

# A Buddhist Perspective on Abortion

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Using a Buddhist framework, this article examines the issue of abortion from six different points of view: 1) from a purely moral perspective; 2) from the perspective of kamma<sup>1</sup> and rebirth; 3) by applying the concept of the middle way; 4) from the point of view of the greater good; 5) from the perspective of the three characteristics; and 6) as an exercise in the practice of compassion. Each of these six points will be discussed separately and then incorporated into a general conclusion to demonstrate their relevance in present-day society.

**1) From a Moral Perspective:** To abstain from the taking of life is the first moral precept of Buddhism. For a bhikkhu (Theravada Buddhist monk), however, that precept is divided into two rules: The first rule – *parajika* 3 – covers the taking of human life, while the second – *pacittiya* 61 – covers the taking of animal life.<sup>2</sup> The first rule is the one that concerns us here, since it includes both euthanasia and abortion, as well as the verbal encouragement to commit suicide or take the life of another. A commentary to the Vinaya Pitaka<sup>3</sup> explains five conditions that must be present in order to constitute an act of killing:

1. The thing killed must be a living being;
2. You, the killer, must know that it is a living being;
3. You must have the intention to kill it;
4. There must be an effort to kill;
5. The being must be killed as a result.

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<sup>1</sup> Kamma: the law of moral causation; action (volition); wholesome and unwholesome actions of body, speech and mind, which have the potential to produce a correspondingly wholesome or unwholesome result.

<sup>2</sup> These two rules (Pr 3 and Pc 61) are part of the 227 rules of conduct in the Theravada Buddhist monk's code of discipline, contained in the Vinaya Pitaka.

<sup>3</sup> Vinaya Pitaka: one of the three great divisions of the Buddhist Canon, laid down for regulating the conduct of the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis (male and female monastics) under the Buddha's guidance.

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First of all, how do we define a living being? The Vibhanga<sup>4</sup> defines a living being as a person (or animal) "from the time consciousness<sup>5</sup> first becomes manifest in a mother's womb,<sup>6</sup> up to its death-time;" so the question that naturally arises in regard to abortion is: "When does consciousness first become manifest in a mother's womb?" In the Mahā Tanhāsankhaya Sutta (MN 38), the Buddha describes three conditions that are necessary for consciousness to enter the womb: "Bhikkhus, the descent [of consciousness] into the womb<sup>7</sup> takes place through the conjunction of these three [conditions]: There is a union of mother and father [sexual intercourse], the mother is in season and the gandhabba [the being to be (re)born]<sup>8</sup> is present." According to this quote, consciousness could enter the womb as early as the time of intercourse, however, that consciousness would still be unmanifest, in the sense that it has not yet taken up residence in the appropriate materiality and will only be able to do so during the process of fertilization, which could occur at almost any time up to six days after intercourse – that moment (of conception) would be the first opportunity for consciousness to "become manifest" in a mother's womb.

Although there is still some disagreement on this issue in the scientific community, most present-day Buddhists regard the moment of conception

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<sup>4</sup> Vibhanga: the second book of the Abhidhamma Pitaka, one of the three great divisions of the Buddhist Canon.

<sup>5</sup> What we term "consciousness" in Buddhism is actually the continuous stream of an infinite number of extremely brief consciousness moments, lasting about a trillionth of a second each. Note that consciousness is not synonymous with being conscious; for example, one is not conscious in deep sleep, although consciousness is still present. As well, the so-called subconscious is merely a deeper level of consciousness that the mind is normally too agitated to see. If this were not the case, a person would die every time he or she fell asleep, and killing a person in deep sleep or a coma, or while dreaming would not be considered murder.

<sup>6</sup> Being born from the mother's womb is only one of four categories of birth in Buddhism. The other categories are birth from an egg, birth through moisture and spontaneous generation. Only humans and some animals are born from the womb; therefore, while this article deals only with abortion among the human population, much of it might also apply to the animal realm.

<sup>7</sup> Following are two alternative translations of "descent into the womb" from the original Pali: (1) "descent of the embryo" and (2) "conception."

<sup>8</sup> In some ways, the Gandhabba is similar to the Judeo-Christian concept of a soul; however, in this context, it is more accurate to view it as the stream of consciousness that bridges the gap from one life to the next.

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as the beginning of a new life, since that is when the chromosomes of mother and father unite to form what could be described as a genetically independent being. According to this line of reasoning, even though the embryo begins as nothing more than a single fertilized cell (a zygote), it is still possessed of a unique consciousness, whose kamma has ultimately brought it to this realm and will continue, along with the law of genetics, to define and shape its destiny.<sup>9</sup> With this understanding, the first and second conditions for the offence of killing are fulfilled.<sup>10</sup>

If the woman decides she wants to have an abortion – that decision provides an intention to kill, which satisfies the third condition. When she seeks an abortion – that meets the fourth condition of making an effort to kill. Finally, a being is killed because of that action, and an offense is committed, which satisfies the fifth condition. Please note that one need not be directly responsible for the death of another to satisfy these five conditions. If, for example, a Theravada bhikkhu were to encourage a woman to have an abortion and she followed his advice, he would no longer be in communion with the bhikkhu Sangha<sup>11</sup> and would be barred from ordaining again for the rest of his life.

Can science prove any of the above claims about kamma, consciousness and rebirth, and if not, how can we know they're true? Whatever cannot be measured by science, cannot be proven by science, and although scientists know how to measure the energy of an electron, they don't know how to measure the energy of a thought; neither can they understand the law of kamma, since it operates through a medium they cannot measure – wholesome and unwholesome thought.

Then how do we know that kamma and rebirth actually exist? Without practicing meditation and directly experiencing the truth for ourselves, we

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<sup>9</sup> In this context, “destiny” includes oversight of the embryo/fetus’s ongoing physical and mental development, throughout pregnancy and beyond.

<sup>10</sup> Contraception (with the exception of IUD’s and so-called “morning-after pills,” both of which kill the embryo), prevents the fertilization of the ovum by the sperm; thus, the first of the five conditions that constitute an act of killing remains unfulfilled (note that no contraceptive is 100% successful in preventing fertilization; with oral contraceptives, an embryo is oftentimes formed, which, due to the effect of the contraceptive, dies afterwards).

<sup>11</sup> Sangha: in this context, the Buddhist monastic community.

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will just have to go by the written or spoken words of another. For example, in the Bhayabherava Sutta, the Buddha describes how, on the night of his enlightenment, he saw “beings passing away and reappearing, inferior and superior, fair and ugly, fortunate and unfortunate, and... understood how beings pass on according to their deeds.”<sup>12</sup> This quote seems to imply that we live in a fundamentally moral universe, in the sense that good is rewarded by good, and evil by evil. Of course, kamma is considerably more complex than this, but at least this provides an overview.

**2) From the Perspective of Kamma and Rebirth:** According to Buddhist cosmology, the universe consists of 31 different realms.<sup>13</sup> Each of these realms, from the lowest to the highest, provides an existence for beings on a relatively similar evolutionary scale, with the human realm falling somewhere in the upper middle range, but considered highly favorable in terms of providing an opportunity for positive growth and change. The human realm and above are all considered happy realms, difficult to attain, their inhabitants being of a generally higher caliber in terms of intelligence and morality, while those below the human realm, referred to as woeful realms,<sup>14</sup> are filled with suffering, easy to fall into, difficult to escape, and with incomparably more inhabitants. Of course, all 31 realms, even the highest and happiest, are still part of samsara – the ongoing cycle of birth and death – and therefore subject to at least some degree of suffering.

When a being dies,<sup>15</sup> due to the fruition of some wholesome or unwholesome past kamma at the end of its life, it will be reborn into one or another of these 31 realms and attracted to a particular set of parents in that realm; in most cases, this will be due to a kammic affinity with one or both of those parents from a previous life.<sup>16</sup> By having an abortion, a

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<sup>12</sup> Bhayabherava Sutta, MN.4

<sup>13</sup> The 31 realms (of existence): the totality of existence, including – from the lowest to the highest – the Hell Realm, Animal Realm, Hungry Ghost Realm, Demon Realm, Human Realm, Heavenly Realms (6), Fine-Material Realms (16) and Immaterial Realms (4).

<sup>14</sup> Woeful realms: Hell Realm, Animal Realm, Hungry Ghost Realm, Demon Realm.

<sup>15</sup> Providing that being has not already attained full enlightenment.

<sup>16</sup> In SN.ii.189, the Buddha states: “Monks, it would not be easy to find a being who has not formerly been your mother, father, brother, sister, son or daughter [in a previous life].” If the Buddha could make this claim in regard to our relationship

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pregnant woman is not only harming her baby by preventing that being from coming into this world and fulfilling its human potential, but she is also harming herself by creating the unwholesome kamma of taking a human life. When that kamma ripens, it will create a correspondingly unwholesome and painful result.

To demonstrate the effect that the belief in kamma has on society, let us take the example of Bali: Most Balinese villagers, being Hindu, share a strong belief in the law of kamma. They honor their ancestors and believe that many of them return again and again to the same family line over numerous generations, coming back as a grandchild or great-grandchild, a niece, nephew, cousin, etc. As a result, abortion is strongly discouraged in these Balinese communities (called banjar).<sup>17</sup> Personally, I have met with Balinese families that are quite convinced that a grandparent or great-grandparent has “reincarnated” as a grandchild or other member of their extended family, citing the character traits that their deceased grandparent or great-grandparent shares in common with the young child. For them, to perform an abortion would be to murder their ancestor and lose the merit of reconnecting via a personal relationship with their family line. The result is that when a Balinese girl, living in a banjar, gets pregnant, she and her boyfriend are more inclined to marry and begin a family than in other cultures, where the girl often has to fend for herself.

According to the Buddhist teachings, all life is precious, but human life, in particular, offers a rare opportunity for moral and spiritual development, which does not exist to the same degree in other realms. By having an abortion, the mother is depriving the baby in her womb of this opportunity, and who knows how long that being may have to wait until another opportunity arises to be reborn in the human realm? Even in the case of a child that, due to its past kamma, will be born severely handicapped, it is still better to let that child be born and expiate its unwholesome kamma in the human realm than in some other realm, where the opportunity to grow and learn from that experience is lacking.

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with animals, how much more true would it be in regard to our relationship with fellow humans?

<sup>17</sup> Banjar: an administrative division of Bali; the subsection of a town or village in Bali, with a traditional, partially autonomous, democratic form of government.

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One final point: No one can produce kamma without first creating its mental component – no one can produce a physical action without first having a thought to do it. What this means is that how you do something, i.e., your volition, is as important as what you do; in fact, the two are inseparable. Take, for example, two women who decide to have abortions: The first woman actually wants to have the baby, but due to a rare uterine condition, her doctor has strongly recommended surgical removal of the fetus; the second one had unprotected sex at a party with someone she barely knew and hasn't the least concern for the welfare of the child in her womb or, for that matter, any intention of keeping it. Either way, both women are going to produce some unwholesome kamma by engaging in the act of killing, but the strength of that volition and the concurrence of other supporting mental factors are going to contribute to two completely different outcomes. Although the first woman might agonize more over her decision and actually suffer more initially, the kammic result of the second woman's decision, all things being equal, will be more unwholesome and more productive of suffering in the long run. However, if the second woman takes even a few minutes to analyze what may one day become an extremely difficult or untenable situation for her, she may be able to change her course and circumvent the worst of her coming tribulations.

**3) Applying the Concept of the Middle Way:** Every thought and action in this world can be taken to an extreme. By rigidly adhering to a particular course of action or point of view, we can all too easily force ourselves beyond our natural limits and end up not only harming ourselves, but also alienating others in the process and providing them the incentive to adapt an opposing view. Thus, the pendulum of life circumstances continues to swing back and forth, from one extreme to the other, increasing our own suffering, as well as the suffering of others, and bringing us further and further astray from the path to enlightenment. The middle way – the path between these two extremes – is the Buddha's answer to this problem: "Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathāgata<sup>18</sup> teaches the Dhamma<sup>19</sup> via the middle."<sup>20</sup>

To practice the middle way, we need to be able to see both sides of an argument, without clinging to one side or the other. Through this practice,

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<sup>18</sup> Tathāgata: an appellation for the Buddha, meaning "one who has thus come."

<sup>19</sup> Dhamma: universal law, ultimate truth, the teaching or doctrine of the Buddha.

<sup>20</sup> Kaccānagotta Sutta (SN 12.15)

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even the most difficult issues can often be easily resolved; for example, if a pregnant woman who is contemplating an abortion wants to practice the middle way, she should try to see the situation from the viewpoint of the unborn child in her womb, as well as from her own personal point of view. In this way, she will be able to seek a solution that will meet the needs of both, without causing irreparable harm to one or the other. Of course, every situation is unique and requires a unique response; that response, however, whatever it might be, should still maintain the fundament of a basic moral code, by providing both the pregnant woman and the child in her womb with the greatest opportunity for health and happiness possible. Society can help in the following way: by providing easier access to adoption, safe and reputable orphanages, free healthcare/hospital-care for women and children, sex education, job training, economic assistance, and unbiased, professional counseling at no cost.

In my own case as a Buddhist monk, by practicing the middle way, I can more easily empathize with a woman's decision to have an abortion, even though I might not agree with her from a moral perspective. Acting in this manner, I am also practicing tolerance, creating a "safe space" for reconciliation and compromise, and avoiding the very real danger of becoming entrapped in the mire of fundamentalism and dogma. Nevertheless, if the woman comes to me for advice, I will do my best to convince her of the benefits of following the Buddhist precepts and not taking another being's life.

**4) From the Point of View of the Greater Good:** Acting in accord with the greater good is more of a Mahayana Buddhist teaching than a Theravada one;<sup>21</sup> this means basically that in Mahayana you can more easily bend the rules if you or your community determines that such an action is for the greater good of oneself, one's community, or the population at large. It implies both the benefit and the deficit of a particular choice, and the net gain in regard to health, happiness, success in life, lessening of suffering, etc. Of course, to arrive at a decision that would override any of the moral precepts is a task that requires impartiality, wisdom and compassion. It is a task that sees the world in numerous shades of grey, and a greater good that may vary from situation to situation, placing the burden of

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<sup>21</sup> Although, strictly speaking, this is true, there does seem to be some room for overlap between the greater good and the middle way.

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responsibility squarely on the shoulders of the individual, to make the right decision – or the wrong one.

Years ago, I heard a story about a well-known Japanese monk, who, while working in the monastery garden, would kill the destructive insects with his bare hands. Later, after becoming a Theravada monk, I learned that, in the Theravada tradition, we are not allowed to kill animals (including insects), dig the earth or destroy vegetation, which effectively prevents us from engaging in agriculture. So who is right – the Mahayana monk who killed the insects so that his fellow monks might eat or Theravada monks who, to this day, are merely following rules laid down for them some 2500 years ago by the Buddha? In determining the greater good, we are dealing with conventional truth,<sup>22</sup> a truth that may yield different and sometimes opposing answers to the same question.

Let us now look at the question of abortion through the lens of the greater good. When one aborts a child, the fetus dies. From a purely ethical point of view, that's a negative; however, depending on the context, the mother may be spared considerable physical, mental, social and economic hardship, which would be a positive. Other members of the woman's immediate family might also benefit, thus the greater good would seem to favor the abortion; the balance changes, however, when we factor in three things:

- a) A woman who is planning to have an abortion should know that there is a possibility she may experience greater physical and mental suffering from following through with her decision than if she went ahead and had the baby. Nowadays, abortion is a relatively safe procedure for women in countries where it is allowed; however, every surgical procedure has its inherent dangers. Also, that doesn't include the very real mental suffering that the woman is bound to undergo, which may even outweigh the physical suffering.
- b) The degree of suffering that the fetus experiences in undergoing an abortion may be greater than the degree of suffering that the mother experiences if she has the unwanted baby. Of course, it's easier to empathize with the mother, because we can see her suffering, and

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<sup>22</sup> Conventional truth: a truth that relies on conventional language and expressions, e.g., "man, woman, table, car, insect, etc.," and is thus relegated to the domain of concepts.

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more difficult to empathize with the unborn child, whose suffering we cannot see; however, what we can and cannot see does not necessarily determine the truth of a given situation. According to the *Visuddhimagga* (a famous Buddhist commentary): “When the mother has an abortion, the pain that arises in him [the fetus] through the cutting and rending in the place where the pain arises, which is not fit to be seen even by friends, intimates or companions – this is the suffering rooted in abortion.”<sup>23</sup> At least in the *Visuddhimagga*, it would seem that the suffering of the aborted fetus is far greater than the suffering of the pregnant mother who decides to keep the child (although this can certainly vary, depending on the duration of the pregnancy and other circumstances).<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Visuddhimagga* 3.16.39

<sup>24</sup> The question of when a fetus can begin to feel pain is relevant here – some say at 27 weeks, some say at 20 weeks and some say as early as 12 weeks. According to Maureen Condic, Ph.D., Professor of Neurobiology and Anatomy at the University of Utah: “The earliest ‘rudiment’ of the human nervous system forms by 28 days (four weeks) after sperm-egg fusion. At this stage, the primitive brain is already ‘patterned;’ i.e., cells in different regions are specified to produce structures appropriate to their location in the nervous system as a whole... [thus] the structure of the early brain ‘anticipates’ the function of the mature system... By eight weeks of development... the neural circuitry responsible for the most primitive response to pain, the spinal reflex, is in place. This is the earliest point at which the fetus experiences pain in any capacity... [At this stage], a fetus responds just as humans [do] at later stages of development – by withdrawing from the painful stimulus.” One of the major issues here, which divides doctors and scientists, is whether or not pain needs to be processed through the cortex in order to be experienced or if it can be apprehended in a more direct manner, and therefore at a much earlier stage of development. Recent research suggests the latter, which could have a profound influence on the public perception of second-trimester, and even late first-trimester, abortions.

In stark contrast to the above variegated abortion limits, a majority of embryologists adhere to the widely accepted 14-day limit for embryo research, which stipulates that a human embryo cannot be grown in vitro (outside the womb) for longer than 14 days from the time of fertilization. This rule is based in great part on the fact that after day 14, there begins to appear a sort of thickening in the center of the embryo, known as the “primitive streak,” which later develops into the spinal cord/central nervous system. A 14-day limit was chosen, therefore, by “subtracting a few days... [to ensure] that there would be no possibility of the embryo feeling pain.” (Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilisation

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Another type of suffering that is not described in the above passage is the mental suffering of the unborn child not being able to attain the human birth that it so desires. With desire comes fear, in this case, the fear of death, which grows ever greater as the abortion proceeds. Due to the negative impact of the fear and confusion arising in the child's mind at the time of death, he or she will most likely be reborn in a woeful realm, with little opportunity to return to the human realm for an exceedingly long time.

- c) In deciding on the greater good in a given situation, we cannot come to a clear determination without factoring in the doctrine of kamma, for kamma considers the present, as well as the future, and this life, as well as the next. In the case of abortion, when the negative kamma created by that act ripens, it will result in a state of future suffering; on the other hand, if one decides (for the sake of the child) to not go ahead with an abortion, when the positive kamma of that decision ripens, it will result in a state of future happiness. Here are several examples:

1. A woman who has had several abortions during her life is born infertile in an equal number of future lives or perhaps even aborted or miscarried in some of those lives, and then reborn in a non-human state, as an animal, demon, hungry ghost or hell being.<sup>25</sup>

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and Embryology, Chapter 11, 20. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office; 1984). What is the cause for the inordinate discrepancy between the in vitro and in vivo pain threshold of the embryo? Until there is evidence that this report is wrong, how can we know for sure that a human embryo, even as young as 14 days, cannot experience physical pain?

<sup>25</sup> The important point to realize here is that one's birth in the next life will correspond to the kamma/kamma sign that appears at the end of that person's current life. This "death-proximate kamma" is the end result of the way one has lived. Generally, it's based on a behavior pattern that one has repeated on a regular basis throughout his or her life and/or in any number of previous lives (referred to as "habitual kamma"). Habitual kamma grows in strength through repetition – the more times one performs a certain type of action, the stronger the kammic force (associated with that action) becomes, and the greater the probability grows that it will later become one's death-proximate kamma.

Sometimes, however, one may perform an especially potent act (referred to as "weighty kamma"), such as killing one's mother or father. According to the Buddha, such an act has the power to produce an unalterable result at the time of

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Note that doctors who perform abortions and those who encourage a woman to have one are also culpable.

2. A single woman with a career gets pregnant. Because her career is more important to her than having the child, she opts for an abortion. One, two, three times. Eventually, she becomes CEO of the company where she works, meets someone she really likes and marries. They decide not to have any children, but sometimes she thinks about the three children that could have been hers. Quickly, she puts the thought out of her mind.

3. A woman marries and becomes pregnant. Soon after, her husband leaves her; nevertheless, she decides to go ahead and have the baby. For years she struggles to support her son, as he grows into manhood and gets an education. The son appreciates how his mother's sacrifice has made it possible for him to become successful in life, and in later years, returns the favor by supporting his aged mother.

4. A young woman who was raped decides to not have an abortion, but since she is unable to keep the child, she seeks adoption and finds a family that is willing to care for the child. The adoptive parents love the child, and the child grows up in a healthy and happy environment. One day, the child is reunited with its biological mother. The mother feels a great burden lifted from her heart, and is finally able to forgive the man who raped her.<sup>26</sup>

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death – in this case, rebirth in a hell realm. When one thinks about the special relationship between a mother and the unborn child in her womb, we can understand why performing an abortion might lead to rebirth in a lower realm. A pregnant woman can only get an idea of the suffering she is creating for herself when she puts herself in the position of the aborted fetus and tries to imagine the shock and pain of being literally ripped out of the mother's womb with an intrauterine vacuum cleaner, expelled (via an induced miscarriage) or having one's body parts cut and twisted apart inside the womb for evacuation. What will be the result of such an act? If that kamma ripens and produces a result at the time of death, one can definitely expect a future filled with suffering – either rebirth in a lower realm or under extremely difficult conditions in a human realm – in other words, as the cause, so the effect.

<sup>26</sup> It is often the case in Bali that if a young girl gets pregnant, someone in her extended family will offer to care for the child. Outside of a traditional banjar environment, the child is more likely to end up in an orphanage, which, generally

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Of course, these are only stories, and I'm sure there are an equal number of stories that could demonstrate just the opposite. However, no one can choose the precise story for his or her future life, and even with an understanding of kamma, it is not an easy task to fathom the future results of one's actions. What an understanding of kamma can do, however, is to point out the general direction of one's life and how to alter that direction in a positive way. Even if we cannot directly see the unfolding of kamma, as some people can, it still gives us a reliable gauge for our lives.

Finally, how can we determine the greater good without first defining what good is? Perhaps, in regard to good, one man's meat is another man's poison. This would mean that there is no one definition of good that can apply to all persons and situations. But is this really true? What about clean air and pure water – isn't that good for all people? Generally speaking, yes, although the way we prioritize these two essentials might vary from person to person, and place to place. And what about money – is money (as a means of exchange) good? For someone with a mortgage to pay and a family to feed, the answer would be yes; for that person, money would definitely be a priority. For a Theravada monk living in a monastery where he is supplied with all his basic requisites, the answer would be no; for him, money would not be a priority, nor, according to the Vinaya, is it allowable.

So what are a monk's priorities? His first priority is to keep the 227 rules of discipline (which include the moral precepts), and his top priority is to attain Nibbana (the extinction of greed, hatred and delusion, and the attainment of lasting peace and happiness).<sup>27</sup> Other sects or religions might refer to the final goal as salvation, moksha, God-realization, enlightenment, liberation or Buddhahood. To attain such a goal – would that not, at least for a monk, be the greatest good? And that which leads to the greatest good, would that not be the greater good? Thus, one's goal in life determines what, for him or her, would be the greater good, and that goal, in turn, is determined by one's belief system.

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speaking, is not able to offer the same degree of love and care that foster parents can.

<sup>27</sup> "Extinction of greed, extinction of hate, extinction of delusion: this is called Nibbana [S. XXXVIII. 1];" "The monk who abides in universal love and is devoted to the teaching of the Buddha will realize Nibbana – peaceful, unconditioned and blissful. [Dhammapada 368]."

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35 years ago, my girlfriend became pregnant. She was 16 years older than me, and I had no plans to marry her at the time. When I found out she was pregnant, I decided that the honorable thing for me to do was to support our future child by offering to marry her. However, if I had met her 20 years earlier, when many young Americans, like myself, were experimenting with drugs and pursuing a hippie life-style, I would never have made that choice – I would have just run away from the situation and left her to figure things out on her own. So what is it that made me change?

In late 1967, I was living and working in Bern, Switzerland, when a friend loaned me a copy of the Dhammapada.<sup>28</sup> As I read through the teachings of the Buddha, it was like someone turned the light on in the room. Suddenly I saw the answers to many questions that had plagued me throughout my life, including the assassination of JFK, the escalation of the Vietnam War, my conflicts with fellow students and family members, as well as deep personal fears, and doubts about religion and God.

Through the Dhammapada, I was introduced to the doctrine of kamma and began to understand the importance of morality – of practicing virtue in one’s daily life. I took the Buddha as my refuge and role model, and began to meditate. From that point on, my whole life changed – once I understood the law of kamma and incorporated that understanding into my belief system, I began to take responsibility for my actions. I also realized that it’s not just a woman’s fault when she gets pregnant. As the saying goes, it takes two to tango. Thus, a man who runs out on a woman when she gets pregnant, must share in the burden of guilt if she opts for an abortion. A final note: In her third month of pregnancy, my girlfriend miscarried (she was 54 years old at the time); so the child that we were both expecting, never arrived.

In my opinion, we ultimately all have the same goal – lasting peace and happiness; however, since each of us is at a different place on the path to that goal, only the individual can determine what the greater good is for him or her. Unfortunately, since nothing in this world is perfect, that determination is all too often limited to a choice between the lesser of two evils, which is not an easy choice to make. What makes that choice even

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<sup>28</sup> Dhammapada: a popular Theravada text, which serves as a compendium and introduction to the Buddhist teachings.

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more difficult is that the vast majority – being subject to ignorance, craving and wrong view<sup>29</sup> – are already inclined to make the wrong choice. Nevertheless, those who choose to follow a spiritual path, even if they have not yet attained enlightenment, have a definite advantage. For example, when Buddhists take refuge in the Buddha and his teaching, and make his example their lodestar, they create a reference point in life that will influence all their future decisions. For Buddhists, Buddha represents the ideal man – one who has overcome all obstacles, perfect in wisdom and compassion, an unvanquished warrior, with no chink in his moral armor. If they choose to follow his example, then their goal in life will be Nibbana, and the greater good will be to practice his teaching, the purpose of which is to attain Nibbana. In simple terms, this consists of avoiding evil, doing good, and purifying the mind,<sup>30</sup> which is accomplished in three stages: the practice of morality, the practice of concentration, and the cultivation of wisdom.<sup>31</sup>

In the Angulimala Sutta, we read how the mass murderer, Angulimala, changed completely after meeting the Buddha, and never killed another being (not even an insect) from that time on. He later attained enlightenment and became known for his great compassion. If even Angulimala could change for the better, can we not do the same? And even if we cannot accomplish exactly what he did, if we can change our priorities in life, will our actions not follow suit, to a lesser or greater degree? One who killed or stole will cease to kill and steal. One who drank, took drugs or committed adultery will cease to do so. One who lied and slandered others will now speak the truth. That person's perspective will change – he or she will become less self-centered and more altruistic. And with that growth and maturity will come a new perspective on abortion.

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<sup>29</sup> Ignorance and craving are the primary mental and psychological factors that bind unenlightened beings to samsara, and hence, act as the cause of suffering. Wrong view (literally “wrong seeing”) is an erroneous belief, opinion or theory, rooted in identity view – the false belief in a self, and the overcoming of this false belief is the first step on the path to enlightenment.

<sup>30</sup> Dhammapada 183: “To avoid all evil, to do good, to purify the mind – this is the teaching of all the Buddhas.”

<sup>31</sup> The practice of morality has already been discussed in Section 1; the practice of concentration will be discussed in Sections 5 & 6; and the practice of wisdom will be discussed in Section 5.

**5) From the Perspective of the Three Characteristics:** The practice of vipassana meditation is the wisdom practice of Theravada Buddhism. “Vipassana” literally means “seeing clearly” or “insight;” it is defined as the experiential knowledge that arises from directly seeing the three characteristics of existence in mind and matter. The three characteristics are:

- 1) Impermanence – mind and matter are subject to change; as soon as they arise, they pass away;
- 2) Suffering – mind and matter are always oppressed by arising and passing away;
- 3) Non-self – mind and matter are empty of anything that could be called a self, void of an ego-I; nor is there any enduring substance or essence, either inside or outside of mind and matter.

Like an electron microscope, vipassana magnifies the mind’s power many times, making it bright and sharp – capable of penetrating solid matter and areas of the consciousness never before seen. Through the practice of vipassana, the meditator enters an impersonal world of nanoparticles and mind-moments, arising and passing away billions of times a second. This is called seeing mind and matter at the level of “ultimate reality.”<sup>32</sup>

As the meditator’s practice grows more stable and the wisdom faculty gradually matures, a day will come when the mind naturally adverts to the ultimate reality of Nibbana. With that experience, the notion of an ego-I finally comes to an end, and the meditator ceases to regard the “I”, “me” and “my” of the so-called self as anything other than a mental fabrication and a product of ignorance. He or she finally understands what the Buddha meant when he referred to the three characteristics as “a firm condition, an immutable fact and a fixed law.”<sup>33</sup>

Of course, most people have neither the time nor the energy to learn meditation; thus, the vast majority, being unable to develop the necessary concentration to “see things as they really are,”<sup>34</sup> remain stuck at the level

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<sup>32</sup> Ultimate reality: truth or reality in the purest sense; the level of mind and matter, at which point, the components of existence cannot be broken down or refined any further. There are four basic categories of ultimate reality: consciousness, associated mental factors, materiality and Nibbana.

<sup>33</sup> Arising Discourse (A.III.134).

<sup>34</sup> Kimatthiya Sutta (A.X.I.1)

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of what the Buddhist commentaries refer to as “conventional truth.”<sup>35</sup> The problem with conventional truth is that it is purely conceptual – what appears to the observer at this level as true is actually the result of trillions of mental impressions, including images and other sense data, plus thoughts, opinions, biases, past-life memories, tendencies and percepts, all of them conjoined by the subtle misperception of an ego-I and the craving that arises from it. Everything we see, hear and do gets filtered through this vast matrix-like web, which people in the West refer to as the subconscious.

What this means, in practical terms, is that two people can view the same object and end up seeing two completely different things. Now we can understand why there is so much conflict in the world – because most of us, in a subjective sense, don’t even live in the same world. This may sound pretty bad, but it is not completely hopeless, since we can still make some good kamma while we’re here, although not as easily as one on the path,<sup>36</sup> who has already seen mind and matter at the level of ultimate reality.

Take, for example, a woman discussing the issue of abortion with her friends. When she hears the well-known catchphrase “my body, my choice,” she automatically visualizes the body as a solid and compact entity, of which she – her-self – is the owner. It does not occur to her that there might be another way to view the body and the mind’s relationship to it. However, assuming she reads this article and is inspired to undertake the practice of vipassana, with that practice, her view of the body will radically change. As her concentration improves, and she is able to penetrate the delusion of compactness,<sup>37</sup> she will know for the first time that “her body” does not really belong to her; in fact, the only thing in this world that truly belongs to her is her kamma, and that her kamma is as much the owner of “her” as she is of her kamma.

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<sup>35</sup> Conventional truth: a truth that relies on conventional language and expressions, e.g., “man, woman, table, car, etc.,” in contrast to ultimate reality, conventional truth is relegated to the domain of concepts.

<sup>36</sup> Path: abbreviation for the Noble Eightfold Path, taught by the Buddha, namely: Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration.

<sup>37</sup> Delusion of compactness: the delusion that the body and mind are solid, impenetrable, permanent, synthetically cohesive entities.; see Visuddhimagga (VsM.xxi.739).

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To see the world in this light is to see it as it really is – impermanent, full of suffering and void of a self. Based on this understanding, a great compassion will arise in her heart, and with it, the confirmation of a universal golden rule, whose standard is to harm neither oneself nor another.

**6) As an Exercise in the Practice of Compassion:** Compassion is the second of the Four Brahmaviharas<sup>38</sup> (the four heavenly abodes). The first Brahmavihara is love, the foundation for all the others, which, in Buddhism, we refer to as loving-kindness (metta in Pali). Loving-kindness is not romantic love, but a love that is universal and impartial, without preference for any one person or being. When we practice metta, we begin by sending love first to ourselves, then to our parents, family, teachers, friends, enemies, etc., even non-human beings, spreading our love in all directions throughout space, until we finally encompass the entire universe; our goal is to feel the same love for all beings, even for those for whom we may have intense dislike.

With love comes empathy. When we have empathy, we feel another person's suffering and want to relieve it – that is compassion. Like love, our practice of compassion begins with ourselves, spreading outward to encompass the entire universe. Like love, our compassion should have no preferences or bounds. It may be difficult to grasp that one would have compassion for a mosquito or a spider, and yet, when we recite the verse, "May all beings be happy; may all beings be free from suffering," all beings includes both mosquitoes and spiders.

Since a fetus is also a living being, it follows that we should have the same love for the unborn child as we do for the one already born, and thus, the same compassion for each of them. Therefore, before going ahead with an abortion, a pregnant woman should sit down and contemplate the gravity of the action she plans to take. She should recall the words of the Buddha in the Karaniyametta Sutta (SN 1.8), where he explains how to practice metta: "Just as a mother would risk her own life to protect her only child, even so, toward all living beings, one should cultivate a boundless heart..." In this verse, the Buddha is positing a mother's love as an ideal that we should all

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<sup>38</sup> The Four Brahmaviharas: four interrelated meditation practices (and their resulting states of concentration), consisting of: 1) loving-kindness, 2) compassion, 3) altruistic (or sympathetic) joy, and 4) equanimity.

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try to live up to. If this is the case of a mother's love for the child already born, why would it not be equally true for the "child" still in her womb, who depends on her in more ways than we can possibly imagine? Is it therefore not possible that a woman would so love the "child" in her womb that she would willingly "risk her own life" to protect it?

With this thought in mind, she should open her heart and fill it with compassion for the being in her womb, who has "chosen" to come into this world as her son or daughter. She should imagine herself in the same situation, at the mercy of a potential death sentence, in which she – the mother – is both judge and jury, and pray that she makes the right decision for all involved, for it is not a small decision, but rather a decision of great import.

### Conclusion

One of the functions of every major religion is to establish a moral code, which makes it possible for people to live together in harmony, respecting one another's basic rights and restraining themselves when their passions might otherwise provoke them into harming one another. Not only is morality an essential element of religious dogma, but it also plays an important role in government, serving as the foundation for our laws, and as a preventative against corruption.

Laws are the children of morality. When morality is weaponized and taken to its lowest common denominator, it becomes a law. Despite their common origin, laws and morality are fundamentally different: Laws are a form of forced restraint and are imposed from without, while morality is a form of self-restraint and is imposed from within; laws can be legislated, while morality cannot; laws change, sometimes all too quickly, while morality has a certain permanency to it. Most important, the end goal of the legal system is to protect the constitutional rights of a country's citizens, while the end goal of morality is Nibbana – the "unborn, supreme security from bondage."<sup>39</sup>

These differences are made manifest in the separation of church and state, which limits our government from incorporating the full scope of any

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<sup>39</sup> Quote from the Noble Search Sutta (MN 77).

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religious teaching into its laws. In 1973, the US Supreme Court issued a landmark decision in the case of *Roe v. Wade*, upholding a pregnant woman's right to choose whether or not to have an abortion. That decision represents a shift in values over the last century in Western society, illustrating a cultural dynamic between rights and morals, which, in recent times, has gradually moved toward a more liberal and less traditional balance (although an in-depth appraisal would no doubt reveal that this cultural dynamic has been with us throughout history, repeatedly moving the needle in one direction and then the other). Either way, the issue is far from resolved, and questions about the ethicality of abortion continue to arise and get recycled, polarizing our country and further dividing our society along political and religious lines.

For myself and other Theravada monks, the question of abortion is fairly black and white, that is if we can all agree on the basic premise of consciousness entering the womb at the time of conception. For us, abortion is primarily a legal issue – if we break the rule, our life as a Theravada monk comes to an end. For lay practitioners, however (living in a country where abortion is legal), the choice to have an abortion is a strictly moral one. For them, it is no longer a question of rights, but of right and wrong. Unfortunately, questions of right and wrong no longer dominate the cultural landscape of Western society the way they once did. This is partially due to the separation of church and state, which prevents us from seeking the answer to any question on morality through our state or federal institutions, and partially due to the control of major news media by politically-biased organizations, which have helped to turn abortion into a political issue, but the primary reason, from a Buddhist point of view, is what the Buddhist scriptures refer to as the wrong view of materialism, which is directly related to the wrong view of kamma – a view that denies the efficacy of moral causation.<sup>40</sup>

When a majority of the populace, including those who serve in our government, no longer believe in the continuity of life or the moral consequences of our actions, when happiness equates to little more than financial success and indulgence in the five sense pleasures, and when we have come to rely solely on economic, political and technological solutions

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<sup>40</sup> According to the Buddha, especially harmful are those wrong views that deny the workings of kamma, since such views inevitably lead to the performance of unwholesome actions.

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to life's problems, then the separation of church and state has gone beyond its original intent, and we are headed in a dark direction, that will ultimately lead to lawlessness, chaos and tyranny. There is a balance between laws and morality that we need to return to, for it is obvious that we need both, if a society is to prosper.

So where do we go from here, and how does the issue of abortion relate to all of this? I believe we need to somehow bridge the gap between church and state, and from that bridge create a different type of social structure, with morality as its foundation. Of course, talk is cheap, and politicians nowadays seem to have a particularly difficult time walking their talk; so instead of waiting for the ideal leader to come along and reform our government, we should take the initiative upon ourselves and seek the leader within, and that leader's first priority should be to reform himself or herself. If we want to create the ideal society, each of us must first become the ideal citizen. Only then will we be able to collectively arrive at a meaningful value for the life of an unborn child or decide on any other moral issue, for that matter.

To accomplish this, the most effective way to begin is by correcting our wrong view of kamma. Having a right view of kamma<sup>41</sup> will incentivize us into following the moral precepts, a crucial step to take if we want to develop our character. Without a fundamental understanding of and belief in kamma – that good is rewarded by good, and evil by evil – it will be difficult if not impossible to live by the old adage that honesty is the best policy or to believe that morality is more important than money, in which case we will be powerless to create an ideal society.

I would also suggest that each person take some time from his or her daily schedule to learn to meditate. Start with twenty minutes, once or twice a day; better yet, take a block of time off to attend a meditation course. Since

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<sup>41</sup> In the Great Forty Sutta (MN.117), the Buddha described right view (of kamma) in the following manner: "There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits & results of good & bad actions. There is this world & the next world. There is mother & father. There are spontaneously reborn beings; there are priests & contemplatives who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves." Please note that Abrahamic and other deistic religions agree with most of the above assertions.

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vipassana is a uniquely Buddhist practice, I'll just say a few words about one of its major benefits – the cultivation of mental stability. Even in a single meditation retreat, one can begin to experience some of the benefits of vipassana, for example, being better able to cope with the stresses of daily life and less likely to fly off the handle or break the moral precepts – qualities essential for the well-being of any society.

Finally, we should undertake the joint practices of loving-kindness and compassion, cultivating “for all the world, a heart of boundless loving-kindness, above, below, and all around, unobstructed, without hatred or resentment... not falling into erroneous views, but virtuous and endowed with vision...” – these are the direct words of the Buddha.<sup>42</sup> As the “Great Physician,”<sup>43</sup> he is providing us with a balm that we can apply to ourselves and each other, to heal the ills of all mankind, and in this day and age, when pharmaceuticals are all too often used to mask the symptoms of a deeper disease, it is a balm that we are all in sad need of. As the Buddha states in the Dhammapada, Verse 5: “Hatred can never overcome hatred in this world. Only by non-hatred [loving-kindness] is hatred overcome – this is an eternal law.”

My mind drifts back to the traditional Balinese village where I have been living for the past year. I see young children here on a daily basis, walking the streets without fear, visiting each other in their respective homes, playing with one another on the streets that serve as their playground, riding their bikes down the main path through the rice paddies, carefree and confident, and wonder, “Why can't children live like this in the US, without getting beaten up, shot, molested or hooked on drugs?” There's no abortion here, but the kids and parents are happy. There's no theft, at least not enough to require residents to lock their doors at night. No gangs, rape, pedophilia, sex slave trade or drug wars, at least not in the banjar. What are children learning here that children in the US are not?

It is not the compass of this article to provide answers to these questions, but rather to stimulate the reader's desire to find the answers for himself or herself. One thing is for certain, though – the American dream of the new house in the suburbs, with the two-car garage, isn't cutting it anymore. What we substitute for that house will help to determine our future values, and according to those values, we will progress or regress as a society,

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<sup>42</sup> A quote from the Karaniyametta Sutta, Sutta Nipāta 1.8

<sup>43</sup> Great Physician: an appellation for the Buddha.

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beginning with the understanding that when a child is born, he or she is actually nine months older than we think. PhD's in the West can argue this statement on the basis of biology, sociology or the laws of genetics and physics, but it is still a one-dimensional argument. There are other dimensions and other laws that need to be considered if we are to arrive at a meaningful answer to the question of abortion. In the words of William Shakespeare: "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

Bhikkhu Moneyya  
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