

Euthanasia: The Hindu Perspective

Namita Nimbalkar

Lecturer of Philosophy and Director of Gandhian Studies Centre in Birla College of Arts,
Science and Commerce, Kalyan, Maharashtra.

Abstract

Modern science with its development process has created many dilemmas for society. Man is faced with the problem of choice. One such is mercy killing or euthanasia. As debate goes on between doctors, lawyers, society, philosophers and governments of the world as to whether euthanasia should be sanctioned or not, the religious traditions of the world can provide a ray of hope in this matter. The Eastern religious traditions, with special reference to Hinduism and Buddhism, are explored for this reason.

Introduction

"I will give no deadly medicine to any one if asked, nor suggest any such counsel"

... The Hippocratic Oath

Death is a defining characteristic of human experience. Yet, while the event of death remains elusively beyond human control, the process of dying has increasingly been brought into the domain of medicine and life-extending technologies. The decision to use these technologies is a moral choice, because it involves a decision about a fundamental human good, the preservation of life. Yet, in some situations, a resort to technology to stave off death comes at the price of compromising another fundamental human value, the quality of that life. Decisions about continuing treatment for the dying, or of allowing death to take place by foregoing or terminating such treatment, or even by physician-assisted suicide or euthanasia, are thus both existentially and ethically agonizing.

The word "euthanasia" comes from the Greek *eu* and *thanatos* and means "happy death" or "good death." Roughly speaking, there are two major views about euthanasia. The traditional view holds that it is always wrong to intentionally kill an innocent human being, but that, given certain circumstances, it is permissible to withhold or withdraw treatment and allow a patient to die. A more recent, radical view, embraced by groups like the Hemlock Society and the Society for the Right to Die, denies that there is a morally significant distinction between passive and active euthanasia that would allow the former and forbid the latter. Accordingly, this view argues that mercy killing, assisted suicide, and the like are permissible.

As individuals and their families face these controversial questions and as many countries consider revising their laws on end-of-life choices, religious traditions and values can offer guidance and insight, if not solutions. Historically, religious communities have sought to appropriate death within the life cycle through rituals of remembrance, and religious teachings have emphasized that death brings meaning to mortality. The process of dying is often portrayed as an invitation to spiritual insight and a key moment in the cultivation of spiritual identity.

The world's great traditions of moral wisdom all begin with a strong predisposition to favour the preservation of life, although the specific reasons for this conviction vary from tradition to tradition.

To die well, say the teachers of eastern religions, one must live well. The views of eastern religious traditions and philosophies have been very influential in global understanding about providing appropriate care to the dying. For example, the pioneering work of the Swiss-born psychiatrist Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in understanding the experiences of dying patients in Western medical institutions drew directly on understandings of the meaning of "good death" and "stages" in life in Hindu tradition. Buddhist values of compassion, non-violence, and suffering have also influenced the discourse of Western medical ethics. The ethical tension in these two traditions about end-of-life choices is rooted in three main values, *karma*, *liberation* and *ahimsa* (non-violence).

Karma, Ahimsa and Liberation

Karma is the net consequence of good and bad deeds in a person's life, which then determines the nature of the next life. Ongoing accumulation of bad *karma* prevents *moksa*, or liberation from the cycle

of rebirth, which is the ultimate goal of Hinduism. *Ahimsa* is a fundamental principle. Hindu dharma proclaims, “*Ahimsa Paramo Dharma*” or, *Ahimsa* is the highest form of *dharma* (virtue). *Ahimsa* means non-violence, non-injury or non-killing. In all the Hindu paths, and especially, Jain and Buddhist, *Ahimsa* is a paramount virtue. Concept of *ahimsa* extends to all living beings, and therefore, protection of environment, natural habitats and vegetarianism are natural derivatives of the concept. We must not be indifferent to the sufferings of others. One must consider all living beings in the image of one’s own self and thus not commit acts of violence in thought, word or deed against other living creatures. Thus, the practice of euthanasia will breach the teachings of *ahimsa*.

In both Hinduism and Buddhist traditions, all living creatures (humans, animals, plants, etc.) represent manifestations of the laws of *karmic* rebirth. To honour these laws, one must show great respect for the preservation of life and non-injury of sentient beings. Acts destructive of life are morally condemned by the principle of *ahimsa*, which is the conceptual equivalent of the Western principle of the sanctity of life.

This pattern of reasoning—the primacy of spiritual goals of liberation or compassion relative to the preservation of life—also applies to euthanasia through physician injection or administration of a lethal drug. Hindu and Buddhist scholars have found support for this so-called “active” euthanasia in their traditions by reflecting on the meaning of death as a door to liberation, the culmination of life in detachment from the material world. They then go a step further by linking compassion to the norm of self-similitude: “one should act towards others as one would have them act toward oneself”. So euthanasia can be seen as a compassionate act or a “mercy killing” for a dying person striving to the highest purpose of human destiny, liberation.

Hindu Views of Suicide and Euthanasia

The central belief of Hinduism is in *Sanatana Dharma* or Eternal religion. According to Hindu philosophy, *dharma* is essential for accomplishing material and spiritual goals and for the growth of the individual and society. *Dharma* here means both law and religion. It is the guiding principle of life. The Hindus live their lives according to their *dharma*- their moral duties and responsibilities. *Dharma* requires Hindu to take care of the older member of their community or family.

This school of thought, which believes in the *karma* theory, feels that the doctor should not accept a patient’s request for euthanasia as the soul and body will be separated at an unnatural time. The result of it will damage *karma* of both doctor and patient. Suicide is generally prohibited in Hinduism, on the basis that it disrupts the timing of the cycle of death and rebirth and therefore yields bad *karma*. It also has dire consequences for the soul’s spiritual progress. Killing in the form of euthanasia, murder, suicide interferes with the killed soul’s progress towards liberation. It also brings bad *karma* to the killer, because of the violation of the principle of non-violence. When the soul is reincarnated in another physical body, it will suffer as it did before because the same *karma* is still present. Same argument suggests that keeping a person artificially alive on life-support machines is also a bad thing to do.

In Hinduism, the ideal death is a conscious death, and this means that palliative treatment will be a problem if they reduce mental alertness. The state of mind that allows a person to choose euthanasia may affect the process of reincarnation, since one’s final thought are relevant to the process.

The other school of thought puts forth the Autonomy Argument, which believes that to help end painful life of a person the doctor is performing a good deed and so fulfilling his moral obligations. Such actions are morally permissible. One should be free to do as one chooses.

As a rule, both Hinduism and Buddhism oppose suicide as an act of destroying life. Suicide puts an individual’s spiritual clock in reverse. However, a distinction is made in both traditions between self-regarding (or self-destructive) reasons and other-regarding (or compassionate) motives for seeking death. Instead of achieving the ultimate spiritual goal of liberation, a person who acts in this way will remain trapped in the ongoing *karmic* cycle of life-death-rebirth. Those who assist in this suicide may also be subject to *karmic* punishment, for they have violated the principle of *ahimsa*.

However, a very different perspective emerges when individuals seek death for spiritual motives, of which there are two kinds. The first revolves around compassion; concern for the welfare of others, as one who is dying can be seen as a sign of spiritual enlightenment. Therefore, a person can decide to forego treatment to avoid imposing a heavy burden of care giving on family or friends. He or she may

also stop treatment to relieve loved ones of the emotional or economic distress of prolonged dying.

The spiritual goal of liberation can also be seen as an ethical reason for seeking or hastening death. When physical suffering impedes self-control and lucidity, it is permissible to shorten life. Pain or lethargy might cloud the awareness and consciousness at death that both Hindus and Buddhists believe is necessary to ensure a favourable rebirth. Extreme suffering might also cause someone to be so attached to their material life (bodily condition) that they cannot pursue the ultimate spiritual goal of liberation from the material world.

Prayopavesa

One exception to the Hindu prohibition of suicide is the practice of *prayopavesa*, or fasting to death. *Prayopavesa* is not regarded as suicide because it is natural and non-violent, and is acceptable only for spiritually advanced people under specified circumstances. It is used when it is the right time for this life to end- when this body has served its purpose and become a burden. Unlike suicide, *Prayopavesa* is a gradual process, giving ample time for the patient and his community to prepare for the person's demise. The decision needs to be publicly declared and the action should be committed under community regulations.

The difference between suicide and *Prayopavesa* is that while suicide is often associated with feelings of frustrations, depressions or anger, *Prayopavesa* is associated with feelings of serenity. *Prayopavesa* is only for those people who are fulfilled, who have no desire or ambition left and no responsibility remaining in this life.

BBC Religion & Ethics provides the following example of *prayopavesa*: Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami, a Hindu leader born in California, took his own life by *prayopavesa* in November 2001. After finding that he had untreatable intestinal cancer, the Satguru meditated for several days and then announced that he would accept pain-killing treatment only and would undertake *prayopavesa* - taking water, but no food. He died on the 32nd day of his self-imposed fast.

Concluding Remarks

Given the complex history of suicide in Indian thought and the various considerations outlined above, not all Hindus agree on whether euthanasia should

be permitted. In the end, there are two Hindu views of euthanasia:

From one perspective, a person who helps other end a painful life and thereby reduce suffering is doing a good deed and will gain good *karma*. From the other perspective, euthanasia interrupts the timing of the cycle of rebirth and both the doctor and patient will take on bad *karma* as a result.

A moral problem arises with euthanasia, however, if the administered medication renders the patient unconscious or unable to comprehend his descent toward death. The patient is unaware precisely at the moment when he or she should be most sensitive and receptive to spiritual teaching and meaning. For these reasons, other modes of bringing about death are preferable morally and religiously.

Similarly, Freedom of Will is an important postulate of moral philosophy. An individual can be held responsible for his actions only if it is performed without any compulsion. The concept right, wrong, good, bad, reward and punishment pale into insignificance, if the postulate Freedom of Will is not taken into consideration. As per Free Will, we can go in for euthanasia, but it is wrong for us to do so. The Free Will believes that every individual is a creation of God and this imposes certain limits on us. Our lives are not only for us to do with as we deem fit. To kill ourselves, or to get someone else to do it for us, is to deny God, and to deny God's right over our lives, and His right to choose the length of our lives, and the way our lives end. We have no right to die as it undermines other people's right to live.

References.

1. BBC Religion & Ethics. "*Euthanasia and Suicide: The Hindu View.*"
2. Encyclopædia Britannica. 2004. Encyclopædia Britannica Premium Service.
3. Harold G. Coward, Julius J. Lipner, Katherine K. Young; *Hindu ethics: Purity, Abortion and Euthanasia.* State, University of New York Press, 1989.
4. Harvey Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhist Ethics: Foundations, Values and Issues,* Cambridge University Press, 2000.
5. HinduWebsite. Hinduism FAQ: "*Hinduism and Suicide.*"

6. Norman I. Geisler, J.P. Moreland; (ed) *The Life and Death Debate: the Moral Issues of our Time*, Praeger, 1990.
 7. Robert M. Baird, Stuart E. Rosenbaum. *Euthanasia: The Moral Issues*, Prometheus Books, Buffalo, New York. 1989.
 8. The Columbia Encyclopedia, Sixth Edition, 2001, online at Bartleby.com.
 9. Zaehner R. C. *Hinduism*, Oxford University Press, 1966.
-

About the Author

Namita Nimbalkar is a lecturer of Philosophy and Director of Gandhian Studies Centre in Birla College of Arts, Science and Commerce, Kalyan, Maharashtra. She is also pursuing research on Gandhian Thought under the guidance of Dr Shakuntala Singh, Principal of K.G.Joshi and N.G.Bedekar College of Arts and Commerce, Thane.

In India, euthanasia is not permitted, but according to some religious books many people adopted self-willed death. In Ramayana, Sri Ram Chandra Ji adopted Jal Samadhi with many of his disciples at the end. Chandragupta Maurya, founder of the Maurya Dynasty with his guru Jain Muni Bhadrabahu adopted self-willed death by fasting till death as a true disciple of Jainism. Vinoba Bhave also adopted self-willed death by fasting till death. One of the early patriots of India, Velu Tampi, died with the hands of his younger brother as he about to be seized by his enemies, so he asked his younger brother Euthanasia: An Indian perspective. Sinha VK1, Basu S, Sarkhel S. Author information. Moreover, undiagnosed depression and possibility of social 'coercion' in people asking for euthanasia put a further question mark on the ethical principles underlying such an act. These concerns have led to strict guidelines for implementing PAS. Assessment of the mental state of the person consenting to PAS becomes mandatory and here, the role of the psychiatrist becomes pivotal. Although considered illegal in our country, PAS has several advocates in the form of voluntary organizations like "death with dignity" foundation. This has got a fillip in the recent Honourable Su