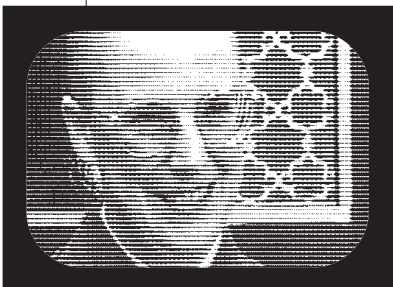
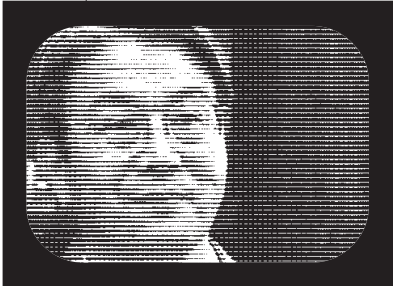


Matters of Life and Death

The Sanctity of Life

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Contributors

Programme Four Outline

Asking the Questions

2 minutes

A kaleidoscope of images and questions introduces issues and concerns related to abortion, euthanasia and the sanctity of life. Young people comment through a series of soundbites.

The Buddhist Teaching

Ahimsa - the principle of non-harm

4 minutes

Becky, a 15 year-old expecting her first baby, attends the ante-natal clinic of gynaecologist William Stones, who is a practising Buddhist and member of the Western Buddhist Order. His Buddhist name is Virabhadra. Against the backdrop of the clinic and an operating theatre where he is performing a sterilisation, Virabhadra explains the principle of **ahimsa**, or non-harm, and the importance of intention in Buddhist ethics.

Metta - universal loving kindness

3 minutes

Virabhadra meditating in front of his shrine and a quote from the *Karaniya Metta Sutta* introduce the quality of **metta**, or universal loving kindness.

Buddhists Respond

14 minutes

Filmed in situ, five practising Buddhists give their views on:

- **abortion**
- **euthanasia**
- **the taking of animal life**

Theravada - Most Venerable Vajiragnana **Tibetan Tradition** - Ken Holmes
Soto Zen - Reverend Myfanwy **Japanese Pure Land** - Reverend Professor Sato
Western Buddhist Order - Dharmachari Virabhadra

Background Information

Principal Contributor

Virabhadra (William Stones, MD, MRCOG)

Virabhadra is a Member of the Western Buddhist Order and lives with his wife and two young children in Southampton, England. He is Senior Lecturer in Obstetrics and Gynaecology at the University of Southampton Medical School, and consultant to the Southampton University Hospital Trust.

In addition to his hospital work, Virabhadra is conducting research into women's health in developing countries. He has thought long and hard about the way attitudes towards abortion affect women's health in different countries and communities. As a Buddhist he is very concerned with the ethical dilemmas surrounding abortion and the principle of non-harm.

Other Contributors

Ken Holmes practises within the **Tibetan** tradition (Karma Kagyu Lineage). He is Director of Studies at Samye Ling Tibetan Centre in Eskdalemuir, Dumfriesshire, Scotland, where he lives with his wife. He is a scholar and translator of Buddhist texts.

Most Venerable Vajiragnana is head monk of the London Buddhist Vihara. He is one of the most senior monks in the **Theravada** school resident in Britain.

Reverend Professor Sato runs the Three Wheels Temple in West London, the first establishment of the Japanese True **Pure Land**, (Jodo Shin Shu) school in Britain.

Reverend Myfanwy is a member of the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives. She lives at Throssel Hole Abbey, a monastery in the **Soto Zen** tradition, in Northumberland.

Ahimsa: non-harm



Key Points

**The Pali word himsa means force.
Ahimsa means no-force, or non-violence.**

The Five Precepts form the basis of Buddhist ethics.
The first Precept expresses the principle of non-harm, or **ahimsa**.

The principle of **ahimsa**

- is based on an understanding of the interconnectedness of all life
- extends to all living beings
- covers any deliberate action of thought, word or deed
- involves avoiding deliberate harm and striving to bring about the greatest good

The other Precepts apply this principle to specific areas of behaviour, such as speech and sexual activity.

The Five Precepts

I undertake to abstain from taking life.

With deeds of loving kindness I purify my body.

I undertake to abstain from taking what has not been given.

With open handed generosity I purify my body.

I undertake to abstain from sexual misconduct.

With stillness, simplicity and contentment I purify my body.

I undertake to abstain from false speech.

With truthful communication I purify my speech.

I undertake to abstain from intoxicants that cloud the mind.

With mindfulness, clear and radiant, I purify my mind.

Skilful or Unskilful

In Buddhist ethics the intention behind an action is of crucial significance.

Skilful actions

- are the expression of positive states of mind, such as kindness,
- generosity and compassion
- have positive consequences

Unskilful actions

- are actions motivated by greed, hatred or ignorance
- lead to unhappy or harmful outcomes

Metta: Universal Loving Kindness



Key Points

The Pali word metta can be translated as love, or universal loving kindness.

Metta is

- based on a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of all living things
- an attitude of the heart and mind that unconditionally seeks the well being of all
- the antidote to hatred or ill will

If you know your own good and know where peace dwells then this is the task:

seen or unseen, here or elsewhere, present or to come, in heights or depths, may all be well.

Lead a simple and a frugal life uncorrupted, capable and just; be mild, speak soft, eradicate conceit, keep appetites and senses calm.

Have that mind for all the world - get rid of lies and pride - a mother's mind for her baby, her love, but now unbounded.

Be discreet and unassuming; do not seek rewards. Do not have to be ashamed in the presence of the wise.

Secure this mind of love, no enemies, no obstructions, wherever or however you may be!

May everything that lives be well! Weak or strong, large or small,

It is sublime, this, it escapes birth and death, losing lust and delusion, and living in the truth!

- Karaniya Metta Sutta

The **Metta Bhavana** meditation is a practice which helps develop an attitude of well-wishing towards all living beings.

There are five stages to the meditation:

1. First one develops an attitude of kindness, appreciation and well-wishing towards oneself, then one extends this to include:
2. a good friend
3. a person one doesn't feel much connection with
4. a person one dislikes
5. all living beings

Bhavana means cultivation of, or bringing into being.

Interview Transcripts



Theravada

Most Venerable
Vajiragnana

Head Monk
London Buddhist Vihara

Abortion

My particular feeling about abortion is that it is very wrong, because it is destroying a life, and we have no authority to destroy life. I don't see that there can be any exception to this because, in our understanding, destroying a life is considered an unwholesome action.

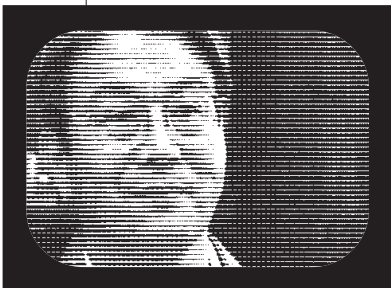
Euthanasia

Euthanasia is not acceptable to a Buddhist because one has no authority to interfere with one's own life. We feel one is undergoing the consequences of one's own actions so we can't interfere with it.

Animal Life

Killing animals by human beings is, of course, killing. Killing animals violates the first precept of Buddhist life, and it spoils the Buddhist life. We have no authority to kill others, whether human beings or animals, so we refrain from killing any living thing.

These transcripts from the video interviews have been edited, retaining the key points.



Pure Land

Reverend Professor
K.T. Sato

Head Priest
Three Wheels Temple

Abortion, Euthanasia

It is always wrong to kill. Sadly, however, living in this world does involve killing, in most cases quite unconsciously or indirectly. But it is a reality of our lives. What we should do is try and avoid harming or killing as much as possible.

When we find ourselves in an extremely difficult situation, we should do whatever lies in our power at that particular moment, expressing our faith in Amida Buddha and our grief and penitence towards those who are in a dire situation.

Animal Life

Any form of life is precious and valuable. If you say human life is particularly valuable, it is because it is only human beings that are able to realise how precious life is. We should respect other forms of life as well and value them for what they are.

Buddhists Respond Matters of Life and Death



Soto Zen

Reverend Myfanwy
Order of
Buddhist Contemplatives

Throssel Hole Abbey

Abortion

The precept against killing shows how we can express great love and compassion in the world; what we sometimes call the Buddha Nature, but what I would call your true heart, a true expression of what everyone is capable of. We are born good but we learn through mistakes to turn away from this heart.

Where killing seems to be the answer to pain and suffering we have to think very carefully. Very often there's something else which will stop the suffering. If a woman was pregnant and felt that she couldn't carry the child to term, we would look at how we could help this woman practically.

If she decided that the best she could do was to have an abortion then I would support her through it. There are always consequences from our acts and the deep grief and feeling of loss that come after something like that should be approached with great love and compassion.

Euthanasia

If I was with a person who was dying very painfully and asking me to help them die, I would try to be as still as possible with them and see what was really causing them suffering. Buddhism teaches that we can help suffering. Pain we have to live with; suffering is something else. Through being with that person and trying to point them towards letting go of the suffering, it is possible to help someone live with pain.

I would not directly kill somebody; but if somebody was unconscious and on a life-support machine, I think there would be a point where we would know that it was good just to let them go.

Animal Life

Animals deserve deep respect as well as human beings, so killing an animal is also not a good thing to do. I'm a vegetarian. In our society at the moment, I can choose what I eat. But in some situations people do have to kill animals in order to survive.

This transcript from the video interview has been edited, retaining the key points.



Tibetan Tradition

Ken Holmes
Director of Studies
Samye Ling
Tibetan Centre

Abortion

Abortion is a difficult issue but as Buddhists, and certainly as Tibetan Buddhists, our response to it is quite clear cut. For us human life starts at the moment of conception. From then on it's a sentient being and the Buddha's teaching is never to harm or to take the life of a sentient being. So abortion is something that we just wouldn't do as good Buddhists.

Obviously there are some very difficult situations where a doctor is faced with the choice of saving the life of child or its mother, and usually they have to make the choice, they can't not do anything. If the doctor was a really good Buddhist I think he would have an ethical dilemma because the teaching really is that one doesn't have the right to take life. So a good Buddhist doctor would not precipitate the choice; they'd just have to let nature take its course maybe.

Euthanasia

On the subject of euthanasia there are two main points: one is the ethical question "Have I the right to shorten somebody's life even if they want me to?" and the answer to that is "No". Respect for life means that we should always try to help the sick; prolong life; nurture life; it's as simple as that.

The other point concerns *karma*. Most people who support euthanasia think that the end of this physical life will also mean the end of the suffering of, for instance, a very painful disease like cancer. If one believes in reincarnation, the continuity of mind, karma and cause and effect, then it could be in fact the contrary: that while we're humans this suffering of cancer is getting rid of a terrible karma we've made in the past, and if we suddenly cut short that opportunity to work out past bad karma, the remnants of the karma could take us to who knows what suffering afterwards.

As to whether one would persist in medical care and prolong life for a long time artificially, or just disconnect the machines and let somebody die naturally, even this is not a straightforward issue. Anything that one does deliberately to bring a person's life to an end is proscribed by the Buddha.

This transcript from the video interview has been edited, retaining the key points.

Buddhists Respond
Matters of Life and Death

Abortion

According to the Buddhist tradition, we have a continuity going right the way through life: the newly-conceived ovum has a potential to become an embryo, that embryo has the potential to become a new-born baby, the baby to develop into an adult; and the adult has the potential to develop Enlightenment. This is why respect for human life is paramount: human life has the precious potential for Enlightenment.

My own view is that there are times where abortion is necessary and I think it's important that that is recognised. Perhaps the obvious example is where there is a very obvious threat to the life of the mother. I don't find it difficult to make a decision in that type of circumstance.

Euthanasia

Sometimes we think there's an ethical issue to do with euthanasia whereas actually there could simply be a practical issue of medical care. Has everything been done for that patient to lift them out of the situation where they would want to end their own life?

If someone asks their doctor to end their life or to help them commit suicide, there are two areas to look at in ethical terms: one is the patient's own actions and to what extent they are ethical. The other question is, what effect will it have on the doctor?

The second question is the most difficult to answer. The doctor might have quite good intentions of alleviating suffering but if they were to actively participate in the ending of the patient's life, that might conflict with this basic principle of the sanctity of life.

We have to take responsibility for the harm that will ensue from whatever we do. Even though our intentions are quite good - it may be that we are trying to prevent a greater harm - we're still going to experience the consequences of whatever harm we do. The Buddhist tradition doesn't provide an easy guide to every ethical scenario. The emphasis is on trying to come to our own conclusions about ethical behaviour, in consultation with our fellow Buddhists.

This transcript from the video interview has been edited, retaining the key points.



FWBO

Dharmachari Virabhadra

Western Buddhist Order
Consultant Gynaecologist