

Euthanasia

Euthanasia is another challenging topic. Is it okay to pull the plug?

Motivation

The first issue is our motivation. If we are the one helping to euthanise a sentient being, why are we doing it? Are we doing it to remove their suffering, or to remove our anxiety around witnessing that suffering? Who are we trying to benefit, and why do we think it brings benefit? These kinds of questions help to reveal hidden motivations that can guide us through this complex issue. It's also imperative to realize that people rarely ask for euthanasia when their needs are met. If someone is feeling loved and valued, and has their physical symptoms managed, they generally won't ask to be euthanised.

Active euthanasia

There is a difference between active and passive euthanasia. Active euthanasia is actively ending a life, and the tradition is clear on this: Don't do it. Even though the motivation may be to end suffering, and that does soften the karmic consequences, active euthanasia still has significant karmic repercussions (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, translated by Francesca Fremantle and Chogyam Trungpa, page 78).

Two Misconceptions

Active euthanasia, however well intentioned, is based on two fundamental misconceptions. The first is that experience ends with death. Although the purpose of euthanasia is to end suffering, not all suffering ends with death. Because we mistakenly identify mind with brain, we assume the mind dies when the brain dies. But mind continues. As we have seen when the body drops away at death, mind becomes reality. If the mind of the dying person was filled with suffering, that experience can initially be amplified. The physical pain from a diseased body disappears but the suffering within the mind can spike. So the harsh reality is that euthanasia can increase suffering rather than end it (*Journey of the Mind*, by Thrangu Rinpoche, page 110). It's like going to sleep full of bad thoughts. Our chances of having a terrifying nightmare, an experience far worse than the thoughts that seeded it, are high. Because of the law of proximate karma, the momentum of the last thoughts before death re-arises in the post-death bardos.

The second misconception is that the suffering that precedes death has no meaning. It seems rational for a dying person to ask, "Why should I have to endure this pain if the only way out is death? I'm going to die anyway. Why should I suffer so much?" But suffering can have great meaning and purpose. The suffering around death can be seen as the purification and exhaustion of past negative karma. That's exactly what death is, the exhaustion of past negative karma. This view can generate a new way to understand and transform our suffering, so that we bear it consciously.

Purifying Karma

To attain enlightenment we must purify karma in one of two ways: through meditation or through experience. We can view the suffering in life - and death - as the purification of karma through experience. Someone who endures suffering with equanimity is making the best of a difficult situation, purifying karma, and progressing along the spiritual path. We should let karma run its natural course. A precious opportunity, however painful, is lost through active euthanasia.

The Dalai Lama says:

Your suffering is due to your own karma, and you have to bear the fruit of that karma anyway in this life or another, unless you can find some of purifying it. In that case, it is considered better to experience the karma in this life as a human where you have more abilities to bear it in a better way, than, for example, an animal who is helpless and can suffer even more because of that.

Instead of trying to end suffering by prematurely ending a life, we should end our inappropriate relationship to suffering. Suffering comes when we contract around the pain and lose our perspective. With a proper relationship, the pain remains, but it's softened and infused with new

meaning. Instead of resisting the pain, which only exaggerates it, we can embrace the pain and, ironically, prevent the suffering. We can practise equanimity.

Once again, putting hardship into perspective allows us to relate to it properly. Pack your bitter experience into a small mind and it gets concentrated. It hurts. Make your mind as big as the sky, and that same experience is instantly diluted.

Passive Euthanasia

Passive euthanasia is allowing someone to die a natural death. If someone is in a coma with no hope of recovery, or kept alive by artificial means, then most teachers allow the removal of those means and the ensuing natural death. There comes point where there's no need to prolong life and incur unnecessary emotional and financial burdens.

With the advent of palliative medicine, which doesn't try to cure the illness but instead lessens its hardship, fewer people need to opt for euthanasia. Through palliative care and the proper view, we can transform a difficult death into a spiritual practice.

Extracts selected by Len Warren from *Preparing to Die* by Andrew Holocek, Snow Lion: Boston, 2013 Page 262. *The Pure Land of the Indestructible Buddha Inc.* <http://purelandcentre.org> , admin@purelandcentre.org