

Pro-life, Pro-choice : Buddhism and Abortion Ethics

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Abstract

This paper examines the abortion issue from a Buddhist perspective. Among the many modern ethical issues of concern to women, those surrounding reproductive choice are arguably the most urgent. As the consciousness is held to enter the embryo at conception, it is felt to be fully human at that moment. My purpose here is to explore these issues from Buddhist point of view. Buddhism strongly discourages abortion except in the situation of an immediate threat to the mother's life. Though Buddhism has clearly "Pro-life" position on abortion, the final decision should be left to the pregnant woman.

Thus the paper seeks to show that Buddhism has traditionally opposed abortion, while tolerating its practice. Exploring this difficult territory means looking at ethics from a Buddhist perspective and considering how we balance compassion for the unborn child and for the mother.

KEYWORDS : Abortion issue, Buddhist perspective, Buddhist view, Final decision, Pregnant woman.

1. Introduction :

Buddhism like all religious and secular philosophies, focuses on two central questions concerning abortion — (1) when does the embryo or fetus acquire the property which makes termination of pregnancy "killing"? and (2) Is termination of a pregnancy, before and after this point, ever justifiable?

According to the Buddhist view abortion is undeniably the taking of life. The debate centers on the issue as to whether the life in question can be considered 'human'. Buddhism like most religions says most emphatically that it is so. The Buddhist teaching runs as follows—

Consciousness first arises at the moment of conception; that consciousness is shaped by karmic influences from past lives, and that, it is a critical, and indeed formative, component of the new organism from that moment onwards. Most Buddhist commentators have adopted classical Hindu teachings that, the transmigration of consciousness occurs at conception and, therefore, that all abortion incurs the karmic burden of killing. Before modern embryology was discovered, in the countries where Buddhism flourished as well as in the west, ideas about conception were scientifically inaccurate. These ideas often associated the beginning of life with events in the third or fourth month of pregnancy.

2. Objectives of the study :

→ To examine the abortion issue from Buddhist Perspective.

→ To examine the Five Precepts that form the foundation of ethical behavior considering 'life'.

→ To show that the First Precept enjoins us not to kill any living beings.

3. Materials and methods :

This is a descriptive study. A part of my doctoral thesis. Data has been collected from journals, articles, books, magazines and websites.

4. Results :

Although the practice of abortion is regrettable in Buddhist Precept but one should always examine the circumstance to allow for exception. Just as compassion (Karuṇā) for the unborn fetus is necessary, so also compassion for the pregnant women is vital.

5. Discussion :

5.1. Gautam Buddha's view on abortion.

Many Buddhist institutions have laid down rules and regulations, but Buddha's actual teachings on any issue like abortion would be that, there is no absolute ruling. Moreover, the Buddha Himself spoke directly of abortion in His discourse called the Dharani Sutra. He said:

“There are five kinds of Evil Karma which are difficult to extinguish, even if one were to repent on them. What are the five kinds of offences? The first one is killing the father, the second one is killing the mother, the third one is abortion, the fourth one is to cause injury. For the Buddha, the fifth one is to create disharmony among the Sangha assemblies (i.e. create division and schism). These five types of evil and sinful Karma are difficult to extinguish¹.”

In Vinaya Pitaka (guide for monks and nuns) there are “Four Disrobing offences”. These four offenses that can get a monk “disrobed,” ex-communicated are:

- 1) Engaging in sexual intercourse.
- 2) Stealing something of value.
- 3) Purposely killing a human being, or encouraging someone to commit suicide, or “convincing a woman to have an abortion².”
- 4) Boasting that one has realized enlightenment while knowing one has not yet realized it (i.e., lying about ones' own spiritual station)

For other offences, monks and nuns can do penance, but not for these four. These are excommunicatable offences.

Of the Eight-fold Path that Buddhism preaches, the fourth is Right Action³— Under Right Action comes the principle of ahimsā i.e. non-violence to all living things.

In this context we may mention that the Buddhists believe in re-birth. The general Buddhist belief about re-birth is that at conception three-things come together — the sperm, egg and the Karmic force, that is the effect of the action of previous life.

Without getting technical about how re-birth works, basically this means that a human life begins at the moment of conception and thus, it must not be aborted. If a human fetus is terminated or otherwise if it dies, this might mean, in Buddhist terms, that the bad Karma carried over from the previous life has been 'paid', and so the next life will be more fortunate. However, at the same time the people concerned with causing the abortion (say the woman, doctor etc.) will be generating bad Karma themselves for this act of violence. Thus the Buddhists, who strongly believe in Karma, that is, the law of cause and effect, firmly oppose abortion, because according to their doctrine, Karma will cause bad effects to the performer of abortion, (i.e. the woman and the abortionist) as well as to the aborted fetus while abortion would generate bad Karma for the former two, the fetus would be deprived of the opportunities of earthly existence and, therefore, of earning good Karma. In other words, abortion hinders its spiritual progress.

Buddhism, no doubt, does not have a definite opinion about the individual human life begins at conception, a view widely shared in contemporary Buddhist societies. The ancient authorities, of course, had an imperfect knowledge of embryology, particularly, concerning conception, but their understanding of fetal development as a gradual process with a definite starting point was not very different from that of modern science. Interpreting the traditional teachings in the light of modern scientific discoveries, such as, ovulation, the view of most traditional Buddhists today is that fertilization is the point at which individual human life commences. Consequently, the Buddhists regard abortion as contrary to the First Precept (which has been discussed in the next sub-section).

5.1.1. PRECEPTS IN BUDDHIST ETHICS

Ethics basically involves leading life through which an individual passes again and again, but does belief in re-birth increase or reduce the seriousness of abortion? It may be thought that it reduces it, since all that has been done is to postpone rebirth to a later time—the child that was to be born would simply arrive later. Traditional sources, however, do not hold this view. They regard the intentional killing of a human being at any stage of life as wrong, regardless of the fact that he or she will be born again.

Although in one sense life is a continuum, Buddhism also believes that each life is an embodied individual who has a clear beginning and an end. From the earliest times Buddhist sources have opposed abortion; and the main belief is that it is wrong to abort. However, there seems no reason for the Buddhists to oppose birth control. Birth control prevents the coming into being of an existence. Here no killing is involved and there is no "akusala" (bad) Karma. But abortion, in their view, is wrong because it involves taking away or destroying a visible or invisible life and, therefore, cannot be justified.

5.2. SERIOUSNESS OF ABORTION RELATES TO RE-BIRTH

The Buddhist belief in re-birth introduces a new dimension to the abortion debate. For one thing, it puts the question "when does life begin?" in an entirely new light. For Buddhism, life is a continuum with no discernible starting point. Birth and death are like revolving door in a right manner and making right decisions about moral issues. In Buddhism, there is no God. So, it is upto human beings themselves to perform right action and make this world a better one. It is to be noted that in

Buddhism, ethical behaviour is necessary not only because it is based on right actions, but also because it is a means to the attainment of enlightenment.

For common Buddhists, the Five Precepts that form the foundation of ethical behaviour are:

- First Precept : Prevent taking life of beings. Every living being has a right to life and it should be honoured by one and all.
- Second Precept : Prevent taking things not given. One should neither steal nor accept things meant for someone else.
- Third Precept : Prevent sensual misconduct. One should not only refrain from sexual misconduct, but also avoid excessive sensual pleasure of any kind (like gluttony).
- Fourth Precept : Prevent making false statements. This not only includes lying but also slander and speech that might cause harm to others .
- Fifth Precept : Prevent taking substance that cause intoxication. This precept is important in the sense that it could be the cause of other four precepts being broken.

In addition to these, the Theravada Buddhists also observe three more precepts on special or holy occasions. The three rules that should be followed by the members of Sangha on a regular basis are:

- Prevent taking food at unsuitable time—from noon the previous day to sunrise next day.
- Prevent any form of entertainment as well as items used to beautify oneself.
- Prevent the use of high beds.

5.2.1. INTERPRETING THE FIRST PRECEPT

As with all religious traditions, there are varying opinions amongst Buddhist, concerning abortion. Abortion is widely performed in some countries where Buddhism is wide spread such as Japan and South Korea, while in other Buddhist countries, such as Srilanka, Thailand, and Burma abortion is more restricted.

(a) Pro-life Buddhist view

The First Precept enjoins us not to kill any living being. The First Precept instructs one to refrain from taking life. The most serious instance of killing is taking a human life. The reasoning behind this prohibition is that nothing can be dear to a living being than its own life. The injunction against taking life, is rooted in compassion (Karuṇā) for living beings.

Traditionally, for the 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. Since life begins at the moment of fertilization, there is thought to be no qualitative difference between an abortion in the first trimester and one in the last. Although a fetus is not regarded as having a fully developed

“personality” it is, nevertheless, regarded as being a “person” complete with the five aggregates, (skandhas) that serve as the basis of determining personal identity, feeling, perceptions, karmic formations and consciousness.

Abortion, because it is seen as taking the life of a fetus, possess a serious moral, spiritual and personal dilemma for the Buddhists. In Buddhist text, taking life applies to taking the life of a “sentient” being, a being with consciousness and, along with it, the potential to achieve enlightenment. Taking life includes performing the action of killing, having someone else killed, or encouraging someone to kill.

It must be noted here that, this precept does not only apply to humans, it can be extended to other living beings. However, if it is accepted that, the fetus is alive, then the precept implies that it should not be harmed. Since abortion implies the taking of life for the Buddhists, this involves an unethical and immoral act.

According to the teachings of Buddha, five conditions must be present to constitute the evil act of killing. They are:

- 1) a living being
- 2) knowledge or awareness of it as a living being.
- 3) intention of killing.
- 4) effort to kill, and
- 5) consequent death.

When a female conceives there is a being in her womb and this fulfils the first condition. After a couple of months, she knows that there is a new life within her and this satisfies the second condition. If for some reason, she wants to do away with this being in her and gets an aid to do the job, the third condition is fulfilled. When the aid or the abortionist agrees to do the job, the fourth condition is satisfied and, finally, the fifth condition is fulfilled when the ‘being’ is killed as a result of that action. Thus abortion , which involves a violation of the First Precept — ‘not to kill’, is an immoral and an evil act.

(b) Pro-choice Buddhist view

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. It is quite clear from the variety of sources that traditionally abortion was severely disapproved. It is also equally clear that abortion was tolerated and accommodated under exceptional circumstances by some modern Buddhists⁴. The situation is similar to that of Roman Catholics, where abortion, though disapproved, in the strongest terms by Church authorities, is still practised by a large number of devoted Catholics and defended by at least a few. Although there are exceptions, Buddhism is still an anti-abortion religion. The abortion issue usually hinges on whether, the fetus is indeed a ‘living being’ in the relevant sense. In its early stages, a fetus is not considered a human by the Buddhists. It is alive but not a human being. Therefore, in some cases abortion may be right or appropriate. “One cannot say that a fertilized egg is a ‘karmically’ advanced human being, just because it is a fertilized egg”. It does not take a human form yet, and all that is there is “genes”

and surely genes do not entirely make up a person⁵. In 1970 the Japanese High Court declared: “A fetus is part of a mother’s body until it is born, and is not by itself a person⁶”.

The Buddhist approach to ethics can be summed up in one word — ‘compassion’ (Karuṇā). Just as compassion (Karuṇā) for the unborn fetus is necessary, so also compassion for the pregnant woman is vital. At the very least it must be said that Buddhists feel that if a woman makes a wrong decision in having an abortion, then they should certainly extend compassion (Karuṇā) to her and not be judgmental or critical about her decision.

5.3. Conclusion :

So, to conclude, very generally it might be fair to say that most Buddhists feel that, in principle, abortion is wrong or, atleast, very regrettable but one should always examine the circumstances to allow for exceptions and not condemn those who arrive at a different conclusion. Because Buddhism cannot offer a middle way on abortion, it has already taken sides. Its contribution is a single, clear principle, the ethical precept of not taking life. But as I have explored this issue, spoken to those who have views on it, talked with woman who have faced abortion, and consider the traditional teachings, I have understood more fully that the way this principle is implemented is as important as the principle itself. Perhaps the most important thing Buddhism can contribute to this ethical debate is a compassionate and engaged sensibility that seeks to be true to life’s difficulty and complexity. Thus it may be concluded that if the decision is considered compassionately, and after long and careful thought (i.e. taking into consideration the special circumstances), then although the action may be wrong the moral harm done will be reduced by the good intentions involved.

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Reference :

1. The Dharani Sutra of the Buddha on Longevity, The Extinction of Offences, And the Protection of Young Children, p. online.
2. Vinaya The Four Disrobing Offences, p. 1 online.
3. The Symbol of Buddhism is a wheel with eight spokes. This represents the Eight fold-path. Each Buddhist is supposed to follow the “Noble Eight fold Path” which represents:

(1) Right understanding (2) Right Thought. (3) Right speech (4) Right Action (5) Right Livelihood (6) Right Effort (7) Right Mindfulness (8) Right Concentration.

4. The Tibetan Spiritual Leader Dalai Lāmā voiced the unorthodox and controversial view that: “Of course, abortion, from a Buddhist viewpoint, is an act of killing and is negative, generally speaking. But it depends on the circumstances. If the unborn child be retarded or if the birth creates serious problems for the parent, these are cases where there can be an exception. I think abortion should be approved or disapproved according to each circumstance”.
5. Making such ethical decision is tremendous personal responsibility, however, and one’s motivation is crucially important.

Most of the studies on Buddhism and abortion to date have focused on Japan, especially the popular ritual called ‘mizuko kuyo’, and its American adaptations. Since 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’ rituals represents a way of these women to cope with the grief, loss and shame they feel as a consequence. Those who have experienced abortion or loss of a child may pray to Jizo Bodhisatva, a supreme 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 Buddhist canons, 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.

6. The ancient religion of Japan was shintoism; the belief the nature contains many spirits called Kami.

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