Prolife, Prochoice: Buddhism and Reproductive Ethics

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Introduction

Among the many modern ethical issues of concern to women, those surrounding reproductive choice are arguably the most urgent. My purpose here is to explore these issues from Buddhist points of view, traditional and contemporary, to open the discussion on how contemporary American Buddhists may resolve tensions between Buddhist ideals and modern realities, and explore how Buddhist thinking on these issues may contribute to contemporary dialogue on reproductive ethics. To begin, I present a brief overview of Buddhist ethical theory. Second, I investigate Buddhist tenets relevant to reproductive choice and how these tenets are variously interpreted in the world's Buddhist cultures. Then I explore what these ideas bring to contemporary discussions about reproductive choice.

An Overview of Buddhist Ethics

It is important to consider the morality of abortion within the context of Buddhist moral theory as a whole. The Buddha taught an ethic of personal responsibility, in which one assumes full responsibility for one's actions and the results of those actions. In this system, individuals exercise freedom of choice in ethical decision-making, with the knowledge that wholesome actions result in happiness and unwholesome actions result in unhappiness unless purified through some type of mitigating spiritual practice.

Buddhist ethics are embedded within a philosophical system that entails rebirth. Sentient beings (that is, beings with consciousness) take birth again and again, according to their actions, experiencing various sufferings and dissatisfactions, until they achieve liberation or enlightenment. Within the cycle of repeatedly being born and dying, sentient beings take birth in an infinite variety of relationships to one another within six possible realms of existence: the god, demi-god, human, animal, ghost, and hell realms. All sentient beings, including animals and insects, have the potential for enlightenment, but because intelligence is important for spiritual evolution, a human rebirth is regarded as a very special opportunity. Conception is viewed as an instance of collective karma, indicating a karmic affinity or association between mother, father, and child in countless past lives.

Buddhist ethical theory is based on the Noble Eightfold Path: right intention, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Since Buddhism is a nontheistic system, no deity stands in judgment of one's actions and there is no mention of God's will or God's punishment.

Although the texts speak of gods and the possibility of rebirth in a god realm, these are not gods in the sense of an omnipotent creator God. Buddhas (fully enlightened beings) and arhats (liberated beings) are free from the cycle of rebirth, but do not control the destinies of others.

Instead, each action, or karma, of body, speech, or mind is a matter of personal freedom and responsibility, subject to the impersonal law of cause and effect whereby skillful deeds result in happiness while unskillful deeds result in suffering. This ripening of the results of skillful and unskillful actions over a vast series of pleasant or unpleasant rebirths in the six realms is

what constitutes the "cyclic existence," or samsara. To achieve happiness and evolve to enlightenment, the idea is for an individual to create as many wholesome actions as possible and avoid even the slightest unwholesome ones.

To determine what constitutes "right" actions of body, speech and mind, ethical guidelines in the form of precepts are taught: five for laypeople, ten for novice monastics, and several hundred for fully ordained monastics. The five precepts for laypeople--to refrain from taking life, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and taking intoxicants--are the core of the Buddhist way of life. Use of the terminology "rules of training" indicates that the precepts are a ground for practicing ethical conduct, rather than moral absolutes. This is further indicated by certain categories of temporary precepts, whereby one can "train" in observing particular precepts for a given length of time, as short as twenty-four hours.

Interpreting the First Precept

The first of the precepts is to refrain from taking life. The most serious instance of killing is taking a human life. The reasoning behind this prohibition is that nothing is as dear to a living being as its own life. The behavior of animals on the way to slaughter and even insects about to be squashed make this clear. The injunction against taking life, then, is rooted in compassion for living beings in danger of losing what they hold most dear. Placing more importance on one's own welfare than the welfare of other beings is often cited as the reason beings continue to circle within the vicious wheel of samsara. The path to enlightenment is seen as integrally related to reversing the tendency to self-grasping and self-cherishing.

Abortion, because it is seen as taking the life of a fetus, poses a serious moral, spiritual, and personal dilemma. In Indian Buddhist texts, taking life applies to taking the life of a "sentient" being, a being with consciousness and hence the potential to achieve enlightenment. Taking life includes performing the action of killing, having someone else kill, or encouraging someone to kill. Killing a human being is considered more serious than killing an animal and taking the life of a fetus is regarded as killing a human being. There is no prohibition against family planning methods that prevent conception.

Traditionally for Buddhists, the life process of sentient beings begins at the moment of conception, when a being's consciousness "enters" the conjoined egg and sperm of the parents. Because life begins at the moment of fertilization, there is thought to be no qualitative difference between an abortion in the first trimester versus the last trimester. Although a fetus is not regarded as having a fully developed "personality," in the Western sense of the word, it is regarded as being a "person," complete with the five aggregates that serve as the basis of determining personal identity: form, feelings, perceptions, karmic formations, and consciousness.

Buddhist philosophical and medical literature describe in remarkable (if technically inaccurate) detail the stages of embryonic development of the fetus month by month, some with illustrations. In addition to the physical aggregate, a fetus is said to have feelings of heat, cold, pain, and discomfort; perceptions of being cramped, bounced, and restricted; karmic formations, including the "imprints" of actions created in past lives; and a momentary stream of consciousness that carries the imprints of actions that being has created in past

lives. According to the quality of those actions, the being will experience pleasure or pain, and live a long or short lifespan, in happy or unhappy circumstances.

The Buddhist texts make no case for the legal rights of a fetus, nor do they mention abortion in circumstances of rape, incest, severe deformity, or cases of mental, physical, or emotional abuse.

(1) His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, is watching closely to see whether medical research is able to determine precisely when the consciousness enters the fertilized egg, whether at the time of conception or perhaps somewhat later. In 1992, he voiced the unorthodox and controversial view that: There might be situations in which, if the child will be so severely handicapped that it will undergo great suffering, abortion is permissible. In general, however, abortion is the taking of life and is not appropriate. The main factor is motivation.

(2) Making such ethical decisions is a tremendous personal responsibility, however, and one's motivation is crucially important. Another Tibetan, Lama Thubten Yeshe, once said, "If you know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you are creating happiness rather than suffering for a being by killing it, then go ahead. But who, other than a person with a very high level of spiritual realization, can be completely sure?" In the Buddhist perspective, such confidence would require the power to discern other beings' past and future lives, and this ability is rare. The traditional Buddhist view takes into account the happiness of both the unborn fetus and the pregnant woman, not only in this life, but in all future rebirths, and this is beyond the ability of ordinary people to see.

Most of the studies on Buddhism and abortion to date have focused on Japan, specifically the popular ritual called mizuko kuyo, and its American adaptations. Because reliable methods of contraception are not readily available in Japan, abortion has become the principal means of birth control, with Japanese women often undergoing six or more abortions. The mizuko ritual is a way for these women to cope with the grief, loss, and shame they feel as a consequence. Those who have experienced abortion or the loss of a child may pray to Jizo Bodhisattva, a being regarded as a protector of women and children, and transfer merit or offer prayers to comfort the spirits of the departed. Although these beliefs and practices are not found in the Buddhist canon and are in no way typical of practices in other Buddhist countries and cultures, they provide a way for women who have experienced abortion to come to terms with their decision.

(3) Yvonne Rand, a Soto Zen priest trained at the San Francisco Zen Center, has adapted the mizuko ritual to help American women who have lost children come to terms with their grief. Each woman sews a bib which she offers to an image of Jizo Bodhisattva with prayers for the well-being of the child who has met with an accidental death or died through induced or spontaneous abortion. This ritual has proved to be an excellent way for women to deal with the psychological consequences of abortion.

(4) Even so, both in the United States and Japan, there is concern that the ritual can be interpreted as condoning abortion or as a kind of penance. In Japan, a schedule of fees for these services has replaced the donation system and abortion has become big business, with sizable amounts of money changing hands. Unscrupulous entrepreneurs have taken

advantage of women by raising the specter of harmful influences from the vengeful spirits of mizuko and charging for rites to propitiate and exorcise these spirits.

(5) In the Tibetan tradition, unwholesome actions may be purified by applying the Four Opponent Powers: recognizing one's unwholesome action as a mistake, generating remorse, determining not to repeat the action, and doing some purification practice, such as meditation, prostrations, or the repetition of mantras or prayers. Purification practices such as these serve as antidotes or methods to counteract the effects of unskillful deeds. In addition to helping purify one's karma, these practices have the effect of preventing debilitating feelings of guilt and self-blame. Meditations on lovingkindness and compassion for oneself, the aborted fetus, and all sentient beings help to replace feelings of sadness and depression.

Buddhist thinking on reproductive ethics recognizes the complexity of the issues. Today traditional Buddhist perspectives are being examined anew in light of technological discoveries such as amniocentesis and nonsurgical abortion techniques such as the RU486 pill developed in France.

There are no moral absolutes in Buddhism and it is recognized that ethical decision-making involves a complex nexus of causes and conditions. "Buddhism" encompasses a wide spectrum of beliefs and practices, and the canonical scriptures leave room for a range of interpretations. All of these are grounded in a theory of intentionality, and individuals are encouraged to analyze issues carefully for themselves. There is no overarching institutional structure to take an official stance, and the final moral authority for actions is the individual herself.

When making moral choices, individuals are advised to examine their motivation--whether aversion, attachment, ignorance, wisdom, or compassion--and to weigh the consequences of their actions in light of the Buddha's teachings. Moral ambiguity, conflicting values, and, in the case of abortion, extenuating circumstances such as multiple birth defects, severe poverty, and dangers to the mother's health or life, are acknowledged. These pose a wicket just as sticky for Buddhists as for other ethical theorists and religious practitioners.

Traditional Buddhist cultures recognize birth, sickness, old age, and death as natural events for all living beings, with social stigmas against premarital and extramarital sex linked to an awareness of the possible consequences of pregnancy and abortion. In general, Buddhists are advised to avoid taking life and to protect the lives of all sentient beings, but Buddhists also acknowledge that it is impossible for ordinary beings to avoid taking life altogether. For example, although a vegetarian diet avoids taking the lives of larger animals, planting the fields to grow vegetables and grains unavoidably takes the life of many insects.

In Buddhism, a primary guiding principle for ethical decision-making is the relief of suffering. It is clear that both abortion and restrictive abortion laws can cause great suffering for both mother and fetus. For Buddhists, the most obvious way to prevent the sufferings caused by terminating a pregnancy is to provide education and legal access to safe, reliable, and free or low-cost contraception. Although formal education in reproductive health was not a part of traditional learning systems in Buddhist countries, it could well find a place in education programs in Buddhist societies today. Reproductive health education based on Buddhist

principles would emphasize wholesome living, mindfulness, compassion for all sentient beings, and the wisdom to make sensible decisions.

In the end, most Buddhists recognize the incongruity that exists between ethical theory and actual practice and, while they do not condone the taking of life, do advocate understanding and compassion toward all living beings, a lovingkindness that is nonjudgmental and respects the right and freedom of human beings to make their own choices. (6)