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A Buddhist View of Abortion

Modern life, with its fierce shifts and starts in social custom and technological capability, increasingly presents us with painful problems of conscience. If religion is to be of practical use it should, if not provide us with complete answers, at least make clear to us those principles of conduct that can safely guide us through this new wilderness. Buddhism responds especially well to the sceptical temper of the times, as it does not attempt to command but gently and reasonably appeals to the individual's own powers of understanding. There are right ways and wrong ways of acting, the Buddha taught, but the moral precepts he set up are perfectly available to inquiry and analysis, and will in time, to the sincere mind, reveal their rightness.

A thorny question that has roused passion in recent years is that of abortion. Withdrawing for a while from the public din, we might gain fresh insight by examining abortion from a Buddhist perspective, on moral grounds, leaving aside the social, political, and legal aspects of the matter. What does Buddhism teach

that may be useful to an individual's private reflections on the rightness or wrongness of abortion? Regardless of what the State says, should we ever consider seeking an abortion for ourselves or someone else?

Students of religion are sometimes surprised to learn that the Dhamma, the teaching of the Buddha, far from being an esoteric, morally indifferent exercise in contemplation, is a practical and highly moral religion. The three levels of training detailed in the ancient Pali Canon are *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*—moral discipline, concentration, and wisdom. The second and third levels, culminating in liberating understanding, cannot be attained without the support of the first. In this world of dependency and interrelationship there must always be a sound foundation to one's efforts, so Buddhists believe that keeping moral precepts is a practical necessity for one's own well-being and progress, quite apart from altruistic motives.

How such precepts and the higher mental training that follows them relate to the question of abortion is a matter that requires serious reflection. Although abortion has been practised throughout human history, inefficacious methods and strong prohibitions against it made it relatively uncommon, so that the average person was unlikely to be confronted with it

as a possibility or a problem. But recently with new technology and diminished opposition, abortion has become a much more frequent practise, with fervent defenders and detractors. Since it has the potential to touch any of our lives, and since it raises profound moral dilemmas, many of us find it a subject not easy to dismiss, one that causes us unease and doubt. Indeed, we should not pass over it lightly.

A number of Buddhist teachings bear directly on the problem of abortion. Over and above everything is the principle of causation. According to the Buddha, the universe is not a field of spontaneous happenings, but an infinitely complex web of causes and effects stretching from limitless past to limitless future. Within this matrix, human beings are not hapless victims of fate but primary players in the drama of existence, possessing the power to shape their own fate by acts of body, speech, and mind. This power entails responsibility. Volitional action or *kamma* (*karma* in Sanskrit) rebounds upon the doer according to its nature: good actions produce good results and evil actions produce evil results. Actions we conventionally call "evil" spring from three unwholesome roots: greed, hatred, and delusion. Whenever we allow thoughts, words, or deeds to arise from these roots we set in motion the natural processes that will in time bring us equivalent results.

It follows that to avoid experiencing pain we should avoid inflicting pain; to avoid misfortune for ourselves we should avoid causing misfortune to others. The basic moral precepts described by the Buddha are logically founded on this relationship between actions and the results of actions (*kamma* and *kammavipāka*).

The first Buddhist precept is to refrain from taking life. This precept refers to all sentient creatures, from the lowest animals on up to human beings. All intentional killing is unwholesome kamma which generates unwholesome results, but the killing of a human being is considered especially serious, one of the gravest actions that one can commit. It is immoral, foolish, and wrong not only because of the immediate suffering of the victim but also because of the tremendous kammic debt that is engendered and must sooner or later be paid by the doer. Any person with the slightest interest in the Buddhist path must recognise the danger of violating the first precept by killing a human being.

Civilised people will agree that the killing of innocent human beings is immoral; thus the debate on abortion often hinges on the question of whether or not a foetus in the womb should be considered a human being—a person—and given any concern or protection. In the light of Buddhist teaching, the question "When does life begin?" is misleading

because, strictly speaking, it does not begin—it only continues. At death, the aggregates that make up the person break down and the accumulated kammic energy springs up again with a new body as its physical base. The last moment of consciousness in one life is followed by the first moment of consciousness in the next life in the mother's womb, in the case of human rebirth. This is the moment of conception, the simultaneous conjunction of sperm, egg, and *gandhabba,* or stream of consciousness from the previous existence. At this moment there are again present, embryonically, the same five aggregates: material form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. Therefore we say that what is conceived of human parents is a human being and to kill such a being will bring on the appropriate result of kamma.

Those who support the option of abortion might say that this explanation is simply a religious belief that they do not share, that they choose to believe that an embryo or foetus is not a human being, and that it is all a matter of personal conviction, anyway. Let us examine this view briefly. If we are presented with the proposition that a foetus is not a human being, we are justified in asking, at what point does it become one? On this there are innumerable arbitrary opinions. Some people would say, after two weeks, or twelve

weeks, or six months, or not till birth itself. If the latter is proposed, we may inquire, what is it about passage through the birth canal that confers humanity on the foetus? If it becomes a "person" only at birth, then would we not be blameless of taking a human life if we killed it five minutes before that event? So logic would dictate, though the thought is hideous.

Take *any* time after conception and apply the same test. Whatever time we fix on has the same liability. If the end of six months (or three or one or whatever) is the magic, humanising moment, then can we not assume an abortion would be permissible even two minutes, or two seconds, before? But who among us would not be driven frantic by this insane mincing of time, as if the licking of a second hand should turn tissue-removal into murder?

To come down to a critical problem, if a foetus becomes a fully human person at a certain point in its development, *who is* to say precisely when such a transforming instant occurs?—for we must be precise in dealing with something as serious as abortion. Truly, there is no authority to say; there is only a storm of opinions. No one can unequivocally determine that such-and-such a condition is the dividing line on one side of which is a lump of protoplasm and on the other a human baby deserving love and protection. "Well, in *that* case," many would

conclude, "the matter must be left to individual discretion." Now we come to a very, very important point. Certainly we may all entertain personal beliefs as to when a foetus might become a human being, but there is—somewhere— only one truth. If a foetus at some point in its development becomes a human being, a morally significant person, our beliefs do not *make* it so. Its essential nature—as sentient or non-sentient or whatever— is quite independent of our views. This is a philosophical realisation that must be kept in mind for any rational inquiry. We are quite free to believe what we choose, but we must understand that possibly we are wrong and the truth is something else altogether.

If, as the Buddha teaches, there are grievous consequences to taking a human life, we had best be careful in defining the period in which we would sanction abortion. But, as we have seen, it is impossible to fix an exact time before which a foetus is unquestionably not human, not of the same essence as we. Furthermore, who can agree on what constitutes a "human being," anyway? We are left in a profound uncertainty that should warn us against rash action.

The Buddhist view of sentient existence as a shifting but unbroken continuum flowing from life to life is rational and intellectually sound, and gives us a standard with which to judge the matter of abortion.

But if one still finds it hard to admit the idea that a tiny foetus might possibly be as human and as significant as oneself, there is still a quite practical reason for refraining from having an abortion: we might in our uncertainty take a human life and thereby bring down on our heads a train of misfortune worse than what we suffer at present. Ignorance of the law is, unhappily, no protection.

The law in this case is the law of kamma, a quite impersonal function of nature which, rightly speaking, neither rewards nor punishes. It simply reflects our own actions back upon us with complete indifference. When we intentionally take a life our beliefs, opinions, and rationalisations are irrelevant. It does no good to pretend, as people often do, that one can perform the act, or have it performed, without hostility to the unborn child. Buddhist psychology points out, with acute insight, that for any intentional act of killing to be carried out there must always be a degree of hatred or aversion in the mind. When the deed is done a seed is planted which will sooner or later yield a fruit. Because volitional acts have consequences for the doer, and because killing is a cruel and violent act, painful results are to be expected. We cannot predict exactly what they will be, because acts of killing and harming have different weights and outcomes depending on many factors especially the volition or

will behind the acts. Where there is no volition, there is no responsibility: a woman who is compelled, entirely against her will, to submit to an abortion, would not commit the kamma of killing. But in all cases, those who act consciously and intentionally to take life generate unwholesome kamma to one degree or another, and we can be sure that no good will come of it. All the universe proceeds according to causes and conditions. A deluded man may believe that he can fly, but if he steps off the roof of a building he will be dashed to the ground. The law of gravity means him no harm; it merely operates according to its nature, and if he is so foolish as to ignore it he will suffer. Likewise the law of kamma is a natural law which, for our own welfare, we will do best to heed.

We have spoken thus far only of the principle of causation and its ramifications. Let us now turn to another great pillar of Buddhism. This is compassion, that queen of virtues. The Buddha is said to represent in his person the perfect fusion of wisdom and compassion, wisdom meaning a limpid understanding of the working of all phenomena and compassion, an open-hearted benevolence toward all beings caught in saṃsāra, the round of birth and death. The enlightened person not only knows and sees the world without delusion, but naturally feels sympathy for those who struggle in the dark without

understanding. Such a person, having lost the sense of "I" or ego, practises *ahiṃsa*— harmlessness—and leans with boundless good will toward all beings, ever desirous of their happiness and security. All Buddhists, if they are worthy of the name, take the Buddha and his enlightened disciples as their guides and models and strive to emulate their wisdom and compassion. All beings, the Buddha said, love life and fear death. Therefore one should not kill or cause to kill, but rather stoop to defend the helpless and point out the way to the lost.

Compassion is a virtue to cultivate so that it will grow in us and through us at all times like a blossoming tree that yields its fragrance to all, without distinction. It is unworthy to suppress compassion with the cold calculation that our own self-interest outweighs the negligible life of a foetus. But this is what we indulge in when we consider and carry out "pregnancy termination." The procedure might be quick, the room cheery, the attendants reassuring, but it is always a sorry deed, and in those minutes there must be a deadening of charity, a loss of honour, a pall on the heart, for compassion can never co-exist with killing.

"Wait a minute!" the defenders of abortion cry with one voice of indignation. "All this talk of compassion! How about some compassion for the woman who

suffers an unwanted pregnancy?" There is no question that an unwanted pregnancy can cause grief and suffering to a woman and her family. But Buddhist compassion does not overlook anybody. As for any misfortune, the proper response is to give comfort, sympathy, encouragement, and love. An unexpected, unwelcome pregnancy can indeed be very trying, causing depression and intense worry. It is very difficult for someone who has not experienced the problem to appreciate the emotional upset and unhappiness involved, and women justifiably object to a cavalier dismissal of their predicaments. An unhappily pregnant woman wants to know what options are open to her, how she might lift her anxiety and gloom, and why she should not seek an abortion as the obvious solution. We have already attempted to show that abortion is an unwholesome act, certain to bring unwholesome consequences, but when people are in the grip of strong aversion or desire or confusion they may think only of present misery and reach for the nearest seeming remedy. Thus it happens that some of us may grant that abortion is a nasty business but maintain that under the circumstances it is the lesser of two evils, and that, anyway, for good or ill, what a woman does with her body is her own personal business.

Here again we should carefully analyse and not be

swept along emotionally and unthinkingly. First of all, it is only in a conventional and relative sense that our bodies are "ours" at all. Buddhist doctrine recognises three basic characteristics of existence: impermanence, suffering, and selflessness. This last means that ultimately there is no real self or ego that possesses a body or anything. Thus our claim to dominion over "our" bodies is not altogether accurate. Second, and more important, a developing baby, while enclosed in and nourished by the mother's body, is nevertheless a separate entity, another stream of life with its own history and future. It is in fact somebody *else* whose existence is of consequence.

But surely, it might be argued, the happiness of a woman is infinitely more important than the life of a foetus; it is absurd to grant a foetus rights equal to those of a grown woman. But Buddhism does not suggest any such equality for an undesired foetus. It simply teaches that mercy benefits everyone in the long run, while violence causes sorrow. Both sides in the public abortion debate have unfortunately cast the argument in terms of right-to-life versus right-to-free-choice. Unlike those whose interest is entirely or chiefly in protecting the unborn, Buddhists are as much concerned with the welfare of the parents. In the case of unwanted pregnancy the interests of the affected parties are not so incompatible as they are

made out to be. Any being, human or other, desires life and happiness—that is to say, lasting well-being. What will really accomplish that? Buddhism teaches that happiness is in the long run increased, not diminished, by compassionate restraint.

Confirmation of this truth can be found by observing our own minds, here and now, by noting changing mental conditions when we are intending harm and when we are inclined toward benevolence and mercy. In the former case the mind is rigid, hostile, full of grievance. In the other case the mind is supple, peaceable, and compassionate. Now, in which sort of mind can wisdom be expected to grow? In which might joy take root? Thoughts of mercy and tenderness make us feel good because they are good; they rise out of good will and, as they develop into speech and action, yield benefits such as confidence, relief of anxiety, and peace of mind. No matter what euphemisms we employ, we know that abortion is a planned killing, and the intention to carry it out or order another to do it stimulates the states of mind associated with killing—hatred, agitation, fear, guilt, self-loathing.

We should refer to our own experience: have we ever regretted an act of kindness and mercy? Then think: have we ever regretted killing or harming? Common sense, let alone the weight of Buddhist

teaching, will tell us that if only for our own peace of mind we should restrain violent impulses and instead trust the pull of our hearts toward compassion.

Nevertheless, in the dark of misfortune many women and men may wish strongly to put an end to a pregnancy, to make it as if it never were, and hence may be drawn to abortion. Even though they might be moved by such arguments as presented here, they still might feel that their own circumstances justify the deed. Here we approach a very old moral problem which we should scrutinise carefully: to what extent does one's suffering entitle one to commit an unwholesome act? In this case, does the distress of a pregnant woman make it all right for her to resort to abortion? May we allow, excuse, or condone such an action? Perhaps we may; perhaps society may; but that is really beside the point in seeking for moral understanding.

According to Buddhism, the end can never be used as justification of the means. Kamma is not a god with discretion and understanding who might impose or withhold a punishment; it is an impersonal law, a function of nature, and it does not make exceptions for anybody. Mahā Moggallāna, one of the Buddha's foremost disciples, was an enlightened one, an arahat, yet even he, on account of evil deeds long past, could not escape the kammic result of a painful death. The

fact that we are suffering now does not make us immune from future harm if we do harm to someone else. We cannot, in the long run, get out of suffering by causing more suffering.

To gain a wider view of the situation we should take a look at how an unwanted pregnancy comes about. Originally, it rises from the unfathomable depths of kamma, perhaps from many lives ago. The results of kamma, it should be noted, are not absolutely fixed to any target in time, but remain as pure potential until conditions are right for them to come to fruition. The immediate or enabling cause of pregnancy is volitional actions by mother and father. We have to do something to get pregnant. In this day of effective contraceptives (and Buddhism has no objection to procedures that prevent conception) it is becoming less credible to treat the event as something entirely out of our hands. We must frankly admit our responsibility in the matter. According to Buddhism, men and women have the freedom to make their own destinies, to rise toward final liberation, and the equal freedom to fall into misery. Freedom and responsibility cannot be separated.

But what about the cases of poor women with many children already, or ignorant teenagers, or frightened women whose careers or family lives may suffer? We must agree that such pregnancies present woeful

difficulties and genuine suffering. This world, the Buddha taught, is bound up with suffering and steeped in suffering. It is for this very reason that we tread the path toward deliverance. How do we tread this path? With wisdom and compassion, with forbearance, courage, and humility, which are all of great benefit even when dealing with the hardest problems. In all cases of unwanted pregnancy it should be borne in mind that *things change.* Circumstances change, desires and aversions arise and fall away, and what is unwelcome today may be welcome tomorrow. Doubtless there are many parents who considered abortion, decided against it, and subsequently rejoiced in their children. We cannot predict the future. Courage and resolve may awake in us. Our pains may be shorter than we expect, so we should not rush into error but rather be patient and watch our own minds. If after giving birth a woman still does not want or is unable to keep a baby she may certainly give it up for adoption. With so many childless couples desperately seeking children, this course is an honourable one, yielding life and loving home to the baby and saving the mother from the pain, humiliation, and grief likely to follow an abortion.

It is only natural to wish to escape a distressing dilemma at once, completely, but how often is this

really possible? The owner of a business, whose partner absconds, leaving him in debt, cannot at once tear up his bills and proclaim himself free. A couple having trouble making mortgage payments on a house cannot restore prosperity by a single stroke. An athlete who has suffered a heart attack cannot immediately resume playing tennis. A time for recovery is required. Bad situations—even apparently undeserved ones—have to be faced with patience and intelligence, first, so that they will not get worse, and second, so that they will get better.

Abortion does not solve the problem of unwanted pregnancy. It eliminates the foetus, but leaves in its place untold regret, remorse, and unwholesome potential. The driving stream of kamma which has led to the situation in the first place is given new impetus. But if a woman chooses to go ahead with the pregnancy with whatever courage, fortitude, and grace she can muster, then that particular stream must spend its force and subside. To refrain from striking out—even when greatly provoked—not only avoids future suffering but positively advances one's virtue and strength of character. Furthermore, as the well-known tales of the Buddha's former lives testify, to willingly endure suffering out of sympathy for another is magnificent and potent merit sure to result in benefit.

It is often argued that some cases of suffering seem so severe as to demand immediate relief in the form of abortion, as drastic and unpleasant as it may be. While it is impossible here to deal with every real or hypothetical special case, we ought to mention the most common types that come to mind. What about pregnancies that come about as a result of rape or incest? Are these not horrible situations? Indeed they are. No sensitive person could dispute the severity of the mother's suffering here. But the searching question we might ask is, "Will an abortion do more harm than good in the long run?"

Of course, we do not know the future; we only know the painful present. But we also know from our participation in the Buddhist life that honouring the teachings has not failed us yet and has given us a start toward serenity. In our relative blindness, the best thing we can do is to rely on those principles we love and trust—the principles of basic Dhamma—which teach that self-restraint, mercy, and kindness produce benefit, whereas the taking of life does not. It certainly would require great bravery to carry on a pregnancy in such a case. All we could hope is that the afflicted woman would meet the affliction with clear sight. The unwelcome new person here is unconscious of, and not responsible for, the terrible deeds of the father. This should be remembered in making momentous

decisions. We are not called on to be superhuman heroes, but just to live up to the Dhamma as well as we can, to make choices in full consciousness of all that is involved.

There are many other special cases, as of very young mothers, or the seriously ill, or women who are likely to give birth to deformed or mentally retarded babies. Again, there is no question of the intensity of the misery involved here and the deplorable nature of the problem. These are beyond dispute. What we have to be alert for, however, is the natural—the almost irresistible— tendency to assume that our very real pain *authorises us* to do what we would otherwise not do. Can we ever honestly separate positive *need* from desire for convenience? Babies who come into this world deformed or sick or unwanted are experiencing the fruits of their past kamma, and they have their own destinies, happy or unhappy, to live out. It is always disingenuous for us to say, when inclined toward abortion, that such babies are better off not being born. It is better to recognise forthrightly that we are concerned principally about our own well-being. And, in a higher sense, there is nothing at all wrong with this, if we carry our concerns to the fullest extent. Why? Because we should see by the light of the Dhamma that our own well-being is ultimately indivisible from the well-being of others. We lose

nothing—we only gain—by giving the gift of compassion.

The most extreme special case is that in which the mother's life is imminently threatened by the continuation of a pregnancy. What is to be done? We know that saints do not take life under any circumstances, but if we are not saints yet then we must decide what to do according to the urgency of the situation and according to our strength, compassion, and understanding of conflicting needs. The same principles apply, saṃsāra rolls on according to its laws (and if nothing else, one may see here that conflict is the very essence of this grim round of becoming). In medical crises, a physician's duty is always to protect the life of the mother. This goes without saying. He or she should also try to save the baby. If both cannot be done then it would seem only reasonable to take necessary measures to guard the mother. If the baby or foetus does not survive, then perhaps so it must be.

But probably it is rare for matters to come to an absolute either-or situation. More likely a pregnancy may pose some degree of medical risk to a woman, which she must judge as best she can, paying particular attention to the state of her own mind. What sort of volitions are stirring there? How much risk can she accept? All intentional taking of life is

unwholesome kamma though many factors enter into (and sometimes mitigate) the process, chiefly the fundamental volition underlying the action. Killing in self-defence is doubtless of lesser weight than killing for baser motives, though it is still significant. In all cases Buddhism asks that we look clearly at the situation, remember our duties, balance wisdom and compassion, suppress selfishness, and act as nobly as we can.

But what advice or consolation can Buddhism offer to woman or couples who have already carried out an abortion? Certainly such a deed generates unwholesome kamma, but it must not be thought that this is the end of the story and that there is nothing more to be done about it. As we said, kamma remains as *potential* until conditions are right for its ripening. But how it ripens, and when, and to what degree, are entirely unpredictable, as the process depends on innumerable other conditions. And chief among these conditions are our own present and future deeds. We can, to some extent, offset our bad actions by good. Thus it is that the Buddha counsels us not to torment ourselves with guilt and vain regret but simply to recognise our errors, let them go, and resolve to restrain ourselves in the future. Even the most virtuous saints and sages have, throughout the infinity of saṃsāra, committed countless misdeeds.

The road to perfection is a long and crooked one, so we should persevere with equanimity, learning from our mistakes and pressing onward toward final deliverance. Those of us who have procured or participated in an abortion should face up to the misdeed, acknowledge it, and resolve to live henceforth full of kindliness for all beings. This in itself will begin to lighten the mind and restore calm and self-respect. Those of us who have not had that unhappy experience should realise that we too bear an ancient load of error and that, as we hope others will be gentle with us, so we should unstintingly sympathise with them.

These reflections and arguments have only outlined the bulk of a great problem for men and women living today. We have hardly touched on the well-known social and political dimensions of the issue, focusing instead on the moral and religious implications as seen through Buddhist eyes. The conflict goes on in this world of passion, and we need to reflect deeply to avoid being caught up in it. The teaching of the Buddha, the Dhamma, should be examined with a fair mind and brought close to the heart as we gain confidence in it. In shaping our destiny we have free choice, which is both our freedom and our responsibility. We should choose with open eyes, and choose rightly.

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