A Buddhist View of Abortion

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ABSTRACT: This paper examines the abortion issue from a Buddhist perspective. As the consciousness is held to enter the embryo at conception, it is felt to be fully human at that moment. Thus, Buddhism strongly discourages abortion except in the situation of an immediate threat to the mother's life. Though Buddhism has clearly a "pro-life" position on abortion, the final decision should be left to the pregnant woman.

The abortion debate rages on. Many different secular and religious viewpoints have been expressed. To this date, little has been written from the standpoint of the Buddhist teachings. I will attempt in this paper to present Buddhist aspects of the abortion issue. First will be a more traditional discussion based on standard teachings within Mahayana Buddhist scripture and commentary. To my knowledge there are no specific teachings per se within the voluminous Buddhist scriptures and commentaries on abortion, so that one must extrapolate from ethical and cosmological positions implicit within them. Following this discussion, I will undertake a short examination of the political implications of the abortion issue from the Buddhist perspective.

Within this paper I have drawn mainly from Tibetan Buddhist sources for two main reasons. First, there now exists a substantial body of works translated into English, available for a general audience. Second, Tibetan works, especially those of the Gelugpa sect, are known for their scholarly and philosophical clarity. It is a commonly held misconception that Tibetan Buddhism is an unusual form of Buddhism off of the mainstream. Most Buddhist scholars now accept that Tibetan Buddhism is solidly based on traditional Mahayana Buddhist teachings and its main difference is in the cultural expression, not in substance.

As with all religious traditions, there are varying opinions amongst Buddhists, especially Western Buddhists, concerning abortion. Abortion is widely performed in some countries in which Buddhism is influential, such as Japan and South Korea. In other Buddhist countries, such as Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Burma abortion is more restricted. There seems to be a trend toward in-
creased abortion practices directly related to increased industrialization and movement away from traditional values.

The writings of Western proponents of Buddhism vary on the topic of abortion. Robert Aitken, a teacher of the Japanese Zen tradition, focuses on the woman's dilemma but is unclear on the ethical issues. Roshi Philip Kapleau, also a teacher of the Japanese Zen tradition, states that "abortion is a grave matter." However, he goes on to say, "There is no absolute right or wrong, no clear-cut solution." A more clear stance has been taken by the Buddhist Churches of America, a Japanese Shin Buddhist sect. In a recent position paper on abortion, they state that "abortion, the taking of a human life, is fundamentally wrong and must be rejected by Buddhists."

Key to the arguments in the abortion debate is the central question of when human life begins. The answer to this question has many times been obscured by the introduction of such concepts as viability or functionality of a central nervous system. Buddhist teachings are explicit as to when human life begins. This is in clear contradistinction to the following comment published from a symposium on the abortion issue, "... although Buddhism, the predominant religion, condemns 'killing of life,' it defines the commencement of life rather loosely." Buddhist teaching holds that human life starts at conception.

From the moment of conception on, the embryo is already a human being. The cornerstone of Buddhist cosmology is a belief in rebirth. All sentient beings constantly undergo the cycle of birth-death-rebirth and have done so from beginningless time. They will do so through the foreseeable future until ended by the realization of enlightenment, the goal of Buddhism. Between consecutive lives, one's mental continuum passes through an intermediate state, known in the Tibetan tradition as the Bardo. The following passage describes the emergence from the intermediate state to a new rebirth.

After that, these drops of semen and blood, which definitely do emerge from both male and female, are mixed in the mother's womb. The consciousness of the dying intermediate being enters into the middle of this...

Thus, the mental continuum enters at the moment of conception and consequently the embryo is felt to be fully human. As opposed to the current materialistic viewpoint of consciousness as dependent upon the central nervous system for its existence, Buddhism teaches that this is not the case. Consciousness exists prior to the physical form. Therefore, arguments based on either development or functionality of a central nervous system as a basis for defining human life are not acceptable. This does not deny that there is a qualitative difference in the functionality of a fetus as it grows, but this carries no moral weight in argumentation concerning abortion. Consciousness is a whole, and its expression, not its development, follows along with the increasing complexity of the fetus.

It is quite difficult to defend logically any position that argues that one be-