

## **Buddhist Concerns Regarding Suicide**

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Suicide is considered a crime in most states. It is considered an immoral act by many societies and by the Christian religion. For Buddhists it is a neutral reality. It can be a very negative action, destructive of the life of the agent and devastating to his or her surviving loved ones. It is, nonetheless, sometimes a noble action. When a captured soldier ends his life rather than risking giving up his comrades' position under torture this is certainly a brave and respectable act. Speaking for myself, I see the same nobility in the deliberate ending of life by the terminally ill patient whose treatment is exhausting family resources as he or she endures great suffering. Suicide is often morally irrelevant when viewed from a Buddhist perspective, just a fact like death from disease or accident. A terminally-ill patient who is not exhausting family resources but wishes an end to the suffering would usually be seen as neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy from a Buddhist perspective.

It seems to me rather silly that Suicide is against the law in many places. If one has decided to end his life he will hardly be deterred by the threat of legal censure after he is gone. (Do they fine the estate in some localities?) It seems a sad fact that some religions teach that deliberately choosing to die is a sin for which one will be punished in some future life. What kind of a God would dole out further punishment to one who has already relinquished the most precious possession that any of us has, life itself?

Although ending one's own life is not necessarily immoral I would advise against it in almost any foreseeable case. Life is intrinsically valuable. Our own lives are worthy to a degree beyond our abilities to fully understand. The best thing is a long life filled with warmth, sharing, adventure and amusement. But even a life filled with physical and or emotional suffering is valuable, is worthy of continuation by those strong enough to persevere. Certainly, I admire those who end their own lives because they do not want to be burdens upon others. But such a self-sacrificing suicide does not exceed the nobility of continuing life to its last moment in the recognition that all life is precious. This year the actor, Robert Urich, insisted that life-support mechanisms not be discontinued in his final days. It was not that he feared death. It was because he loved life so much that he intended to live every possible moment left to him.

I have always liked Dogen Zenji's highly symbolic way of praising the value of any life: "Even a demon pacing back and forth in a cave buried in the depths of the earth is one bright pearl." Some who are contemplating suicide may not be able to sense the beauty that pertains to any life. We need to find other ways to encourage them to continue living. Cautionary remarks about how suicide will affect the loved ones of the victim might help some who are not too far down the road to self-slaughter. Indeed there does seem to be a higher percentage of suicides amongst those whose parents have taken their own lives. Also, of course, the sadness which family and friends must face could be a deterrent. Reminding people that good things – beauty, friendship, happiness- may be just a little further down the road could help.

One problem is that we often don't know that someone has suicidal yearnings, even if we are close to them. Since we don't know who to encourage, perhaps we must resolve to be encouraging in our remarks to everyone. Nietzsche once said, "The thought of suicide has gotten many a man through a bad night." To consider the possibility as a last-ditch effort to escape unbearable stress or pain may actually be what is needed for some to continue living.

There was a period in Chinese Buddhist history when some people jumped off cliffs while chanting the Nembutsu. They couldn't wait to go to Amida's Pure Land. They expected not just happiness for themselves but the wisdom and power to lead others to Absolute Freedom. Remembering their motives, their suicides were noble even if I believe they were misguided. If I had been there as they contemplated their self-canceling trips to the Pure Land I would have advised them to wait. I would have tried to help them see that there is a beauty to our lives even now which is not to be ignored or devalued. Amida Buddha will still be there to welcome us if we let our lives follow their courses up to the last minute.

We may not always know how to encourage friends and family members to persevere. Sometimes we may have no idea that someone we care for is contemplating suicide. There may be no warning signs. In such cases we must not judge harshly but rather honor those who leave us early. They saw clearly the suffering that shadows the lives of the unenlightened. This is half of what the Buddha tried to teach us. The other half of the message is that **Life is intrinsically valuable**. It is when we stop trying to have things our own way so doggedly that we come to see that all of life is beautiful. If we can only see worthiness in pleasant times we are in great danger. That is why the Buddha directed our gaze back to suffering. Those who see suffering so clearly are "bright pearls". I hope we can find ways of encouraging them to stay here with us. If not, Amida Buddha will welcome them to his joyous realm of influence. Amida, Sakyamuni all the Buddhas know the worth of such deep-feeling people. The next time we do see a sign that someone is depressed let's honor that person. If we can't cheer him or her up can we still value that person. Each one of us is one bright pearl. I only hope that those of such deep feeling may come to feel this fact.

Twenty-five years ago in the middle of an extended blizzard a depressed man jumped off a twenty story building in Chicago. He landed in a huge pile of snow. Except for having the wind knocked out of him he was unhurt. I suspect he felt that someone or something was looking out for him. I only wish there had been a happy ending for more of those driven by sadness to the final escape. Let's do what we can to prevent our associates from despairing. Life is beautiful in a way that goes beyond our usual concepts of beauty and ugliness. Not everyone knows that. If we keep the Buddha-dharma alive on this planet one day everyone will know the worthiness of all life.