

A RESPONSE TO DAMIEN KEOWN'S
SUICIDE, ASSISTED SUICIDE AND EUTHANASIA:
A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

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In his article, Keown articulates what I see as a basically valid reading of the implications of the texts of the Pali Canon on the issues at hand.¹ I particularly like his formulation, 'to deny death and cling to life is wrong, but equally wrong is to deny life and seek death.' As the aging Arahāt Sāriputta says in the *Theragāhā* vv. 1002-03:

I do not long for death; I do not long for life; I shall lay down this body attentive and mindful.

I do not long for death, I do not long for life; but I await my time, as a servant his wages.

Keown focuses a fair amount of his discussion on the suicide of a few near Arahats. Though I broadly agree with his analysis of these cases, they do pertain to rather rare and exceptional types of people, while for the ordinary person, various central Buddhist values and considerations straightforwardly make it clear that suicide is highly inadvisable. While Buddhism emphasizes that there is much suffering in life, this can, paradoxically, help dissuade a Buddhist from giving in to despair. If suffering of various kinds, gross or subtle, is to be expected in life, then there is less reason for a person to take particular problems so personally—as if the world is conspiring against him or her.

Buddhist encouragement to regard events and bodily and mental processes as 'not-Self'—not any kind of fixed essence that one should identify with—can also help a Buddhist step back from being dragged down by unpleasant experiences. Reflection on the principle of impermanence should urge the Buddhist to realize that all bad things come to an end, sooner or later. Reflection on the principle of karma should mean that he is more willing to patiently live through what may

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1. Keown may perhaps be criticized for relying exclusively on Theravāda sources, though he makes a good case for doing so. One might also add that he focuses on material in the Theravāda collection that was broadly shared by the various early schools, and was mainly augmented rather than rejected by the later Mahāyāna tradition.

be the results of his own prior action—and maybe learn something about the nature of life in the process—rather than sow the seeds of future suffering by new, rash actions. This does not, however, preclude, though, patient, determined action to try to improve any difficult situation.

Someone faced with some weighty suffering might perhaps kill himself or herself in the hope of something less intolerable after death. However, in the Buddhist perspective, there is no guarantee that matters will not be made worse by this act. The next rebirth might be as an animal preyed on and eaten by others, as a frustrated ghost, or in a hell, so that it might well be more ‘intolerably painful’ than the present life. Even when someone is reborn as a human, there are many possible forms of severe suffering in the next life. If karma is the cause of present difficulties, such difficulties may well continue in the next life. Moreover, as because dying in an agitated mind is seen as leading to a bad transition into the next life, suicide is seen as likely to lead to a bad rebirth next time. In Tibetan tradition, the consciousness of one who commits suicide is seen as anguished and weighed down with negative karma, so as to need rituals to aid it.² To one who argues that they would rather die calmly at a time of their own choosing, rather than later, agitated by pain, a Buddhist might reply a) that palliative care has now greatly reduced the suffering of the dying, b) that going through the full dying process may, from a Buddhist point of view, offer opportunities for great insight into life, c) that one never knows if one might, indeed, recover, and d) to die while conspiring at someone’s death—one’s own—is a bad way to make the transition to the next rebirth.

In fact, while human life contains many difficulties, to cut it short means that the potential for spiritual development which is present in a rare ‘precious human rebirth’ will have been thrown away. Not only does suicide waste this opportunity for oneself, but it also deprives others of benefit that one may bring to them. This attitude is reflected in a canonical text where the monk Mahā Kassapa was asked by a materialist: why, if rebirth existed, do moral people such as monks not kill themselves so as to gain the karmic results of their good actions? Kassapa replies that moral people ‘do not seek to hasten the ripening of that which is not yet ripe,’ for:

The purpose of virtuous renouncers and Brahmins of beautiful qualities is gained by life. In proportion to the length of time that

2. Sogyal Rinpoche, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* 310, 376 (Rider, 1992).

such a man abides here, is the abundant karmic fruitfulness [*puñña* or 'merit'] that they create, practicing for the welfare of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world (D.II.330-1).

One can also add that, even for a not particularly virtuous person, suicide is an act which will bring grief to friends and relatives, and so, if for no other reason, it is to be avoided.

Focusing now on the textual sources from the Monastic Discipline, which see aiding or inciting suicide as very serious, a critic might say: yes, but these teachings apply only to monks, of whom higher standards are expected. True, yet the rule treats the monks' suicide actions as equivalent to murdering a human being, that is, as equivalent to a the most serious breach of the first lay precept, on killing any living being, human or otherwise. The monastic code's ruling, then, is surely also relevant for lay people, on this issue.

It is notable that the Theravādin monastic code does not make suicide itself an offense. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that the focus of the monastic rule on inciting or aiding a suicide concerns actions that will lead to expulsion from the monastic order. If someone has killed himself or herself, this question does not arise. The *Mahā-prajñā-pāramitā-sāstra* cites an unspecified *Vinaya* as saying that suicide does not break the first precept, against killing, and argues that the precept only concerns harming other beings. Nevertheless, the texts still say that the act is "sullied by delusion, by attachment, and by hate."³ Moreover, Demiéville reports that in the *Vinaya* of the Mahīśāsakas (*Taishō* 1421, II, 7b-c), the Buddha, before giving the pronouncement on aiding suicide, says that to commit suicide is a grave offense, just falling short of a full offense entailing defeat.⁴ In Tibetan tradition, suicide is seen as on a par with murder.⁵

The question remains whether an unsuccessful suicide attempt is a monastic offense. At *Vin.*III.82 an account is given of a monk who, due to struggling with sexual desire, throws himself off a cliff. Though he does not die, he kills someone he lands on. As this death was not caused intentionally, the monk is not expelled, but the Buddha says: Monks, one should not throw oneself off (*na . . . attānam pāṭetabbam*).

3. k12, 149a; II *Le Traité de la Grande Vertu de Sagesse de Nagarjuna* at 740 (Bureau du Muséon, E. Lamotte, trans, 1949).

4. P. Demiéville, 'Le Bouddhisme et la Guerre', *Mélanges*, Vol. I, pp. 347-85, at 350 (Paris, L'Institut des Hautes Etudes Chinoises, 1957).

5. G.H. Mullin, *Death and Dying: The Tibetan Tradition* 149 (Arkana, 1987) (translated texts plus introductions).

Whoever shall throw (himself) off, there is an offense of wrong doing.' Though he has not committed an offense entailing expulsion, he has done something approximating such an offense; of these offenses, there are two grades: a grave offense and the less serious, an offense of wrongdoing. The succeeding case of some monks who accidentally killed someone by throwing a stone off Vulture's peak, is dealt with in exactly the same way. This perhaps suggests that the offense, in both cases, was seen as one of culpable carelessness as to the safety of others, or that in the first case, the offense did not reside in its being a case of an attempted suicide. Yet *na . . . attānam pāetabbam* can mean 'one should not kill oneself,' and the para-canonical *Milindapañha* (pp.195-97), after citing the above rule, says that a virtuous persons should not kill themselves.

Moreover, the commentary on the above rule (*Vin.A.467*) says:

i) And here, not only is (oneself) not to be thrown off, also by whatever other means, even by stopping eating, one is not to be killed: whoever is ill and, when there is medicine and attendants, desires to die and interrupts his food, this is wrongdoing, surely.

ii) But of whom there is a great illness, long-lasting, (and) the attending monks are wearied, are disgusted, and worry 'what now if we were to set (him) free from sickness:' if he, (thinking): 'this body being nursed does not endure, and the monks are wearied,' stops eating, does not take medicine, it is acceptable (*vattati*).

iii) Who (thinking) 'this illness is intense, the life-activities do not persist, and this special (meditative) attainment of mine is seen as if I can put my hand on it' stops (eating): it is acceptable, surely.

iv) Moreover, for one who is not ill, for whom a sense of religious urgency has arisen, (thinking) 'the search of food is, indeed, an obstacle: I will just attend to the meditation object', stopping (eating) under the heading of the meditation object is acceptable.

v) Having declared a special (meditative) attainment, he stops eating: it is not acceptable (numbers added).⁶

This generalizes the prohibition on throwing oneself off a cliff to any method of suicide, even a 'passive' method such as self-starvation (i), as used by Jain saints. It does, however, allow that some instances of self-starvation are acceptable. It is acceptable when one has no time to collect food because one is being inspired to intently practice a

6. Compare P.V. Bapat & A. Hirakawa, *Shan-Chien-P'i-P'o-Sha, a Chinese Version by Sanghabhadra of Samantapasadika: Commentary on Pali Vinaya translated into English for the first time at 327* (Poona, Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1970).

meditation (iv), but not if one has already attained a specific meditative state and thinks one need do nothing more (v). It is not acceptable if one is ill, but help is at hand (i). It is acceptable in two other cases of illness: when there is a severe, long-lasting illness, and a monk allows himself to die so as not to trouble those who attend on him (ii), and where there is an intense illness, the person is clearly dying, and he knows he has attained a meditative state he had been aiming at (iii).

Here, self-starvation is seen as acceptable when it is because it is an unintended side-effect of a more important task (iv), part of a compassionate act (ii), or a situation when death is already imminent and further eating would be futile, not even allowing further work on a meditative task (iii). Such scenarios are clearly relevant to a consideration of euthanasia, yet none of them actually validates choosing death to avoid further suffering. Scenario (iii) might be seen to come close to this, but it is best seen as a case of giving up a futile struggle to prolong life, particularly when a worthwhile mental state has already been reached. This is perhaps reminiscent of very ill old people who simply stop eating, and so die.

Example (iv) might be seen as a heroic death, where a person lets go of—not the same as rejecting—life so as to be better able to attain the highest potential of human life. Scenario (ii) can be seen as an act of self-giving, partly reminiscent of stories in Mahāyāna texts (and some Theravāda *Jāta* stories) of Bodhisattvas who generously choose to die as part of a compassionate act to aid others. Such cases might be seen to validate the decision of a Buddhist patient who, faced with death, freely chooses to forego further medical treatment if this is placing a great financial strain on relatives, particularly if it is of little real benefit. Any hint from relatives that they should so choose, though, would be an incitement to suicide, and clearly immoral.

The Mahāyāna also discusses scenarios where the doctrine of skilful means leads to a Bodhisattva, in constrained circumstances, having to ‘compassionately’ kill someone who is about to kill many others. This act, however, is to save the potential victims and save the potential killer from the bad karma of killing. The Bodhisattva’s act, though, is not treated lightly. In order for it to be in any way acceptable, the Bodhisattva has to be willing to go to hell for the action. Then, and only then, might he escape being reborn in hell, due to the great compassion of his action! Thus, the act of killing is still seen as evil, but an evil that the Bodhisattva is willing to commit, for a greater good, and at his own expense. Such scenarios have little relevance for suicide or euthanasia. These early cases involve the killing of people who are

themselves about to intentionally kill others, so as to prevent such an evil. Indeed, the *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*, which endorses certain acts of killing from skilful means, also says that the Bodhisattva's generosity should not include giving someone an instrument for suicide,⁷ which is surely relevant to cases of assisted suicide or euthanasia.

On the issue of autonomy, Keown rightly argues that autonomy is no moral trump card in Buddhism. Just because someone thinks something is morally right does not mean that it is so. It is worthwhile making the point, though, that what is regarded as immoral is not always made illegal by a society. Thus in Asian Buddhist lands, only in Sri Lanka, (due to the influence of British law) is attempted suicide a punishable offense. In the case of Channa, it is notable that, prior to his suicide, senior monks try to dissuade him from committing the act, but they do not try to physically prevent him. To this extent, his autonomy is respected. One might, on this basis, make a more general point: while Buddhist ethics sees a range of actions as morally unwholesome, and Buddhist countries have made a number of them illegal, generally speaking, the autonomy of people to do legal but immoral actions is respected. Buddhist values strongly counsel against such actions, but at the end of the day, if people choose to do them, that is their look-out (karmically speaking). It is entirely another matter, though, when it comes to aiding or encouraging other persons to kill themselves, even if they are gravely ill. It makes no difference if the persons themselves request to be killed, and the same applies if they are unconscious but have previously made a 'living will' to that effect. In the latter case, there is the added Buddhist consideration that, as there is no unchanging self, there is no guarantee that a previous decision might still be endorsed by the patient.

As Keown argues, though, the discontinuation of futile, onerous treatment would be acceptable in certain cases. Moreover, the increase of pain-killers, with the foreknowledge that this may cause death, may be acceptable if the intention is genuinely to ease the pain, and not to kill it by killing the patient.

7. 49a; H. Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* 175 (Motilal Banarsidass, repr 1970).