

**COMMITTEE II**  
The Value of Human Life

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**Discussant Paper on Sulak Sivaraksa's Paper**

**THE VALUE OF HUMAN LIFE IN BUDDHIST THOUGHT**

by

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## The Value of Human Life in Buddhist Thought

Paper Discussant's Remarks by Deirdre Green on a paper by Sulak Sivaraksa  
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Sulak Sivaraksa directs our attention back towards fundamental principles, of which the world sadly needs to be reminded, when he tells us that we must strive to create a peaceful and just society in which human beings live in harmony with nature, in which the wholeness of life is affirmed, and individual moral and spiritual growth thereby nourished. He sees Buddhism as concerned both with individual spiritual development, and with bringing about improved social, political, and economic conditions. Elsewhere Sulak has argued that the first precept of Buddhism, not to kill any living being, should be thought to have a bearing not only on obvious examples of "killing" such as war, but also on racial disharmony and nuclear disarmament. A style of living must be evolved, he has argued, which includes a concern for peace and ecology, and which should ideally entail vegetarianism. (1) The Buddhist Peace Fellowship, active in a similar area, seeks to promote peace and ecology concerns through the propagation of Buddhist values. Buddhists generally, indeed, are often seen to play a prominent part in the anti-nuclear and ecology movements.

Sulak also asks, in the same article, how far we should allow Western science and technology to interfere with the natural processes of birth and death (2), and in his present paper he speaks out against what he calls "blind admiration for western science and technology as if it were value free" (3) and he calls for a reappraisal of traditional Buddhist values. Certainly, in the area of medicine, many Buddhists would prefer less reliance on drugs and medical technology, more on preventative health care and holistic healing methods. A mistrust of any (so-called) "manipulation" of "natural reproduction" is also shown by a recent article in Soka Gakkai News (the newsletter of a Japanese Buddhist sect). The author speaks out against artificial insemination, and against new techniques which may enable parents to choose the sex of their child, apparently recently demonstrated at Keio University Medical School. (4)

Sulak also appears to argue against the use of contraception. He says that family planning is "completely tied up with the over-indulgences of the powerful materialist societies of the world" (5). These societies have exploited the Third World, and then, having drained the Third World countries of their natural resources, have argued that the population of the Third World must be reduced. But whatever truth there is in this, it does not constitute a Buddhist ethical argument against the use of contraception. Sulak adds that sexuality for the Buddhist should be seen as an expression of love and commitment, and not as a means of satisfying lust; surely few of us would disagree with this, and yet again this does not constitute a conclusive argument against the use of contraception; no more does the Buddhist theory to which he also refers, which states that sexual energies should be conserved in order to promote spiritual strength. (6)

Roshi Jiyu Kennett, a modern Zen Buddhist teacher, speaks out even more strongly against sexuality, which is to be indulged in, she says, only for purposes of procreation. She claims that the sexual act "forces life downwards" instead of upwards to the spiritual levels of being; and that an active sex life results in (I quote) "delusion, inaccuracy of memory, loss of intelligence and obsession." Regarding contraception, she says, "Pills and devices which enable beings to indulge themselves [sexually] create more and more tensions in the organs until disease develops....." (7) She does not object too much to what she calls "true marriage" where

sex is used not for the purposes of satisfying lust but only in order to have children; but what I find astonishing is that neither Sulak Sivaraksa nor Roshi Jiyu Kennett considers that sex, without the express purpose of procreation, might be an expression not of lust but of love, and that in this case it might be a genuinely spiritual experience and not one that detracts from the spiritual.

From these considerations, it will be obvious without further discussion that Buddhism denounces abortion; though there is another reason for this, to which I will return, namely that in Buddhist thought all life, not only human life, is sacred. Therefore, whether or not the foetus is a human being is not the central point at issue for a Buddhist; one could hardly argue that the foetus is not a form of life, and according to Buddhism all forms of life are to be protected.

Sulak rightly, I believe, emphasizes that death must be accepted, and that death and life, or death and rebirth for the Buddhist, are two sides of the same coin. (8) Roshi Jiyu Kennett again makes this point in her book which describes her experiences in intensive meditation after she had been told that she had only three months to live. In this moving account, the sanctity of life and the dignity of death are equally well portrayed. It is perhaps precisely because people in our modern societies have lost touch with the inherent sanctity in life, of life's spiritual dimension, that they are unable to see the sanctity of death. The Tibetan Book of the Dead is one scripture which is relevant here: it describes the visions and spiritual experiences that the Tibetan Buddhist might expect to go through after death - but, just as important, the book is a guide to life - for the visions and spiritual experiences described are intimately interlinked with meditative practices which the dying person should have performed during his or her earthly life. The idea is that, in the process of dying, we pass through in reality the same states which we should, ideally, already have experienced in the higher stages of meditation. We pass through various types of visions until we find what the Tibetan Book of the Dead calls the Clear Light - the pure spiritual peace of nirvāna, which is both the eschatological goal, and the goal of the mystic in this life.

I have left Sulak's first point to the end, for I believe a consideration of its implications may bring together many of the themes we have been discussing. Sulak refers to the Buddhist teaching that human beings are unique among the worlds of animals and gods inasmuch as they alone can attain spiritual liberation, nirvāna, which implies overcoming suffering and death, transcending the ever-turning wheel of deaths and rebirths so that we are no longer reborn. But I want to add a cautionary note here, as to Western ears the idea that human beings are unique, sounds very much like the notion that man is the "measure of all things" and that everything else in the world is made for the benefit of the human race. This belief, which has, of course, influenced Western philosophy immeasurably, has come under attack recently, being branded as "speciesism", or, perhaps a better term, "anthropocentrism". Now as I've said, for the Buddhist all life is sacred. The subject-matter allocated to this Committee is "The Value of Human Life" : but in the Buddhist context it's actually difficult to consider human life in isolation from life in general. The sanctity of all life is brought strongly into focus when we consider that Buddhism extends the precept about not killing, to cover animals. Many Buddhists are therefore vegetarian. Some have compromised on this issue, but I would argue (and I believe Sulak might agree) that it is inconsistent to be a Buddhist and not to be a vegetarian. In taking the first precept, a Buddhist recognizes his or her relationship with all living beings, a relationship that is so close that to harm any living being would be to harm oneself. Guidelines on issues such as abortion, capital punishment,

euthanasia, and so on, all follow from this precept. Thus many Buddhists are active in the anti-vivisection and animal rights movements. Indeed, the "protection of all beings" is often seen as including not only animals, but also plants, trees, and nature as a whole. Mahāyāna Buddhism in particular emphasizes that every single thing has the Buddha-nature in it, and every single thing is therefore certainly sacred. Hence the involvement of Buddhists in issues relating to ecology and conservation, as already mentioned.

But there is one final question that I want to raise. Even though all life is sacred for the Buddhist, it is also held that the extent of moral guilt, or karmic repercussions, in the act of killing, depends on the physical and mental development of the being which is killed, and the circumstances under which the deed is committed. Thus the karmic consequences of killing a human being are worse than those of killing a dog. But if physical and mental development is the determining criterion, then it ought (logically) to be less blameworthy to kill (or to allow to die) a foetus, or a senile and sick old person, or a baby born severely handicapped, than to kill a person in the prime of life and health. There are, to my knowledge, no Buddhist writings on these questions, at least none that are available in Britain; so I am not putting forward any formulated Buddhist view, but simply pointing to the logical implications of a pre-existing view. Generally, Buddhism does not emphasize absolute moral stances, any more than it emphasizes absolute metaphysical views. Each person must learn how best to act through his or her own experience. There is no divine punishment or retribution, although certainly the actions one performs will have karmic consequences which will determine the nature of one's next rebirth. Buddhists give strong priority to individual conscience. It is for this reason that there is no single accepted Buddhist view on many of the topics we have been considering. But I hope that what I have said will give rise to some ideas for further discussion.

#### References

- (1) Sulak Sivaraksa, 'A Buddhist Perception of Desirable Society', in Seeds of Peace, vol.2 no.1, January 1986, p.21.
- (2) Ibid., p.22.
- (3) Sulak Sivaraksa, 'The Value of Human Life in Buddhist Thought', p.6.
- (4) Eiko Fukumoto, 'Ethics of Sex Selection Birth Method Questioned', Soka Gakkai News, vol.11 no.210, August 1986.
- (5) 'The Value of Human Life in Buddhist Thought', p.6.
- (6) Ibid., p.7.
- (7) Roshi Jiyu Kennett, How to Grow a Lotus Blossom: How a Zen Buddhist Prepares for Death, Shasta Abbey Press. pp.169-170.
- (8) 'The Value of Human Life in Buddhist Thought', pp.1-2.