings’ abilities. So, euthanasia is one of the issues, which is concerned with morality (Sila). And the results of it is bad Karma. To understand and solve the problem of euthanasia in the right way is helpful to develop human beings’ spirituality, make peace, and live in perfect harmony.

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