

RELIGION EXPERTS COLUMN

*Below is my response to the question provided for the **Ask The Religion Experts** feature in this Sunday's **Ottawa Citizen**. We hope this will generate thoughtful discussion of real-life applications of Buddhadharma and deeper understanding for us all.*

Sunday, January 8, 2012

Q : What is your faith's view on euthanasia?

A : This dilemma begins before questions of terminating care or medico-technical intervention. Western culture has such a mix of terror and fantasy about suffering and death, and attributes so little to those intrinsic elements of human experience that it constructs medical care like warfare, funerary rites like sanitized secrets and afterlife like Disneyworld. Some even reduce life/death decisions to an accounting cost-benefit analysis, the decision becomes an economic one.

For Buddhists, life, suffering and death are never discreet experiences. They are not just related in a linear way, they are interwoven. Every moment of life is part of death and dying. Our suffering is the central teaching of the Buddha - suffering, pain and dissatisfaction are more than occasional experiences, they are the very nature of human experience. "All of this is suffering" he says.

As with most moral questions, a Buddhist position on merciful deliberate deaths, such as euthanasia or assisted suicides, encourages compassionate action combined with wisdom and an appreciation that such acts bring morally-driven consequences. Ending a life, no matter how sterile the method, no matter how elevated the intent, remains an act which impedes the spiritual progress of all involved. Method and intent only qualify that impediment.

However we engage with the process of dying,

we must never reduce it to some calculus of cost or a technical decision reserved for doctors only. Life is a fabric of relationships and so any tearing of that fabric requires a careful consideration of the many lives impacted by that decision. Thankfully, these days such decisions increasingly involve family members with support by caring professionals.

It bears noting that for Buddhists, the euthanasia issue applies to all sentient beings. The moral consequences of "putting down" a suffering pet are equally present. We live our lives interconnected with all living beings. Buddhist teaching and practice is the recognition of this relationship and its implication. When we experience death, be it naturally, by accident or misadventure or through the act of euthanasia, we are ourselves reduced and wounded. We must be attentive to any deliberately assisted death for its consequences on our and other lives.

*Rev. Innen Parchelo, doshu,
Red Maple Sangha
:: om namu amida butsu ::*

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