

Buddhist Ethical Discussion on Euthanasia*

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〈Abstract〉

The development of medical science and equipment saves countless lives and alleviates patients' pain. However, at the same time, patients, their families and doctors come to face ethical and moral dilemmas related to euthanasia. Thus, issues on euthanasia relating to how or when to die are being actively discussed. When confronting this controversy, it becomes clear that ethical points of view on death are not standardized. This study discusses euthanasia in terms of the Buddhist point of view. Since Buddhism explains death and life as concepts of equal value, I believe that it will provide valuable in attempting an ethical discussion of euthanasia. Buddhist scriptures provide clues that help understand the Buddhist idea on euthanasia both directly and indirectly. Buddhist percepts related to taking a human life suggest the Buddhist viewpoint on euthanasia. Many excerpts in the Buddhist canon suggest that euthanasia is not allowed because basically Buddhism is a religion that prohibits any kind of killing to any beings. Therefore, any acts or intents to kill anything cannot be excuses. Although euthanasia has a clearly merciful motive to help patients, it cannot be allowed because it shortens humans' lives as part of an arbitrary human act. This stance of a precept of 'don't kill' is based on a Buddhist basic spirit which considers life to be the most precious thing.

However, although basically Buddhism prohibits suicide, it distinguishes suicide of the common people who have reasons to live from that of monks who kill themselves to reach 'nirvana through sacred death. The goal of 'sacred death' is to reach 'nirvana', in Mahayana Buddhism, it means 'attaining Buddhahood'.

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Eventually, discussions on euthanasia come to the conclusion that it is a practical task in dealing with death. Selecting life and death depends on an individual's choice but it is important to emphasize the dignity of life to patients who think about euthanasia. Also, it is significant to find social support and moral justification for patients who suffer from incurable illness to ensure there is a meaning in their lives, insofar as a theory of bio-ethics has been established. This is the genuine set of practical Buddhist ethics.

Key Words: euthanasia, death, suicide, Buddhist ethics, Buddhist precepts

I . Introduction

Modern technology enriches humans' lives. However, many ethical problems have arisen that technology alone can not solve; specifically, the medical control over human death by the development of medical science and technology causes ethical confusion related to death. The life support system has generated unprecedented ethical issues on euthanasia.

Since patients have begun demanding the right to die without pain, or emotional or economical burden to the families of terminal patients, the numbers of patients who die in the hospital has increased. Thus, issues on euthanasia relating to how or when to die are being actively discussed. When confronting this controversy, it becomes clear that ethical points of view on death are not standardized. It is not that simple to distinguish euthanasia from suicide, the denial of useless medical treatment, or from ideas of death with dignity. In order to free them from extreme pain and keep human dignity, how can we respond to patients who request artificial death? Either rigidly supporting euthanasia or opposing it is not the answer to this question.

This study discusses euthanasia in terms of the Buddhist point of view. Since Buddhism explains death and life as concepts of equal value, I believe that it will provide valuable in attempting an ethical discussion of euthanasia

II . Ethical Issue on Euthanasia

Etymologically, euthanasia is a Greek compound word, euthanotos, of eu, which

means “well,” “good,” “beautiful,” and “comfortable” and thanatos, which means “death.” To the ancient Greeks, euthanasia meant a “good, happy, and beautiful death” and to the Romans it meant a ‘good, honorable death’¹⁾

In both cases, euthanasia can be defined as a peaceful and comfortable death through artificial means when patients suffer from extreme pain and incurable disease. Euthanasia is performed with a patient’s voluntary request to reduce their unspeakable mental and physical pain resulting from an incurable disease or irrecoverable injury. Therefore, euthanasia that is death through someone’s help or intervention is distinguished from suicide, and since the patient’s desires are taken into account, it is distinguished from murder.

However, regardless of how euthanasia is defined, since it is not a natural death, but is one generated by someone’s intervention, it has a possibility to be interpreted as murder. Although the patient’s will to die is considered, euthanasia is condemned ethically because it is an unnatural death or negligence of life. In every aspect, euthanasia embraces core issues of bio-ethics. Furthermore, since it stirs up significant issues on medical ethics, it has been an important ethical theme.²⁾

Modern ethicists classify euthanasia into two categories: active or passive, according to the degree of intention to provide patients with medical help. The active form of euthanasia includes killing patients actively by providing lethal injections, for example. The passive form is caused by deliberate or intentional negligence such as not providing food or other required conditions for life.

Each of these two modes of euthanasia can take three forms ① voluntary ② non-voluntary ③ involuntary. ‘Voluntary euthanasia’ involves the request by a legally competent person that their life should be terminated. ‘Non-voluntary euthanasia’ is killing of a non-competent patient. The removal of feeding tubes from comatose patients is an example of non-voluntary euthanasia. ‘Involuntary’ euthanasia is the intentional killing of a person against his will.³⁾

In addition to the three categories, there are three ethical stances on euthanasia; the liberal idea that every form of euthanasia ought to be allowed, the conservative one that views any form of euthanasia unallowable and the eclectic view that grants

1) In hoe Gu, *Bioethics and Philosophy* (Seoul: Philosophy and Reality Publishing, 2002), p.72.

2) Byunggi Park, “Ethical Issue and Recent Trends on Euthanasia”, *Buddhism and Culture* (Seoul: Korean Buddhism Promotion Foundation, 2002), pp.20-22.

3) Damian Keown, *Buddhism & Bio-Ethics* (London: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), pp.168-169.

only euthanasia that satisfies specific requirements ought to be allowed.

Ethically, euthanasia implies the following principles: the first is a principle of autonomy related to patients' voluntary agreement, the second is a principle of good will to others who can not shoulder the heavy burden and the third is a principle of respect for human life without any excuse. The ethical dilemma of euthanasia generates a tension between the first two and the third principle.⁴⁾

The dilemma and controversy surrounding euthanasia cannot be solved by simple theories but must also consider complicated realistic conditions in order to result in ethical solutions.

III. Negative Viewpoints on Euthanasia

Some excerpts from Buddhist canons provide clues that help understand the Buddhist idea on euthanasia both directly and indirectly. Buddhist percepts related to taking a human life suggest the Buddhist viewpoint on euthanasia. Specifically, the third parajika or offence of 'Defeat', namely 'depriving a human being of life'.

At that time a certain monk was ill. Out of compassion the other monks spoke favourably to him of death. The monk died. The others were remorseful and wondered: 'Have we committed the offence of Defeat? These monks reported the matter to the Lord. 'Monks' he said 'You are guilty of the offence of Defeat'.

The above episode can be applied to the current situation. When we see a monk who suffers from tremendous irrecoverable pain, we may think it is better for him to die. On this point, Buddhaghosa explains as follows:

Turning now to the accounts of the disciplinary cases, in the first case 'out of compassion' means that those monks, seeing the great pain the monk was in from the illness felt compassion and said to him: 'You are a virtuous man and have performed good deeds. why should you be afraid of dying? Indeed, heaven is assured for a virtuous man at the very instant of death' Thus they made death their aim and, praised death. That monk, as a result of them praising death, ceased to take food and shortly after died, and because of this they committed an offence. A wise monk, therefore, should not now speak in praise of death to a

4) Byunggi Park, op. cit., pp.23-24.

sick monk for if he, hearing that praise, dies through some means like ceasing to take food when even one second of life remains, then he been killed by that person.⁵⁾

Buddhaghosa condemned the monks who praised death for the sick monk to the most serious guilt. In a normal situation, the monks' sympathy could be praised, but in this case, their sympathy can not be justification for their acquittal.⁶⁾

Since Buddhist precepts mostly apply to monks in their response to certain events, it seems irrelevant to apply them to doctors. However, these precepts provide critical thought on euthanasia for common people. There is another excerpt in We-fen-lu (Vinaya of the Five Categories) related to death.

Several monks visited their sick colleague and talked to him, saying,

"Since your virtuous acts have already been done, heaven will comfort you. Why don't you kill yourself, if you are suffering from such pain?"

The sick monk says,

"Even so, I cannot kill myself because Buddha says committing suicide is to commit a thullaccaya. And I will expiate myself from what I committed."

At that time, the nation had gone through serious distress from looting thieves, and the laymen were separated from their families and suffered pain and agony. Thus, a monk said, "You have already done gracious and virtuous acts that will lead you to heaven. Why did you not kill yourself, if you were suffering from separation from your family and feeling pain from that?"

They answered, "Although we suffer from serious concern and sadness, we cannot kill ourselves because living in this world and experiencing pain make us cultivate the path of enlightenment "

They reprimand the monks, saying, "The duty of Buddhist monks is to love human beings and yet how do you praise death and urge us to kill ourselves? What in the world is the difference between committing suicide and praising death?"

Many of the elderly monks rebuked him after listening to this story, and took him to Buddha. Buddha asked the group of monks that gathered around him if the monk had really said what was reported. They confirmed that he had.

Buddha reprimanded him harshly, "What you did is not what Buddhist monks are supposed to do. What is the difference between committing suicide and praising death?"

A precept says, 'as a Buddhist monk, whether he kills humans or living beings, gives them a knife or drugs to kill themselves, lets others kill them, or lets them commit suicide, instigates or praises death, saying 'Why do you live suffering from pain? Dying is better than living', it is considered an attempt murder in your mind. If the man dies because of what

5) VA. II. p.464.

6) Demien Keown, op. cit., p.61.

was said to him, the monk will commit a parajika and so he cannot live as well.”⁷⁾

There is an episode where some monks instigate death as follows. In order to make a man desert hope to live and finally to obtain his wife, six monks talked about pleasure to a sick husband and told him that he would receive heaven after death.

They said, “Layman, you done what is right done what is virtuous, painted security from fear. You have not done evil, you have not been cruel. You have not been violent. You have done good and abstained from evil. What needed have you of this evil, difficult life? Death would be better for you than life. Hereafter, when you die, when your body is destroyed at death, you will pass to a happy bourn, to a heaven world. There, possessed of and provided with five divine qualities of sensual pleasure, you will amused yourself”⁸⁾

As a result of hearing this the husband began to eat drink the wrong kind of food and eventually succumbed to a fatal illness. When the matter was reported to the Buddha he excommunicated the monks and expanded the definition of the third parajika to included incitement to death:

Should any monk intentionally deprive a human being of life or look about so as to be his knife-bringer, or eulogize death, or incite [anyone] to death saying ‘My good man, what need have you of this evil, difficult life? Death would be better for you than life’, -or who should deliberately and purposefully in various ways eulogise death or incite [anyone] to death: he is also one who is defeated, he is not in communion.⁹⁾

Pressuring and unconsciously delivering the message of death can make sensitive men kill themselves because they think it is their duty to commit suicide.

There is a story in the Buddhist canon about a monk who asked for a prompt execution for a criminal.

Then, on the way to the execution ground, the monk pleaded to the executioner “Sir, don’t cause him too much pain and misery. Cut off his head with one stroke, right now.” The executioner did as he was told.¹⁰⁾

7) We-fen-lu(五分律), T.22. p.8a.

8) Vin III. p.71.

9) Vin III. p.72.

10) Vin III. p.71.

Clearly the motive of the monk was to relieve the prisoner of his spiritual pain, as he was waiting for the designated execution time. According to the Buddhist rule, it was considered that despite this good motive, basically the monk violated a Buddhist percept.

In many places throughout the canon, there appears a story of a monk who prescribed a lethal drug to a person who eventually died from it.

At one time a certain man whose hands and feet had been cut off was in the paternal home surrounded by relations. A certain monk said to these people, 'Reverend sirs, do you desire his death?' Indeed, honoured sir, we do desire it', they said. 'Then you should make him drink buttermilk', he said. They made him drink buttermilk and he died.¹¹⁾

Since the man whose hands and feet were cut off could not do anything by himself, he needed his family's constant care and assistance. The family assumed the quality of his life was miserable and he would be better off dying and took action to do so.

We do not know whether the patient agreed with his family or not. The monk who gave the advice was excommunicated. A similar verdict was pronounced in the case of a nun who recommended a concoction of salted sour gruel (lonasuviraka) as a means of causing the death of another patient in the same condition.¹²⁾

As seen above, in Buddhist precepts, committing suicide or euthanasia is considered taboo. Many excerpts in the Buddhist canon suggest that euthanasia is not allowed because basically Buddhism is a religion that prohibits any kind of killing to any beings. Therefore, any acts or intents to kill anything cannot be excuses. Although euthanasia has a clearly merciful motive to help patients, it cannot be allowed because it shortens humans' lives as part of an arbitrary human act. This stance of a precept of 'don't kill' is based on a Buddhist basic spirit which considers life to be the most precious thing.¹³⁾

The negative viewpoint on euthanasia is clear in the explanation of the western Buddhist scholar, Philip Kapleau. He asserts, 'Buddhism is emphatic in its opposition to suicide, and in the respect of euthanasia comments:

11) Vin III, p.85.

12) Demien Keown, op.cit. p.172.; Jesung Jeon, *Open Symposium for Establishment of Buddhism Bio-Ethics* (Seoul: Korean Buddhism Promotion Foundation, 2005), pp.165-167.

13) Jewoon Song, op. cit., p.159.

“Buddhism holds that because death is not the end, suffering does not cease thereupon, but continues until the karma that created the suffering has played itself out; thus it is pointless to kill oneself-or aid another to do so-in order to escape”¹⁴⁾

He notes that because euthanasia is a fruitless effort to get rid of a person's karma, it is wrong. In this respect, euthanasia, an act to shorten a human being's life, eventually violates Buddhism's basic spirit, which focuses on saving human life. Buddhism is a religion that pursues a 'comfortable life' rather than euthanasia.¹⁵⁾ Therefore, it follows that both the person who administers euthanasia and the one the one who requests it would be in the breach of the precepts.¹⁶⁾

Buddhism is an active and positive religion. If one kills oneself because his life is painful, it will provide another reason for transmigration in the next life, according to Buddhism's idea of transmigration. Additionally the crevice of transmigration will become deeper.

To eliminate reasons (greed, anger, stupidity) that kill the body is a wise form of self-love and love for life. To avoid the suffering of this life, to commit suicide or ask others to help to do that cannot get rid of suffering forever. Moreover, inasmuch as karma does not become extinct, it becomes an explanation for the suffering.

IV. Positive Position on Euthanasia

Ethically, Buddhism takes precept of “do not kill” as a basic principle and values life most. As seen earlier, Si-fen-lu(Vinaya of the Four Categories) and Fan-wang-jing(Brahma net Sutra)clarify this point.

Buddhism opposes euthanasia with respect to the idea of karma. However, some episodes in the basic Buddhist canon expose the disparity on issues of euthanasia. In particular, a story on a death of a monk who acquired arahat explains this opposed stance. The story of the Buddhist priest, Bakkalli, is described in Tsa-a-han-ching. He was suffering from a serious disease and acquired nirvana. Because he did not cling to his body, he killed himself in order to free himself from his body.

14) Damien Keown, op.cit., p.174.

15) Jewoon Song. op. cit., pp.159-160.

16) Damien Keown, op. cit., p.170.

Bakkalli says:

“Buddha, you know what to know and see what to see. Those two heavenly gods know what to know and see what to see as well. However, today I do not have any doubt because I am sure ‘there is no constant-becoming to things’, and I do not have any doubt because I am sure that things without constant-becoming generate suffering. Also, ‘things without constant-becoming and suffering change. I do not have any doubt because I am sure there is nothing to desire and want there. Feeling, creating and consciousness are the same. However, the pain of this illness is inside the body. I want to kill myself with a knife. I don’t want to live any longer.”

After saying this, he took out a knife and killed himself with it. At this time, his servant monk offered Bakkalli’s body and afterwards, returned to Buddha to tell him what had happened while curling himself up under Buddha’s feet.

“Buddha, I will talk to Bakkalli about what you said. He says ‘I know what to know and see what to see. The two heavens know what to know and see what to see...then he took out a knife and killed himself.”

Then, Buddha talked to many monk followers.

“Let’s go together to the temple of golden teacher where Bakkalli’s body is laid.”

When Buddha saw Bakkalli’s body, he knew that Bakkalli had freed himself from human agony and said to his followers.

“Do you see Bakkalli’s body laying on the ground has a light free from agony?”

The follower monks say.

“Yes, we do, Buddha.”

“Did you see the dark form that lingers around Bakkalli’s body?”

“Yes, we did.”

“That is the devil’s form. That is wandering around to search for where Bakkalli’s body will be reborn.”

Buddha continues.

“Bakkalli’s body does not stay here because he killed himself with a knife.”

Then, Buddha provided the first prophecy for Bakkalli. After the followers listened to Buddha preach this sutra, they were delighted and practiced what Buddha said.¹⁷⁾

While a monk, Bakkalli had been suffering from serious illness, his eyes were opened to Buddhist laws and he acquired nirvana. He was sure that his bodily pain was an unnecessary vanity of the five agglomerates(panca khandha) and killed himself.

Buddha did not criticize Bakkalli’s suicide directly because he trusted that Bakkalli’s mind had reached nirvana and knew better than to kill itself. In the Buddhist’s point of view, committing suicide cannot be applied to everybody, but it can be

17) Tsa-a-ham-ching(雜阿含經), T2. p.347a-b.

allowed to arhats who do not have to suffer from bodily pain and whose bodies do not have to stay in a place of the five agglomerates.

Most of the conversation between Buddha and Bakkali shows that Buddha expresses his concern for his followers' health. Since Buddha certainly knew the vanity of panca khandha, he tacitly agreed with Bakkali who freed himself from all obsession and decided to kill himself. This fact presents a clue on death in terms of Buddhist ethics.

Today, in terms of 'self-determination,' on how people must die, the criteria on who can select it among hospitals, or family and what kind of medical equipment can be used is related to "extension of life and extinction of pain." For the Buddhist idea on this, extending life means reaching nirvana. The purpose of extending life is not to enjoy the five pleasures but to extinguish pain by doing righteous things with precious life. Bodily pain is regarded as meaningless and unrelated to the dignity of human life. The goal of respecting life is to reach nirvana.

There is a representative example of this. Monk Godika always tried not to act thoughtlessly and understood 'temporal emancipation of mind and then lost it again. He repeated this process six times. When he attained the seventh level of nirvana, he decided to kill himself because he was afraid of losing it again. While a devil asked Buddha to prevent Godika from killing himself, saying 'Godika did not reach arhat,' he committed suicide. Buddha said, 'Godika did not hope for long life and reached nirvana after getting rid of a thirst. In Godika's case, Buddha valued "reaching nirvana" more.¹⁸⁾

These two examples suggest that although basically Buddhism prohibits suicide, it distinguishes suicide of the common people who have reasons to live from that of monks who kill themselves to reach 'nirvana through sacred death.

The goal of 'sacred death' is to reach 'nirvana', in Mahayana Buddhism, it means 'attaining Buddhahood'. When 'sacred death is selected by 'a great self,' the modern Buddhist must interpret this issue as the 'death of dignity.' The Western Buddhist scholar, Louis van Loon agrees with euthanasia. He defines death as a situation without volition death. Implicit in the definition of death is the notion that the value of the human life is to be found in the capacity for self-awareness and conscious choice. Louis van Loon argues that 'when an individual loses this ability, he or she dies' and favors euthanasia. However, he does not answer the question specifically

18) Tsa-a-ham-ching(雜阿含經), T2. 286a-b.; Damien Keown, op. cit., pp.180-184.

with regards to what conditions would justify euthanasia or what form of euthanasia Buddhism allows.¹⁹⁾

Moreover, if the value of human life is based on self-awareness as Van Roon asserts, how can we interpret lives of patients who are dying in a coma and so cannot express their wills freely? Furthermore, can we exercise direct actions to end others' lives arbitrarily? For patients capable of decision-making to ask others to let them die is to pass their guilty conscience onto others to relieve their own pain. Buddha did not directly tell his followers that after not to need study, who reached nirvana and deserted his body, that they, too, could kill themselves. When follower monks attain nirvana but suffer from physical and mental pain, Buddha considers death a cessation of desire, not a dismissal of the body. Although Buddhism considers life a basic virtue, it does not reach the conclusion that it must be kept at all costs. Since death is a natural part of the transmigration cycle, it is accepted. Death is not the ultimate goal but a gateway to enter reincarnation and new life. Leaving desire that generates unnecessary reincarnation, or committing suicide which is unenlightened, cannot be compared with the death of two monks who reached nirvana as part of a 'sacred death' in becoming one with the 'great being.'

It is important to help people who deny death or try to delay it when they are old or fatally ill to have consciousness about death. Therefore, I agree with Lecso who notes that the hospice movement is a form of euthanasia that Buddhism can accept because it helps patients to have peace of mind.²⁰⁾ When patients suffer from unbearable pain, drugs can help to reduce this pain by killing them but it is necessary that other treatments in addition to drugs must be performed. The purpose of this medical treatment is only to get rid of patients' pain by killing them.

Modern philosophies that favor euthanasia are based on the principle of autonomy, which emphasize an individual's right to select his own life or death. Currently, euthanasia is performed by doctors who receive exemption from murder charges if they provide drugs for the procedure. However, the doctors' intervention in death changes individual right to die into an issue of the medical professionals' collective role. This issue does not reflect an individual's right because doctors are not just tools of the patients' wills. Before doctors themselves exercise euthanasia, they have to know patients' thoughts on the subject. In a normal situation, doctors do not

19) Damien Keown, *op. cit.*, pp.180-184.

20) *Ibid.*, pp.177-180.

follow the patient's will if it means endangering the patient's life. They have to judge professionally on whether what they do is right both clinically and ethically. Doctors who exercise euthanasia must agree with judgment of patients who think that their lives are not worth living. This is a fundamental break from traditional medical ethics because doctors are not asked to judge whether patients are worth living or not before they treat them.

It is important to help persons who face death to have peace of mind and to prepare for their deaths religiously and ethically. After all, in terms of the Buddhist point of view, euthanasia is not desirable because death is not cessation of life or pain but continuation of new life. As seen in theory of Dependent Arising, since it exists in connection with karma, it is transient and completely absent. Buddhism urges people to know what substance of death is and deal with it properly. Although the episodes mentioned earlier present different circumstances from modern ones, the intention is similar. There are two motives that encourage euthanasia: the first includes the good intention of a friend who talks with a patient suffering from pain about euthanasia and the second includes the malicious intent of Buddhist monk who encouraged a husband to kill himself in order to get his wife. Today, a hospital advises the family of terminal patients about euthanasia with sympathy and sometimes euthanasia is misused because of enmity to the patients or because of money considerations. The excerpts above instruct us on how euthanasia must be exercised and what kind of attitude we ought to have on it. The lessons constantly support life and oppose any intentional selection to commit suicide. That is, to be 'a killer', to ask someone to kill others, and help others to die are all wrong because death cannot be artificially induced as either a tool or a goal. As seen earlier, the two cases in the Buddhist sutra, Monks talked to their serious sick colleague about suicide with sympathy suggest how we ought to perform euthanasia. These examples provide justification of euthanasia, in which humans exercise autonomy to stop pain. Buddhism considers that euthanasia cannot be justified by reason of autonomy. However, as an exception, it allows euthanasia when death extinguishes greed, anger and stupidity, and helps one to reach nirvana. Therefore, when patients who suffer from incurable illness understand death and decide to die, their free will must be respected. In terms of Buddhism, patients' decisions on death that result in access to Buddhahood allow autonomous and passive euthanasia to be considered.

V. Conclusion

The development of medical science and equipment saves countless lives and alleviates patients' pain. However, at the same time, patients, their families and doctors come to face ethical and moral dilemmas related to euthanasia.

Various discussions on the permission of euthanasia have been questioned legally and ethically. In these cases, if euthanasia were to be legalized, it is highly possible that euthanasia that it would not be ethically performed even if the law limits its usage. Ethically, the liberals on euthanasia argue it must depend on an individual's selection, while conservatives assert that in any case, euthanasia cannot be permitted and eclectics argue that it depends on situations and conditions.

Recently, in many countries the argument that we must allow euthanasia receives only limited agreement. Realistically, the treatments on terminal patients have widely been stopped by family or hospitals. Religious groups stick to the stance that they absolutely oppose these acts.

However, Buddhism is not in the position to say 'absolutely not.' As persons who reached arhat are allowed to have autonomy on death, Buddhism is close to eclecticism because it allows individuals who have the ability to think logically to select their way. In this aspect, Buddhism that considers the Buddhist precepts as the best ethical virtue premises on suicide and euthanasia Vinaya spirit as the basic principle.

Discussions on euthanasia eventually come to the conclusion that it is a practical task in dealing with death. Selecting life and death depends on an individual's choice but it is important to emphasize the dignity of life to patients who think about euthanasia. Also, it is significant to find social support and moral justification for patients who suffer from incurable illness to ensure there is a meaning in their lives, insofar as a theory of bio-ethics has been established. This is the genuine set of practical Buddhist ethics.

Abbreviations

T. Taishō shinshū daizōkyō(大正新修大藏經)
Vin. Vinaya Piṭaka
VA. Vinaya-Aṭṭhakathā

References

- Vin. III.
VA. II.
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현대사회에서 성취된 과학 기술의 놀라운 발달은 인간의 삶을 더욱 풍요롭게 해주고 있다. 하지만 과학 기술의 편리로만 해결할 수 없는 많은 윤리적인 문제들이 새롭게 제기되고 있음도 현실이다. 특히 의학과 의료기술의 발달로 인하여 죽음에 대한 의료적인 통제가 어느 정도 가능해지면서 이에 관련한 혼돈이 일어나고 있는 것이다. 생명유지 장치 등의 발전은 전에는 일어나지 않았던 안락사와 관련한 새로운 윤리적 문제를 발생시키고 있다.

안락사의 허용 여부를 둘러싸고 다양한 법률적 윤리적 논의들이 등장하고 있다. 이런 상황과 맞물려 안락사를 합법화하는 방향으로 갈 경우에 그것이 제한적인 경우에만 행한다고 할지라도 종교는 윤리적으로 허용할 수 없는 안락사까지 자행될 수 있는 가능성이 높다.

현재 세계 각국에서는 제한적이거나 안락사를 허용해야 한다는 목소리가 높아지고 있다. 실제로 회복 불가능한 환자에 대한 치료를 중단하는 행위가 병원과 가정에서 광범위하게 행해지고 있다. 반면 종교계에서는 안락사에 대해 여전히 ‘절대불가’ 입장을 주장하고 있다.

그러나 불교의 입장은 ‘절대 불가’만은 아닌 것 같다. 아라한에 대해서는 죽음에 대해 자기 결정권을 부여한 경전의 예에서 볼 수 있듯이 불교는 절충주의적 입장에 보다 가깝다고 생각된다. 즉 이성적 사유능력이 있을 때 자신의 죽음을 충분히 결정할 수 있도록 한다는 입장으로 이해할 수 있기 때문이다. 하지만 불살생계를 최고의 윤리덕목으로 하는 불교에서는 안락사에 대하여 생명존중의 정신이 기본 원칙으로 전제되어야 할 것이다.

안락사와 관련된 논의는 마침내는 우리가 그런 상황에 처했을 때 어떻게 해야 하는가 하는 절박한 실천적인 과제로 귀결되어야 한다. 삶과 죽음을 선택하는 것은 결국은 본인의 결정이지만 안락사를 선택해야 할 만큼 괴로운 자일지라도 마지막까지 생명의 존엄성을 강조하는 것이 불교의 실천윤리 입장이다.

핵심 주제어: 안락사, 죽음, 자살, 불교윤리, 불교