



I did it my way - Respect for Life

Professor Keith Ward DD FBA

22 March 2007

BUDDHISM AND QUESTIONS OF LIFE AND DEATH

REVELATION IN BUDDHISM

In these talks I am considering the relation between religion and morality. In the first four talks I may seem to have taken for granted that religion is about conscious relationship to God, and that the main moral issue to be discussed is the relation between the will of God and human decision-making in morals. My general argument has been that religious morality does not primarily consist in the revelation of new and specific moral rules - we have a natural knowledge of right and wrong without religion. The idea of God provides a transcendental dimension to morality - it roots morality in an objective reality of supreme goodness, love of which can motivate us to greater moral effort, and encourage us to hope for the eventual realisation of universal human fulfilment.

But there is one major religion for which the idea of God has no special importance. That is Buddhism, which generally rejects the idea of a creator God and the importance of conscious relation to such a supreme being. There is no God to issue a set of moral commands, and there is no question of humans simply having to obey those commands, whether they want to or not.

Yet while there is no God, in the sense of a creator of the universe, in Buddhism, there are Buddhas, Enlightened Ones, who, by long practice of meditation, moral striving and intellectual discernment, have come to see the final truth of existence, have been liberated from suffering, and have entered into Nibbana, a virtually indescribable state in which there is full understanding and bliss. Gautama was just one such Buddha, and he is the Buddha for our world and age. His authority is as absolute as the authority of God, for he knows the truth and the way to liberation, and what he teaches springs from his own experience of enlightenment, the true goal of every human life.

Many Buddhists will say that Buddhism is not an authoritarian religion, and that its truths are to be experienced personally. But how many of us have experienced Nirvana, have been freed from sorrow, and discern the true nature and meaning of existence? Most Buddhists will say that very few have done so, and perhaps in the last few thousand years Gautama is the only one to have done so. Because of that, we must accept his authority as incontrovertible. It is true that personal experience is the ultimate test of truth. But our experience is vastly inferior to that of Gautama. Therefore the Discourses of the Pali Canon have absolute authority for those who wish to walk in the way of Enlightenment. Buddhist Scripture teaches the final truth about reality, and derives from a source that knows such a truth by its own experience, and is inerrant. So it turns out that most Buddhists accept Scriptural authority in just as full a sense as any Abrahamic believer in divine revelation.

One of the most influential of all Buddhist authors, Buddhaghosa, a fifth century CE Sri Lankan scholar, says, 'Scripture is incontrovertible. It is equal to the First Council in authority, and is just as if the Buddha himself were alive today' (VA i, 231). The First Council was, by tradition, a meeting of senior monks held shortly after the Buddha's death, in the fifth century BCE, and it is held to have established the canon of Buddhist Scripture, known as the Pali Canon. It must be said that most non-traditionalist scholars do not regard this tradition as plausible, as the texts of the Pali Canon were only committed to writing in the first

century BCE, about 400 years after the Buddha's death. The Pali Canon consists of three main collections of texts, the Discourses (teachings and sermons of the Buddha), the Monastic Rule (vinaya) and the Scholarly Treatises (abhidhamma).

The best known part of the Canon, a work that is short, readable, and provides a beautiful poetic exposition of Buddhist teaching, is the Dhammapadam. But the Discourses as a whole are important as providing teaching that is said to be the teaching of Gautama himself, on various occasions during his ministry after he had reached Enlightenment.

I should make it clear that I am speaking of Theravada Buddhism, the major form of Buddhism in Thailand and Sri Lanka, which has a good claim to have remained fairly close to the original teaching of the Buddha, so far as that can be ascertained. The other major form of Buddhism, Mahayana, or 'the greater vehicle', has its own Scriptures. They were mostly revealed to various sages by direct inspiration from a Buddha or Bodhisattva in another spiritual realm. The most popular such Scripture in East Asia is probably the Lotus Sutra. Again its authority lies in the fact that it has been reliably received from a being who is omniscient at least with regard to everything concerning human liberation.

THE BUDDHA'S ETHICAL TEACHING.

The Buddha's ethical teaching is not a set of revealed commands. It is advice on the way of life that leads towards the attaining of Enlightenment. The nearest thing to commandments are the Five Precepts for lay Buddhists. They are: Do not take life. Do not steal. Do not misuse sex. Do not lie. And do not take intoxicants.

These are guidelines for the sort of conduct which keeps one compassionate and mindful, and leads towards non-attachment and the ending of suffering. For some Buddhists, the higher states of consciousness are 'beyond good and evil', in that once the goal is attained, the way to it can be dispensed with. There are forms of Tantric Buddhism in which moral rules are intentionally broken to demonstrate one's freedom from passionate desire. But mainstream Buddhism insists on conformity to high moral standards - primarily, however, as a training of the mind in non-attachment and liberation.

There is no set of moral commands which are to be obeyed without question. There are guidelines, rooted in the experience of advanced spiritual teachers, for attaining liberation from suffering. The primary strength of Buddhism lies in its practice, a practice leading to the liberating experience of that reality of compassion, wisdom and bliss which is Nibbana.

So Buddhism differs from the Abrahamic faiths in being primarily a practice aimed at liberative experience, a discipline for achieving a spiritual goal. The Abrahamic faiths appear more as a revelation from a living personal reality, God, who is to be worshipped and obeyed. Yet this simple contrast between the two traditions is blurred and complicated by the fact that many later Buddhist traditions include a strong devotional element (to Amida Buddha or to compassionate Bodhisattvas), and the goal of the Abrahamic faiths is often said to be union with a reality beyond literal description, having the nature of wisdom, compassion and bliss, possible only for those who have overcome egoistic desire. This suggests that the approaches of the Abrahamic and the Indian ascetic traditions may be more complementary than contradictory.

Buddhist ethics is based on the personal authority of the Buddha, which is held to be enshrined in Scripture. Nevertheless there are very few specific moral rules laid down in the Scriptures. Since Buddhism has traditionally been primarily a monastic movement, there are many rules for monastic practice, and some ethical rules can be generalised from them. But the general Buddhist attitude is that one should not be 'fettered' by too great an attachment to specific rules. It is better to uncover the underlying principles or mental attitudes, and then to see how these can be best expressed in differing social circumstances. Such underlying principles are capable of being interpreted in a very rigorous sense, and it should not be thought that they lead to any sense of moral indifference on the part of Buddhists. On the contrary, Buddhist morality is principally a discipline of the mind in the virtues of compassion and lovingkindness, and such virtues clearly rule out some actions - one cannot be compassionate and steal another's property, for instance. The ethical question for Buddhism is just how rigorous or absolute the specific moral rules that follow from the general principles are to be - and that is analogous to a similar question in theistic religions.

In my discussion I will concentrate on what is without doubt the most basic ethical principle of all in Buddhism - the principle of respect for life, which includes rules concerning abortion, embryo research, and euthanasia, that could be generated by basic Buddhist principles. As the Emperor Asoka said in his Brahmagiri Rock Edict, 'One should respect the supreme value and sacredness of life'.

He does not speak, as Christians tend to do, about the sacredness of human life. He speaks about the sacredness of all life. Buddhists seek to extend their sympathy and compassion to all sentient beings, all beings capable of feeling pleasure and pain. There are other religions of Indian origin that go even further. The Jains hold that all things are filled with souls, and one should seek not to destroy anything that exists, for one is thereby harming countless souls. The principle of ahimsa, non-violence, which so much influenced Mahatma Gandhi, is a key Jain principle that Buddhists would also accept. It teaches that one should not kill or even harm any living thing - and perhaps everything that exists is in some sense living. As a 'middle way', Buddhism does not go that far, and on the whole when its Scriptures speak of 'life' they tend to speak of 'sentient beings', beings capable of feeling pleasure and pain.

The Doctrinal Texts analyse human life into five skandhas or groups, which are named as rupa (material or physical form), vedana (feeling, or sentience, the capacity to experience pleasure and pain), sanya (cognition or perception, including the recognition and classification of objects), sankhara (will, volition, or the cluster of dispositions that give rise to karmic causality) and vinyana (states of consciousness or abstract thought). This final quality is also known as citta (mind or heart or possibly, 'stream of consciousness'). These collections of qualities are difficult to translate precisely, and commentators dispute about how exactly they should be described. It is agreed that they together form an assembly which is the human person, and that there is no further continuing 'self' or person that stands over against them or 'owns' them as its own experiences. The human self is simply the collection of these qualities. It is this collection, or at least the karmic consequence of its actions, that is 'reborn'.

In the state of final release, the collection dissolves. But it does not dissolve into annihilation - a view the Buddha explicitly disavowed. It rather dissolves into a higher unconditioned state of cognition and bliss, a state beyond the realm of samsara, of personal desires and accumulating karmic consequences. The stream of human consciousness has, it may be said, been transfigured into the Unconditioned state beyond division, attachment and suffering. It becomes - or realises that it always has essentially been - a Buddha, free of all finite limitation, one with the unconditioned.

Human existence has a special importance for traditional Buddhists, since only in such an existence can liberation be achieved. But rebirth in many forms is possible - humans can be reborn as animals, and animals as humans. So it is important to respect all living things, since they either have been or will be human, and compassion is appropriate for them, since they are involved in the realm of suffering.

It looks as though the five skandhas are arranged in order of complexity. All material objects have bodies or material form. All animals have perception or some ability to feel pain or pleasure. Perhaps only some animals can recognise objects and have cognition. Perhaps only humans have volition, and become capable of morally relevant acts of will. If so, discriminative consciousness or the capacity for abstract thought will be the most complex mental state, a fluid 'sense of continuing self' (though it is in fact a complex bundle of mental states), and it will be characteristic of humans.

It seems that it is because humans possess the two most complex properties of will and discriminative awareness that they become capable of liberation, and can play a positive role in affecting their karmic destiny (or the destiny of those beings whose arising depends upon their volitional acts). But living beings will be anything with the capacity to feel pain or pleasure, and with primitive cognition. Such beings are worthy of respect, and the First Precept enjoins that their lives should not be taken. I confess that after all the violence and killing that sometimes seem to characterise the Abrahamic faiths I feel something of a sense of relief at finding a religion that condemns all taking of life, and enjoins the extension of human sympathy and loving kindness to all living beings. There is no Scriptural excuse here for hatred or violence against others, and excessive attachment to one's own beliefs or creed is explicitly condemned in the Pali Canon.

RESPECT FOR LIFE AND HUMAN RIGHTS.

It may look as though no further discussion of abortion, embryo research, euthanasia and suicide is needed, when considering Buddhism. They all involve the taking of life, and are therefore morally prohibited. Yet morality is never as simple as that, and modern medical progress has raised issues which

are not addressed in the Buddhist Scriptures.

It is those issues I propose to discuss. In doing so, I am indebted to an excellent treatment of the subject by Damien Keown (Buddhism and Bioethics, Macmillan, 1995), who has defended the rigorist view that indeed all taking of life under the above heads is prohibited. I respect the view he takes, but confess that I am not convinced either that he is right in his moral conclusions, or that Buddhists are logically bound to agree with his interpretation.

Let me begin, then, by asking the most basic question for Buddhists: are there conditions under which the taking of a life is morally justified? The obvious justification is self-defence, either against an animal predator, like a tiger, or an aggressive human. Most Buddhists would accept this, though in the Scriptures soldiers who die in battle are said to be reborn in Hell or as an animal. If an aggressor threatens to kill large numbers of innocent people, it will save lives overall if the aggressor is killed (if there is no other way of resistance). So 'Do not take life' is not an absolute rule. There are exceptions, and there are grey areas, where lives saved and lives taken have to be balanced against each other. We do not want to say that we can take a life whenever we thereby save more lives, since that would justify killing healthy people to distribute their organs to a number of ill people. So taking life is justified only against an aggressor, one who actively desecrates the sanctity of life - and this is probably true whether the aggressor consciously intends to kill or not. We might shoot a mentally impaired, and thus not responsible, person who was about to explode a bomb to kill many innocent people.

THE BEGINNING OF LIFE.

This case is already relevant to the question of abortion. For it implies that we could take the life of an embryo if it threatened the life of the mother - and many Buddhists accept this. Buddhists often regard the offence of abortion as increasing in gravity with the age of the embryo, and that seems to imply that embryos become 'more human' as they develop. If a living being is one that has the capacity to feel and perceive, such a capacity does not exist before the development of the brain-stem, which cannot be dated before six weeks after conception.

To 'have a capacity' does not entail that the capacity is actualised. I have the capacity to play the violin, but I am never going to exercise it. But I do not have the capacity to fly; that is not possible for a being like me. So a three month old child in the womb may have feelings or perceptions of a very primitive sort. Its capacities will be very limited, but these are undoubtedly the capacities of a living being. Without a brain, a being cannot have such capacities, and in this fact lies a reason behind the natural feeling that very young embryos are not fully human persons. They do not possess human capacities.

This suggests that Buddhists should be able to countenance abortion before the stage at which embryos develop a brain. I think this conclusion is corroborated by an early text (Vinaya iii 73) in the Monastic Rule, which reads, 'A human being [exists] in the interval between the first moment when mind arises in the mother's womb, the first manifestation of consciousness (vinyana) and death'. This suggests that a human being exists only when discriminative consciousness exists. Such consciousness is a more complex, and therefore a later developmental state than perception, feeling and volition. So it implies that a human being comes to exist at a fairly late stage in embryonic development. Before that state the embryo is due the protection given to an animal, and before a brain exists, the protection given to non-sentient life.

On the Buddhist view, souls (collections of karmic elements) wait for embodiment between births, and they descend when a suitable material body has been formed, to constitute that collection known as a human person. Presumably such souls descend at a specific time, and some account must be given of when that time is. Keown argues that conception is the only justifiable time for such a descent. This is because he insists that 'the view that the moral worth of a human being arises and disappears as [a specific set of capacities] come and go is an idea which finds no support in Buddhist sources' (Keown, 29). Humans are complexes of mental and material elements with a history and destiny which transcends a single lifetime. He quotes Buddhaghosa as saying, 'The very first moment of existence in human form consists of that first moment of mind (citta), with its three associated immaterial components [i.e. feeling, thought and character] and the body of the embryo which is generated along with it' (VA ii 437). For Keown, mind binds together the five collections of qualities into a unitary whole. In this sense, minds exist through many thousands of rebirths. At any particular birth, they wait for fertilisation to take place, and then associate with the fertilised ovum to produce a new human life. Mind precedes body, and the moral status of mind does not change through time, depending on how its capacities are manifested or restrained.

We now know much more in detail about the origin of human life, and this enables us to be more precise about the early details of human genesis. When an ovum is fertilised, a packet of DNA is formed, which will govern the form of the body and at least the general dispositions and capacities of the mind (the ways in which the emerging person will tend to think, feel and act). DNA is a code, inscribed on long molecules, for constructing such an embodied person. Such codes can be stored in frozen cells, and placed in ova from which a previous code has been removed (in cloning, for example) and subsequently implanted in a womb.

Such frozen DNA cannot be called a person, though it is certainly human material, for it exists in every cell of a human body. It is a genetic code that will never naturally function as a code. When it is placed in an ovulating cell in a laboratory, such a cell will divide to form a small ball of similar cells, but will then die. A dividing ball of cells cannot be called a person. Again, the code is simply not translated. It is just a chemical code.

This seems closely analogous to an ovum fertilised through intercourse which fails to implant. A new DNA code is created, but it is not translated into an organic form. This suggests that fertilisation is not a reasonable point at which to say that a human person exists. The code for a person exists, but then every human cell in every human body carries such a code. The fact is that the conditions for its operation do not yet exist.

Keown points out that before fertilisation there is no one individual that will develop into a person, and after fertilisation there is such a genetic individual, with a distinct set of forty six chromosomes. So fertilisation marks a point at which a new individual comes into being. It would be more exact to say that when forty six chromosomes of the right sort come to exist in an ovulating cell, by whatever method (intercourse or laboratory technology), they form a distinct code for developing a human organism. If the process is normal, that code will be replicated in a vastly increasing number of cells, linked in a developing organism. Strictly speaking, that original cell does not continue to exist as an individual. It generates many qualitatively identical individuals, linked organically. All that remains the same is the code, instantiated in a number of linked but undoubtedly new individuals.

This way of looking at the matter agrees with the general Buddhist tendency to deny individual continuance, and insist on the transient existence of all individuals within a continuing but ever-changing process. The creation of a specific DNA code is a crucial event within the process of human genesis. But it is no more crucial than the differentiation of cell functions, the development of a central nervous system and brain-stem, the emergence of sentience, or the ability to exist independently. Something new, but in developmental continuity with what already exists, occurs at each of these stages.

If what is morally important about human life is its capacity to generate or eliminate karmic consequences, then the morally crucial stage will be that at which such a capacity properly originates - quite late in embryonic development. If that never happened, there would exist no truly human life, however much genetic qualitative identity there was between earlier and later stages in the process. It does not seem as if the creation of a new genetic code in an ovum is, for a Buddhist who does not believe in substantial continuity of any sort, either a morally or an ontologically crucial event. It is part of a continuous process, and we have to decide how to treat entities within that process in accordance with what they really are (or should be) at a particular stage. If the ball of cells (blastocyst) created by fertilisation is implanted in a womb, it will begin to develop, gradually taking embryonic form.

Now the code begins to be translated into an organic form, as it receives protein from its environment. After about fourteen days the central nervous system begins to form (this is the 'primitive streak'), then the brain stem forms, and electrical activity can be detected in the brain after about six weeks. This is also around the time at which the embryo was traditionally said to be 'formed', or to have a discernible bodily shape.

It seems to me that when Buddhaghosa wrote of mind and body being generated together, this is the moment that best fits his description - though that may not be the traditional and popular view in Buddhist societies like Sri Lanka. Of course it is not a datably precise moment. The development of the embryo is a continuum, in which new properties gradually emerge. But there is some point at which the first consciousness occurs in a growing embryo, however indistinct or elementary it is. We might well wish to place the inception of a human life early in the continuum, but the principle is that without the capacity for consciousness or mind, a human life does not properly exist. There is a code for constructing a human life, but that code does its constructing piece by piece over a period of time. Why, then, should Keown prefer to think of fertilisation as the origin of fully human life? He thinks of a human person as a complete integrated 'bundle', no part of which is the 'real essence' of personhood - certainly not 'rational thought', for existence. For then we might regard humans who could not think rationally as sub-human, and that is a conclusion

rightly to be feared.

But it is not the case that the various parts of the human bundle are inseparably integrated. For Buddhists, parts of the bundle - the immaterial parts - can exist without bodies, since souls exist between rebirths. Since humans can become animals, volition and thought may also be stripped from the bundle during an animal existence, presumably to be re-united after the animal's death.

Human existence is valued by Buddhists precisely because volition and thought, which produce karmic merit or demerit, only fully exist in a human life. So I think Buddhists do distinguish some qualities as more important and as more human than others, and they do regard humans as special because of specific qualities of volition and reflection that humans possess. Keown himself says that only 'life with a moral biography' - roughly, life offering a chance of liberation - has intrinsic value. Other, non-human, life has only instrumental value (49). This plainly marks out some forms of life as morally important because of the distinctive properties of volition they possess.

But sentient non-rational life does have intrinsic value. Health and happiness are, I would think, intrinsically good for animals, and therefore intrinsically good in themselves. But they are much less good than the capacity for moral self-shaping and for liberation that fully volitional and reflective beings possess. For Buddhists, there is some obligation to promote the health and happiness of animals. But there is a greater obligation to respect and promote the morally responsible agency of which humans are capable. It may be the case that all animals have been, or will be, human persons. But that does not mean it is appropriate, for example, to treat cows as humans. They should be treated as sentient beings, with compassion but not with respect for a moral agency that they do not, in their temporary form of existence, exhibit. 'Life with a moral biography' - volitional and mindful life - is given a special moral status in Buddhism, even though compassion for suffering should regulate our dealings with all sentient beings.

ABORTION

It is morally important to say that the moral worth of a human being does not vary with the presence or absence of rational consciousness. We do not want to say that some people are sub-human, or only partly human. What we need to make such a moral point is a distinction between deficiency and potentiality. A person suffers from a deficiency if they lack something which it is natural for them to have. A person has a potentiality if in the future they may come to have a capacity, but it is not natural for them to have it yet. We may hold that in a compassionate society, which a Buddhist society would be, there is a special duty of care for those suffering deficiency in some human good. Those who are mentally or physically deficient are deserving of more compassion and moral concern, not less. But if people have potential capacities, it would be silly to treat them as though they had actual capacities (to let children vote, for example).

Potentiality is nevertheless an important property. If something is a good, and a being has the potential to realise that good, such a being should be sustained and not killed. One reason for not killing an embryo is that it has a natural potential for becoming a rational person. However this seems to be what some call an 'imperfect', not an 'absolute', duty. That is, if X is a good, it will, other things being equal, be good to promote it and whatever leads to it. But it does not follow that it is always wrong to frustrate processes that would naturally lead to X. There may be circumstances in which such processes also lead to great evil, or which prevent the realisation of other goods. In the case of abortion, the most obvious cases are those where birth would lead to the death of the mother, or to grievous physical or mental distress, or to the child being unwanted, neglected or abandoned.

Buddhists regard human life as a good, in the sense that it allows the possibility of liberation. But they regard life as an evil, in that it necessarily involves suffering and death. They hold that the highest form of human life, as a monk, will not involve procreation at all. So human life is not unequivocally good, and there is no obligation to procreate as much as possible, or even as often as nature might incline one to. Compassion is appropriate for living things, precisely because they suffer. Simply killing them would not help, since their karma has to be worked out one way or another. And killing would usually cut off the possibility of positive goods like perception, health and happiness. But it is not regarded as good just to increase the number of living beings. Ideally, it would be better if there were no living beings in the realm of samsara.

This suggests that, while taking sentient life is always forbidden in Buddhism, there is no absolute obligation to refrain from terminating a being with the natural potential for sentient life - that is, a pre-sentient being in a human womb. Any of the reasons just mentioned might be sufficient to defeat any such

obligation. From this it follows that the use of artificial contraceptives or such things as the 'morning'after' pill are readily justifiable, though they do need some justification. This may be given by reference to such things as world population problems, the ability to care for children responsibly, or even the ability to provide a good quality of life for the family and society. It is not true to say, as Keown does, that 'the decision to use contraception becomes a choice against life in that it deliberately frustrates its coming into being' (129). Such a decision does prevent a birth, as does abstinence from intercourse. One can frustrate a good as effectively by refusing to have sex as by having sex using a contraceptive. But the decision to prevent a specific life from coming into being is not a choice against all such lives comes into being. It may be wise to frustrate a possible good sometimes, if thereby one prevents an evil.

A positive choice can be made for life that can flourish, and for the good of all life on earth, and it may entail wise family planning. Moral obligations in this area, for married couples, seem confined to producing life that can be reared happily and well. Indeed, if procreation was the only good to be considered, marriage would have little importance. Marriage exists to enable children to be reared safely and happily, and that entails not simply having as many children as possible. It is not life or even human life as such, in any form, that is an intrinsic good. It is life as a necessary condition of other goods, such as knowledge, friendship and happiness - and above all, for Buddhists, the possibility of liberation, the attainment of supreme knowledge and happiness.

It is not unreasonable to hold that abortion before the onset of sentience has the same moral status as artificial contraception - the prevention of a physical process the natural consummation of which is sometimes the existence of a human life. We have to say that the consummation is 'sometimes' a human life, because it is estimated that between 30% to 75% of fertilised embryos fail to implant, or if they do implant, are spontaneously aborted without the mother even knowing they were there, usually because of some genetic defect.

Like many physical processes, like fertilisation itself, this is one where a large number of attempts are made, most of which will fail, in order that a few might have a chance of achieving the goal of reproduction. It is not like a process that tends directly towards a goal. It is more like a process that scatters shots in all directions, so that some of them have a good chance of reaching a desired goal. It is a stochastic or probabilistic process, with a very high probability that most attempts will fail, and a much lower probability that one of them will succeed.

Most fertilised ova will not generate human lives. Some of them, sooner or later, will. So the question is: what sort of moral consideration would you give to a being that has a small chance of generating a human being, by a combination of its own internal development and a favourable environment? The answer may depend upon how much you want a human being. Moral problems only arise significantly where a human being is not wanted - in cases of rape, for instance, or of unwanted conceptions in an already large family that can hardly be supported.

It seems that in such cases there is no obligation to preserve a non-human being that has a small chance of becoming human. However, when it becomes sentient, its chances of developing consciousness also become very high, and there arises an obligation not to eliminate it - a level of obligation roughly equivalent to our obligation to sentient animals. It may seem callous to regard early embryos as animals. But from a Buddhist viewpoint animal life is to be respected. In addition, a bodily and emotional link has been established with the mother, which is morally significant. And it is hard to say when higher mental functions become established exactly - so it is probably better to err on the side of caution. For these reasons, a sentient but not yet fully human life is entitled to a high degree of moral care, and should not be eliminated for trivial reasons.

Yet a properly human obligation only begins with the origin of discriminative consciousness. Keown quotes the Zen master Robert Aitken as saying that decisions about abortion lie with the mother, and if, fully compassionate and mindful, she decides to have an abortion, 'there is no blame, but rather acknowledgement that sadness pervades the whole universe, and this bit of life goes with our deepest love' (102). This view may be, as Keown says, a peculiarly Zen and Western one, but it perhaps reflects the better knowledge of embryology we now possess, the general availability of methods of safe abortion, and a Buddhist attitude to moral precepts as guides rather than unbreakable absolutes.

If such a view is accepted, there is no moral problem with embryo research, with using stem cells for therapeutic purposes or for research. For such cells are taken from genetic material that will not be implanted, and that has not yet begun to develop any cell diversity of structure and function.

A problem that does arise is whether fertilised ova with an identified genetic defect (like Downs syndrome) should be terminated, in favour of ova that are 'healthy'. The implication is that this is permissible, until a fully human life has come into being. It is therefore a matter of great practical consequence at what point one considers a life to be fully human. This is a matter on which views, religious and non-religious, differ, and there seems to be no way of resolving them. We can only seek to know all the observable facts as fully as possible, seek what seem to us to be the most appropriate analogies to and counter-examples for the view we hold, and try to see all the consequences of our decision. We must then decide as well as we can how far our analysis is coherent with our general view of human nature and of the nature of ultimate reality. I have set out a moral view that I think a Buddhist view of human nature would suggest on these issues. But I am not suggesting that all Buddhists would agree, and the really perplexing fact is that I can think of no way of resolving these issues decisively. In this respect, ethics is like religion, and we have to live with the need to make some vital decisions in a situation of theoretical uncertainty.

EUTHANASIA

There is, I have suggested, a general Buddhist view of human nature as not containing any one continuing self or individual entity, and of moral precepts as guidelines for conduct conducive to the development of those mental states that lead to liberation. Traditional Buddhists must allow for the rebirth of 'souls' (bundless of properties) in physical bodies, and hold both that karma will inevitably work itself out, and that it is better not to be reborn. In opposition to Keown's carefully argued view, I think this naturally suggests the view that there is no obligation to procreate, that frustrating a process leading to birth is not always morally wrong, and that there are identifiable basic properties of life that make it morally valuable - sentience and the capacity for responsible volition and reflective thought. Above all, pain is to be avoided and liberation is to be sought.

The Buddhist principle of respect for life, while it is wider in range than typical Abrahamic principles (in that it extends to animal life as well as human) is less absolute than at least the Catholic principle that an innocent human life should never be directly terminated, even from the moment of its conception, nor should a natural process leading to its creation be frustrated. For Buddhists, what constitutes a human life is a more fluid notion, and there is no moral obligation to 'be fruitful and multiply' (Genesis 1, 28). In short, while we must have compassion for all sentient beings, there is no absolute moral principle that a human being should never be killed.

This means that for a Buddhist there may be no absolute prohibition on euthanasia, in the sense of assisted suicide. The most obvious cases are where there is extreme pain without hope of recovery, where someone is progressively losing all volitional and cognitive mental functions, or where a person is in the most severe persistent vegetative state. If human death is defined by analogy with the origin of human life, the most appropriate definition will be that of neo-cortical brain death. When the neo-cortex ceases to function, there can be no volitional or cognitive, no 'karmic', processes.

This differs from brain-stem death, when the brain-stem ceases to function. Then bodily functions like respiration or reflex responses cannot continue without artificial aid. Keown rejects this view because of his belief that a human being is a total integrated psycho-biological unity. He sees neo-cortical death as a state in which the human being still exists, but has in extreme cases lost one of its capacities - the capacity to be conscious. But it seems to me that a more natural Buddhist description would be that the spiritual properties have departed, leaving only the 'home of consciousness' (S iii 9) from which the homedweller has departed forever. We would not treat an abandoned home as we would a home with a person in it.

Further, many comatose patients require technological help to keep them alive - tubes, enemas and catheters. The problem becomes acute when very expensive medical techniques are required to keep alive a body with no possibility of consciousness. Keown suggests that there is no duty to treat complications that arise for such patients, though they should be given food and water. It seems to me that there is no duty to prolong the existence of a body by technological means. But I recognise that opinions will continue to be divided on this matter. It is an empirically unresolvable, but morally decisive, question.

A major argument in Indian traditions against suicide is that karma must work itself out; suicide is no escape from karma, and such suffering as there is must be experienced sooner or later anyway. This argument does not apply where consciousness has ceased to exist. But it would apply where a patient is in extreme terminal pain. A Buddhist may say that pain is not evil, because it is the necessary working out of bad karma. But this would lead to the conclusion that pain should never be relieved, which seems

unacceptable. Compassion requires the alleviation of pain wherever possible. So if there is terminal pain, without the possibility of remission or of being counterbalanced by some other sort of mental good, it should be alleviated, even if that causes death.

That is not a direct taking of life - though the distinction is often a very fine one. But there are extreme cases - for instance, a soldier dying in agony after a fatal injury who asks to be shot - where killing is the only way of ending the pain. Perhaps it still makes sense then to say that your intention is to end the pain, but it looks as though killing is the means (the only means) to end pain. In such extreme cases - which do arise - it might be regarded as permissible to take a human life, since the extremity of the pain renders any reflective volition impossible, and so the possibility of volitional karmic action by the sufferer has effectively ended.

The criterion in such cases is whether any reflective volition is possible. If extreme pain renders it impossible, and if there is no possibility of remission, then killing could be seen as an act of compassion, and so permissible for a Buddhist. Keown objects that it is still the taking of a life, and so the deprivation of a good. But is life, as such, a good? It is certainly the necessary condition of any other good, as is consciousness. For without life and consciousness, we could not be aware of any state or activity as good. But both may also be necessary conditions of evil states, like extreme pain. In such cases, life might be said to be, not an instrumental good but an instrumental evil - a necessary condition of an evil state.

Human life is certainly not a supreme good, for Buddhism, since the whole point of the Eightfold Way is to cease being reborn as a human. It is only good, therefore, as an instrumental good, as a necessary condition of cultivating virtuous mental states. Patience and endurance may be such virtuous states. But if the higher mental functions of volition and discriminative consciousness are lost, a virtuous life is no longer possible. In such extreme cases, life is no longer even an instrumental good. In such cases, especially when there is extreme pain, compassion may lead one to end a human life, on the grounds that it is not life, however agonising, that is to be respected, but rather the living discriminative consciousness which will, on Buddhist theory, not be wholly terminated by bodily death.

A case that is much less clear is the decision to take one's own life to avoid an inevitable process towards senility or total lack of independence, so that one may die mindful and self-possessed, rather than demented or confused. It is good to die self-possessed, but on the other hand there are still virtues of mind that can be exercised even when one is wholly dependent on others, and a senile person can have a painless, even happy life. So there is much less justification for euthanasia in such cases. Nevertheless, some Buddhists at least feel that the quality of volitional consciousness may become so restricted that one is living at best with the properties of sentience and perception only, as the higher animals do. There remains a requirement to respect sentient life, so it would still be better not to commit suicide. But if the condition is one that brings great distress, suicide could be seen as a personal decision that is understandable, if not commendable.

SKILFUL MEANS

Buddhist Scriptures deal with a primarily monastic discipline to root out attachment and attain liberation from desire and suffering. They have high authority for most Buddhists, and they certainly enjoin a set of moral precepts that include a prohibition on the taking of sentient life. But modern ethical issues surrounding the beginning and end of life were not considered in the Scriptures, and there are different ways in which Scriptural teaching might be used to address such issues.

Damien Keown argues for the position that a human life originates at conception and ends with brain-stem death, and may never be directly terminated either as an end or a means to some other end. But I have suggested that the Buddhist doctrine of conditioned co-origination, or the lack of a substantial central self or person, does not support such an argument. It seems rather that all sentient life is to be valued, insofar as it offers possibilities for happiness. And human life is to be especially valued because it is a volitional and reflective form of life that may lead to liberation (even if individuals may not use, or may not be able fully to use, their capacities). This suggests that human life begins with the first functioning of the neo-cortex, and ends with the cessation of such functioning.

Further, the doctrine of absolute, unbreakable moral rules is foreign to the Buddhist ethos of 'skilful means'. So the precept forbidding the taking of life may be over-ridden by other moral considerations, especially compassion for those in pain or experiencing avoidable suffering. These moral disagreements are theoretically unresolvable.

Perhaps Buddhism is right in holding that the primary concern of religion is not the resolution of such conflicts, but the teaching of a discipline aimed at liberation from egoism and union with supreme compassion, wisdom and bliss. Unresolvable moral issues are not a province in which religion has a special authority, or to which it can offer a universally acceptable solution. Such things we each have to work out to the best of our ability, or by accepting the authority that seems to us - and the element of personal judgment is inescapable - to be the most reliable. At least I think this is the view of morality, and of questions of human life and death, that seems most coherent with the worldview of Buddhism.

I think the view could also be accepted by many believers in God. For the fundamental issues are the same: is it life as such, whether God-given or not, that is to be respected absolutely and unconditionally? Or is it life as the condition of sentience, understanding and creative will, that is to be respected in various ways, depending on the capacities that various conditions of life make possible? Religious views do not give one answer to these questions. But religion does see human life as a gift and a responsibility, and does insist that respect for life is a categorical demand. In a world in which human life is often treated with callous disregard, morality needs all the help it can get from religious faith, even if religious faith sometimes needs reminding that respect for life is one of its own most basic principles.

© Professor Keith Ward, 2007