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Death With Honor: Rethinking Euthanasia Beyond Ethics Through Zen And Pure Land Buddhism

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***Death With Honor: Rethinking Euthanasia Beyond Ethics
Through Zen And Pure Land Buddhism***

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Prologue

The lifelong struggle of coping with the inevitability of death is one thing that connects all of us as human beings. In most cases, the thought of our own death, or that of our loved ones, immediately evokes the feelings of anxiety, fear, hopelessness or sadness. What does this mean to us from a philosophical perspective? Let us briefly look at how fear and death mingle. Most of us would by default claim they fear death, which is why a psychologically healthy person lives with respective carefulness, straying away from activities and situations that endanger their life. Even those who do not normally think fearfully of death would experience this innate fear in a sudden dangerous life-or-death situation. However, is this fear based on reason? Death is a necessary final moment of every single life. Is it rational to fear something that we inevitably cannot avoid? Fear serves us as a warning alarm in order for us to avoid something that has the potential of harming us. Now death can on the one hand be viewed as the ultimate harm, or on the other as no harm at all, since harm is tied to life and therefore it is something one has to keep on living to suffer from. I think neither of these assumptions is incorrect.

For fear to be rational, it must be of something that we are somehow able to avoid. If something is inevitable, like death, we have no reason to fear it because the warning that fear gives us is futile. This means that the fear of a premature or unnatural death, for instance by an accident, shall be considered rational, because it warns us to not cross the road on a red light as it just might kill us. However, the fear of death in general is not rational since we cannot escape it. Rather, it is an instinctive fear. A fear that we acquire inherently alongside our very own will. This fear is a result of our awareness that this life is the only set of experiences we will ever know, and therefore we cling to it as an affirmation of our existence.

Let me ask again: What does all this mean philosophically? In philosophical exchange, the currency of highest value is reason. Therefore, instinctive feelings regarding death would appear inferior to reason. However, Socrates, right before facing death himself, deemed philosophy as the practice of death, as it prepares one for the bodiless life of the eternal soul that is free from attachments.¹ This claim implies that the abstract reasoning included in philosophising, applies only to life and not to death. And

¹ Plato, *Phaedo*, 47.

since it is the “practice of death”, it also implies that its ultimate goal is to free ourselves from attachments in preparation for death in order to ensure the soul’s pleasant eternal existence after it detaches from the body. Therefore, it is not that our intrinsic thoughts and feelings about death are necessarily inferior to reason if they are not based on it. Rather, they are, as death itself is, beyond reason. Facing imminent death with valor would mean dissolving the duality between our will and instincts and transcending beyond our modes of knowing which are conditioned by reason, entering the realm of death in an exercise of ultimate freedom.

Introduction

In this paper I will examine certain views of death of a nation in which its people had been consciously facing death with valor for centuries. The nation in question is Japan. Since its periods of warrior-dominated history, the Japanese views of death have evolved under a number of influences, which resulted in rather unclear, heterogenous, and still-evolving standpoints. I am interested in how these standpoints correspond to Japanese terminal care, especially in cases of euthanasia. As I want to focus on discussing “conscious” or “unnatural” death, this topic will bring me to the ethical discussion of euthanasia and “death with dignity” within the Japanese philosophical paradigm. Both of these concepts are closely tied with suicide, and could arguable in some cases be regarded as ritual suicide.

Such an approach to this paper was inspired by the fact that at some point, ritual suicide was a relatively long-standing customary practice in the Japanese society. Here I am referring to the concept of *seppuku*, or *hara-kiri*, a well known notion of suicide amongst the samurai class in the late medieval and early modern period. Though it can be argued upon how common this practice truly was in various periods, the fact still remains that during those times, such an act was not exactly unusual to the citizens.

Of course, in today’s time such an act is unthinkable in the widespread society, and any unfortunate instance of suicide is viewed as a shocking tragedy. Nevertheless, a different kind of ritual suicide has been developed, namely euthanasia, which to this day remains a controversial topic everywhere in the world, with no clear-cut solutions or a single correct approach towards it. However, there is no doubt that the procedure of euthanasia presents a glimmer of hope for great relief to many people who suffer from

diseases which are unimaginable to an average healthy person. Therefore, it is very important to lead continuous critical discussions from various standpoints toward this matter. Though we might never arrive at one explicitly best solution, this way we will be able to find such paths which are ethically acceptable, lawful and also present the highest possible rate of individual and common well-being, which unfortunately may not always necessarily lead to the prolonging of an individual's life at all cost.

The two main perspectives from which I will discuss the attitude toward death and euthanasia are two Buddhist schools which are the most prominent in Japan, the Pure Land school and Zen. We will see that among the various indigenous and foreign cultural and religious influences, which the Japanese collective mentality consists of, Buddhism and Shintoism have the greatest spiritual significance. Out of the two, Buddhism actually has the most to say about death in a coherent philosophical manner, whereas Shintoism can be summed up as a collection of myths and legends about higher spiritual deities. What is interesting about the Buddhist treatments of death is that they do not always argue on the grounds of such mainstream ethical principles that we would expect. However, since euthanasia is quite a complex issue which requires much discussion from various perspectives, it cannot hurt to at least try to treat it in such a “non-ethical” manner, so to say, if that just might be what will invite new ideas and perhaps even propose acceptable solutions.

Chapter 1: Euthanasia in Japan

Contemporary discourse on euthanasia is often embedded within Western ethical paradigms, which are dominated by principles such as autonomy, beneficence, justice etc. These frameworks tend to universalise ethical dilemmas in treating them as questions to be resolved by coherent moral theory. This paper sets out to challenge that orientation. By shifting the focus to Japanese philosophical and religious traditions, especially Zen and Pure Land Buddhism, this study seeks to explore alternative modes of approaching death and euthanasia. This opening chapter provides the structural foundation by categorizing different forms of euthanasia in the Japanese medical and legal context. Beyond mere classification, the aim is to foreground the tension between

institutionalized ethical models in the medical field and the cultural and spiritual assumptions regarding life, death and suffering.

The discussion on attitudes toward death and euthanasia will naturally lead to questions which belong to the domain of bioethics. Bioethics is a philosophical discipline that has been on the rise as a consequence of the rapid evolution in both medical science and life-supporting technologies, as they gradually raise new questions for which there were previously no grounds for. It is concerned with discussing the best possible approaches and perspectives to the issues of euthanasia, suicide, brain death, organ transplantation, terminal health care and so on. Since I will not only be talking about the Japanese attitude toward death in general, but I will primarily focus on how it applies to the dilemma of voluntary and involuntary death in the case of a terminal illness, this essay too will in this sense partly have a bioethical character. This chapter shall therefore serve as a brief introductory overview of euthanasia as it is currently perceived in Japan, along with its categorization and the problems which it raises.

The general conception of euthanasia in Japan is one of denial, as the Japanese society does not accept its existence. Instead of being an option among medical practices, it is mostly perceived as no different from homicide. This is also partly because there are no official guidelines or specific provisions for euthanasia, and it is largely left to legal interpretation by literature and judicial precedents.² The Japanese, however, have developed a new term, “death with dignity”, which actually corresponds to the idea of euthanasia as it expresses the preference of dying to futile medical treatment. As a result, the discussion, with regards to life-supporting technologies and assisted suicide, has been divided into these two categories.³

Euthanasia is generally perceived in two main methodological types by the populous, namely active and passive euthanasia. Being a quite sensitive topic in Japan, it has actually been classified in five main categories. However, no official definition of euthanasia which encompasses all its aspects is yet known. That is why we encounter various authors often laying down their own interpretations. These interpreted definitions may differ in details, but in the end they resemble the same idea. As an example, here is one such definition by Katsunori: “An act to relieve or remove an acute physician pain of the patient, whose death is imminent, on his/her sincere request, and

² Katsunori, *Euthanasia and Death with Dignity*, 1.

³ Katsunori, *Euthanasia and Death with Dignity*, 2-3.

to make the patient meet his/her own peaceful death.”⁴ Despite slight potential differences, the fundamental requirements for euthanasia remain the same across all definitions. They are the presence of immense physician pain, the imminence of a death, and the sincere and conscious request of the patient, and also that all measures to alleviate the pain have been exhausted.⁵ The last requirement shall actually prove to be an important point later in the discussion of Buddhism. Let us now look at the five categories into which euthanasia is divided in Japan. These do not include mercy killing or the aforementioned death with dignity.

The first type is pure euthanasia, in which only the patient’s pain is treated medically, but the treatment does not shorten his natural life span. It is basically a sort of palliative care which aims at lessening the pain but has no effect on when the patient dies. This method is lawful in Japan since it does not bring about an earlier death. That is also why I am having a difficult time considering this to be a type of euthanasia. If I were to lay down my own interpreted definition of euthanasia, a key element of it would be the premature termination of life. Since all life will at some point end anyway, regardless of the presence of a disease, there is no point in considering a treatment of pain without shortening the natural span of life to be a type of euthanasia.

Granted, the primary purpose of euthanasia is indeed the elimination of suffering and not the termination of life. However, in my eyes, for a practice to be considered euthanasia, steps toward an earlier death in order to eliminate suffering must be taken. If not, then any instance of treating physical pain while not disturbing the natural course of life could be taken as euthanasia. Of course one could argue that in contrast to pure euthanasia, the aim of regular medical treatment is not only to eliminate suffering but first and foremost to prolong life if the disease in question is potentially fatal. But since we are discussing such a sensitive topic, I think it appropriate to draw the line a bit sharper and reserve the discussion for such instances of medical treatment in which the way to eliminate suffering leads through the premature termination of life.

The next category is indirect euthanasia. This is a case in which the administration of a pain-relieving drug incidentally results in an earlier death of the patient. Though the reasons for justification of this category apparently vary, it is still also lawful in Japan.

⁴ Katsunori, *Euthanasia and Death with Dignity*, 2.

⁵ Kawada, *Medical Ethics and Buddhism*, 60.

With the third category, namely active euthanasia, we begin entering the domain of discussion around which this paper shall be centered. Active euthanasia signifies the doctor's administration of a lethal drug with the purpose of eliminating physical pain, ultimately resulting in the patient's death. On one hand, this is done in compliance with the patient's conscious request. On the other hand, it is undeniable that in this way the doctor participates in the active killing of the patient. Though this is perhaps the most controversial method, it has nevertheless also been considered the most typical euthanasia. It is still being discussed whether this act can be considered excusable if deemed unlawful.

The fourth category consists of passive euthanasia, which arguably appeals the most to the compliance with the law. Here the doctor does not perform life-sustaining measures upon the sincere request of the patient. The patient's willful refusal to undergo treatment and receive medication must be accepted by the doctors, who have no right to force a patient to act otherwise. Since I have already expressed my opinion on the matter of pure euthanasia, which at first glance might seem like the opposite side of the coin to passive euthanasia, I should also briefly address this type.

The issue I had with pure euthanasia is that the elimination of suffering does not affect the patient's life span. As for passive euthanasia, however, it does not so much matter whether the treatment aims at merely lessening physical pain or actually prolonging life. Though no active steps were taken toward the early termination of life, it is nevertheless the patient's conscious choice to withdraw the treatment, since he feels that it would bring about the least amount of suffering. That is, for instance, if the treatment is futile in terms of lessening pain and prolonging life, or if the patient feels that the suffering he goes through during the treatment simply does not outweigh the prolonging of his life. Naturally, in the case of a fatal disease, his life will likely end earlier than it would if he were healthy. As its name suggests, the passive non-action of this type of euthanasia is actually the decisive factor in the elimination of suffering as well as shortening the life span. Therefore, in contrast to pure euthanasia, I have no issue considering this category to be a type of euthanasia. In fact, passive euthanasia might actually prove the most significant, both historically and argumentatively, as we will see later in the discussion of Buddhist standpoints.

The final category of euthanasia in Japan is the physician assisted suicide. This is a relatively new method in which the doctor provides a lethal drug or a "suicide machine",

which the patient is able to freely activate and this way initiate his own death. Here the physician merely plays a role of a provider, and the act of killing oneself is all in the hands of the patient. However, this category, along with active euthanasia, is probably the most problematic.

On one hand it may seem the most ethical to many for two reasons. One, the only person participating in the killing of the terminally ill patient is the patient himself. The patient decides for himself that even with the treatment, the pain is unbearable and that they are not willing to live any longer with it. Such decisions, if done in what can be considered as a clear conscience, I argue, shall be respected. Just as they alone make the decision, they alone will act upon it. The second reason is that this method provides a clear and professionally controlled setting, considering it is for such a grim act as suicide. This way it might prove much more mentally bearable for the patient's close relatives and the patient himself.

On the other hand, it is clearly stated in the Japanese Criminal Code (Article 202), that aiding in suicide is punishable by law, and the situation in question does not provide enough justification for it.⁶ This renders the physician assisted suicide unlawful in Japan.

On the other side of the discussion, opposite to euthanasia, lies the aforementioned relatively young notion of death with dignity. Though similarly as with euthanasia, there is no clear and official definition of death with dignity in Japan, there appear to be a number of ways to view it. One interpretation that I have encountered is the notion of natural death, a refusal of the patient to artificially prolong his life via medical treatment and technology.⁷ Another interpretation that I came across consists of the decision making whether or not to extend the life of a patient, who seems to have "lost their dignity as a human being" by, for instance, falling into and remaining in a vegetative state.⁸

This method closely resembles passive euthanasia, but it draws a sharp distinction in that in passive euthanasia, the decision to refuse life-extending treatment lies exclusively within the capacity of the patient's "healthy" consciousness. This presents us with the first problem of death with dignity, namely that due to the disease the patient

⁶ Katsunori, *Euthanasia and Death with Dignity*, 3.

⁷ Katsunori, *Euthanasia and Death with Dignity*, 3.

⁸ Kawada, *Medical Ethics and Buddhism*, 60.

may lose consciousness or the ability to express either his pain or his resolve, and therefore cannot make an explicit decision by himself. Here the second issue arises. As the patient loses his ability to communicate his thoughts and experience, the decision about whether or not to extend the patient's life falls into the hands of either the doctor or the patient's close relatives. Therefore, the opinion of the person who is concerned with the situation the most either becomes unclear or is completely lost, which in a question of life or death is incredibly problematic.

As this chapter has shown, the classification of euthanasia into the aforementioned five categories reflects the legal and biomedical framework that is shaped by Western ethical concerns. Yet in Japan, where religious and philosophical traditions have historically viewed death also as an existential transition, such categorization may in some cases obscure more than they clarify. Euthanasia in Japan exists in a liminal space, as it is not fully permitted but also not fully condemned. This suggests a deeper ambivalence grounded in cultural and spiritual attitudes toward death. This unresolved space, as we will see, is where Buddhist thought enters. The next chapter explores how various traditions influence the Japanese attitude toward death, with the main focus on two most prominent schools of Buddhism. It will appear that these schools do not frame death as an ethical dilemma, but as a mere stage in the continuity of life, and potentially even as a moment of enlightenment. Retaining the Buddhist ideologies as the basis for our treatment will pose the question whether euthanasia necessarily needs to be addressed exclusively within the conventional "ethical" framework.

Chapter 2: Religious and Cultural Implications in the Japanese View of Death

To understand how euthanasia is approached in Japan, one must understand how death is viewed. This chapter investigates the philosophical and religious landscape, where Buddhism especially offers frameworks that fundamentally diverge from Western ethical doctrines. Rather than treating life as sacrosanct or grounding moral value in rational autonomy, these traditions engage with death through the lenses of impermanence, no-self and spiritual continuity. Drawing on sources such as Suzuki's Zen philosophy and Shinran's Pure Land theology, the chapter outlines how these schools shape attitudes

toward death in ways that resist standard bioethical categorization. The goal is to position these views not as cultural curiosities, but as viable philosophical alternatives.

It is quite ironic that though Japan is one of the countries with the most significant homogenous societies in terms of shared ethnicity and culture etc., there are dimensions in which the Japanese people branch out into heterogeneous groups. One such dimension that is relevant for this paper is the Japanese way of viewing death. This is so due to the fact that Japan is heavily influenced by a number of various religious and philosophical disciplines and cultural ideologies, each of which varies in its attitude toward death. It is an unfortunate reality, however, that this situation results in a lack of fundamental principles in terminal care, as the doctors, patients, nurses and the patient's families are split in their ethical standpoints on dying with dignity. The scope of the issue is further widened by the lack of legal guidelines for euthanasia and other matters concerning terminal care. Another aspect which complicates the matter is the activity of mainstream media in Japan, which tends to demonize the doctor's willingness to perform euthanasia.⁹ In this chapter, I will examine the attitudes of the representatives of various religious and cultural categories toward dying in general, as well as toward different types of euthanasia, and the implications that these attitudes have on the state of Japanese terminal care.

According to Shigeaki Hinohara, Japanese society is divided into four main categories of thought and ideology, which have a great impact on the questions at hand.¹⁰ Their native culture is mainly rooted in Shintoism. This ancient religion dates back at least to 1000 B.C.E. and it consists of many supernatural spiritual deities, called *kami*, without a singular supreme being. It advocates for a permanent flow of natural energy from which spirits, deities and phenomena are able to manifest. The shintoists believe in the immortality of the soul, and therefore regard ancestral worship highly. In Shintoism, death is viewed as something very unclean, due to the simple reason that the body is left to rot away after the vital energy of the soul leaves. Partly because of this, the topic of death is taboo, and the close relatives of a deceased person undergo thorough cleansing, and avoid interaction with others so that they do not get "dirty" off them.¹¹

⁹ Tanida, *Implications of Japanese Religious Views toward Life and Death in Medicine*.

¹⁰ Hinohara, *Facing Death the Japanese Way*, 145.

¹¹ Hinohara, *Facing Death the Japanese Way*, 145-146.

Besides their native religion, the Japanese mentality is formed by the following major foreign influences. Confucianism as well as Taoism from China, Buddhism from India, and Christianity from the Western world. Except for Christianity which mostly has its position in other aspects of Japanese culture, each of these plays their own part in forming various standpoints toward death.¹²

Confucianism holds as its supreme values filial piety and social harmony, emphasizing human relationships, loyalty, and collective benefit over individuals. As family is held as the fundamental unit of society, such decision making regarding euthanasia is approached as a family matter rather than as an individual choice. Therefore with regards to euthanasia, it seems that it is open to the interpretation of individual families with Confucian ideals, whether they consider the euthanasia of a family member to be the most beneficial for the family, or whether it would impose a greater collective suffering. Regardless, however, of the conclusion of this decision making, the fact remains that such an approach rids the individual of autonomy as collective choice is prioritized.¹³ The notion of filial piety also encompasses care and respect for one's elders. This may lead to the young members being reluctant toward the idea of their elders being euthanized because it could make them seem unfilial which would be disgraceful not just to them but to the entire family.

Another dimension in which Confucianism places high value is the perseverance of life on one hand and natural death on the other. The idea of natural death differs across philosophical and religious disciplines, but in this sense it means not rushing to death, not taking a life whether it is one's own or another's. This standpoint is also referred to as "the Way of the Sages", such as Confucius and Mencius, and it urges not resorting to reckless action, to which murder and suicide belong.¹⁴ Therefore, in the Confucian sense, medicine is highly regarded as "the art of humaneness" that endorses the opposition toward euthanasia, which is viewed as unnatural.¹⁵

From the perspective of societal structuring, Confucianism puts great emphasis on one's loyalty and duties to their emperor and state. Such a notion of loyalty is actually what stirs the Confucian standpoint toward suicide, as it quite heavily influenced the

¹² Hinohara, *Facing Death the Japanese Way*, 145.

¹³ Chen, *Legislating the Right-to-Die with Dignity*, 489-493.

¹⁴ Hurst, *Death, Honor, and Loyalty: The Bushidō Ideal*, 522.

¹⁵ Nabeshima, Takimoto, *Disparity in Attitudes Regarding Assisted Dying*.

warrior's code of ethics that is known as *bushido*. At some point, it was acceptable and even required from the samurai to perform *seppuku* in certain situations, and it was partly due to the Confucian ideology. It was a sign of their undying devotion to their lord, and for practical matters it meant that the fallen warrior could not be captured and tortured for information anymore. However, in a time of prolonged peace during the Tokugawa period, the samurai were gradually becoming more of a moral symbol for the working class, than active military power.¹⁶ As a result of this, many warriors who from an early age had only known training both in combat and in the appropriate ethical code, were left to never further realize their purpose in life. Many longed to at least be able to die a warrior's death by committing *seppuku* (*junshi*) upon their lord's death in order to follow them. That is where the Neo-Confucianists argued against such practices on the grounds of not resorting to reckless action. Under such influence, the samurai were not permitted by their lords to follow them in death.

In the present time, the distinction of euthanasia plays a crucial role in discerning the Confucian standpoint toward the idea. From what has been already established, in the case of passive euthanasia, in which the patient decides to withhold life-sustaining treatment, the Confucianists may be more accepting. Especially if that is supported by the collective wishes of the family. However, active euthanasia in which the patient's life is deliberately terminated, would be by a Confucianist viewed as unnatural death, and therefore this idea is generally unacceptable.

The Great Influence of Buddhism

Perhaps the most dominant spiritual influence of Japanese society, besides the native Shintoism, comes from Buddhism. As influential as Confucianism is to the Japanese people, it mostly provides ethical principles and imperatives. It endorses societal harmony and hierarchical duty, but it is not so much concerned with higher existence in the spiritual sense. Cultivating the self in Confucianism is associated with properly fulfilling one's function in a social group. Therefore a proper death among Confucianists is, for one, a natural death, and for two that which comes after a filially pious life and causes the least possible suffering to the members of the family and is in no way

¹⁶ Hurst, *Death, Honor, and Loyalty: The Bushidō Ideal*, 521.

disgraceful. It is, however, not so much concerned with the spiritual aspect of death, such as the path to heaven or hell as in Christianity, or rebirth in Buddhism.

The spiritual value of death is associated with the belief that the life of the soul does not end at death, and that there is something more waiting for us after we die. For Confucianists in this sense it seems that what comes after one's death are consequences only for the living. An honorable death is rewarded by the fact that one's social group remembers the deceased individual as having lived a prosperous life. It consists of the impression that the dead have left on the living. But it does not seem so much in Confucianism than in the other categories, that the soul as such merits from a prosperous life after death.

This is one of the reasons why Buddhism presents a dominant spiritual refuge with regards to life and death, from which the Japanese inherited the idea of transmigration and rebirth.¹⁷ Hinohara points out two main schools of Buddhism which differ in their approach to death and rebirth. One such school is referred to as the Pure Land tradition, the retainers of which believe in the ritual practice involving the chanting of Buddha's name. By the practice of chanting, the believers wish, for themselves as well as for others, for the rebirth in the Pure Land after death.¹⁸ The Pure Land refers to the world in which all creatures are on the path to achieve buddhahood. A world from which all suffering has been eliminated and it therefore offers the ideal conditions for attaining enlightenment. Such is the equivalent of paradise in this particular tradition.

The other Buddhist school, which has been developed in Japan, is Zen. In Zen Buddhism, meditative practice is central to achieving enlightenment. When enlightenment is achieved, the believers attain such perspectives which altogether transcend the worldly ideas of life and death.¹⁹

On the one hand, the Pure Land tradition tends to emphasize the continuity of life after death, while the Zen tradition on the other hand tends to stress the importance of the timing and manner of death. However, both of these ideas are together deeply rooted in the consciousness of Japanese people.²⁰

¹⁷ Hinohara, *Facing Death the Japanese Way*, 147.

¹⁸ Hinohara, *Facing Death the Japanese Way*, 147.

¹⁹ Hinohara, *Facing Death the Japanese Way*, 147.

²⁰ Becker, *Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia*, 548.

Not only is Buddhism in general of great spiritual value to people, it is even acknowledged throughout Asia that Buddhism has the most to say about death and the afterlife among other religions. In comparison to the Western world, Japan is argued to have a more sensitive standpoint toward the dying process.²¹ Due to the fact that great emphasis is put on the inevitability of death in Buddhist teachings, its believers and practitioners are often mentally prepared to face death with calmness and dignity.²² The importance of such a mental state at the moment of dying has long been recognized by Buddhist traditions.²³ Let us now look at how such an attitude impacts the Buddhist view of euthanasia.

Though euthanasia is in general not permissible under the Buddhist premises since any act of killing is not allowed, it still remains a special case, due to the specific medical setting, even among Buddhists. Another reason why the standpoints toward euthanasia might vary between schools and individuals is because there is no term for such an act in the early Buddhist context.²⁴ Therefore, we cannot know how exactly euthanasia, in the contemporary medical sense, would be treated by scripture, and so it is to a certain degree open to interpretation. However, as there were active medical practitioners among monks, there were situations in which the value of life had to be reexamined due to the immense suffering of the monks who were treated for illness. Some of these are recorded in the Monastic Rule, a composition of literature the purpose of which is to outline the regulations for monastic life.²⁵ On the one hand there were cases of deaths associated with medical intervention by another monk. Therefore, we can see that even in earlier times, there were circumstances under which death was considered preferable to terminal care which likely prolonged the immense suffering or intensified it. On the other hand, there were even cases in which monks had either taken their own life, or asked another to kill them after developing great disgust toward their own bodies.²⁶

These were circumstances to which the Buddha had to react by expanding his prohibition on destroying a life and included the crime of encouraging death.

²¹ Becker, *Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia*, 546-547.

²² Keown, *End of Life: The Buddhist View*, 952.

²³ Becker, *Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia*, 547.

²⁴ Keown, *End of Life: The Buddhist View*, 952-953.

²⁵ Keown, *End of Life: The Buddhist View*, 953.

²⁶ Keown, *End of Life: The Buddhist View*, 953.

“Should any monk intentionally deprive a human being of life, or look about for a knife-bringer [to help him end his life], or eulogise death, or incite [anyone] to death saying ‘My good man, what need have you of this evil, difficult life? Death would be better for you than life,’— or who should deliberately and purposefully in various ways eulogise death or incite [anyone] to death: he is also one who is defeated [in the religious life], he is not in communion.” (Vinaya, volume 3, p72)²⁷

Since this statement addresses the preference of death to a cruel life, a premise under which the idea of euthanasia operates, it therefore seems to directly prohibit both the assistance in suicide and euthanasia. However, as we will see in the following passage, there are some special exceptions which open new ways to go about it.

One of the key terms for benevolence toward euthanasia in general is compassion. Compassion is a highly regarded, central moral value in Buddhism. Upon witnessing the increasing suffering of an ill patient, it also provokes the question whether such circumstances could actually eat away at the value of life, and whether death would be preferable in such a case. Despite the position it has in Buddhist ethics, it is also one of the main grounds on which euthanasia is being argued for. Does therefore, for the Buddhists, compassion provide acceptable reasoning for euthanasia? The answer to this is a bit more complicated than a clear “yes” or “no”, but it is closely tied with the intent behind the act.

This issue is addressed by Buddhaghosa. According to him, those who merely suggested, out of compassion, to an ill monk that in his state death seems preferable to life, even though they did not directly destroy his life, are guilty of breaching the Buddha’s precept. Despite this being done with benevolent motive, the suggestion was aimed at death, which is the problem that Buddhaghosa points out.²⁸ This also goes for the patient himself. If he rejects medical treatment and food on the grounds that his suffering is unbearable and wishes to die to break free from it, he is committing an offense. However, if a patient rejects food and further treatment after it is clear that no methods of treatment seem to better his state, and upon seeing that other monks are exhausted from caring for him and frustrated from the results, it is viewed, according to Buddhaghosa, as accepting the inevitability of death.²⁹

²⁷ Keown, *End of Life: The Buddhist View*, 953.

²⁸ Keown, *End of Life: The Buddhist View*, 953-954.

²⁹ Keown, *End of Life: The Buddhist View*, 954.

That is where Buddhaghosa draws a distinction. One patient wants to reject his treatment with the purpose of dying, and the other wants to live, but recognizes that forcing to prolong his life is pointless and accepts death. The latter option is permissible. We can also observe here, how compassion changes its direction and comes from the patient toward those who care for him, rather than the other way around as in the first case. A medical practitioner who is steadily curing his patient struggles, but one who treats his patient without any positive results truly suffers. Such seems to be the suffering worthy of the patient's compassion, which in my opinion aids in the permissibility of resigning to death on the grounds of futile treatment. Therefore, the notion of compassion is not as significant, for the Buddhists in this case, when it is aimed from the physician toward the suffering patient, as when it is the other way around. A compassion felt by the suffering patient for the people around him. If that is combined not with the aim to die, but with the realization that though the desire to live is present, life cannot be prolonged beyond its natural course, then resigning yourself to death by not fueling your being further is permissible in the context of the Theravada Buddhist school which Buddhaghosa represented.

From the examples in the previous passage we are able to assess a general standpoint toward euthanasia, as well as murder and suicide for that matter, among Buddhist schools. However, if we turn specifically to the Japanese paradigm, we might perhaps discover some new perspectives on the issues at hand. The Japanese consciousness with regards to death consists of the combination of two ideas. Namely, that life is continuous as death is no end to life, but rather a transition between the previous life and the next, and that the time and the manner of dying are of great importance.³⁰ In this passage, I want to look at how it is possible to bend the general Buddhist attitude toward suicide, which states that it is not permissible.

The key points to this discussion have already been hinted on in the previous passage, and they are all associated with the state of the mind and the purpose behind the action. Since death is not conceived of as the end of life, suicide does not bring about an escape from anything. The circumstances into which one is reborn should be associated with their karmic record. However, the Buddha noticed that sometimes a person with bad karma is born into pleasant conditions, while others with good karma

³⁰ Becker, *Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia*, 548.

would be reborn into bad ones. Therefore, he had to declare that the nature of consciousness at the moment of death is a crucial variable for rebirth.³¹ Due to this declaration, Buddhism emphasizes holding “proper” thoughts at the moment of death. Now one might ask what is meant by proper thoughts, and as it is described in various sources, I understand it not to be thoughts but rather a certain attitude of the mind.

Though suicide is regarded as an inappropriate action, there nevertheless have apparently been instances in which the act was accepted and even praised by the Buddha. Such were the suicides of Vakkali and Channa, as they experienced sickness which brought about irresistible pain. Their terminal states, however, were not the ground for the Buddha’s praise. What the Buddha admired was that their minds were selfless, desireless and enlightened at the moment of death.³²

Previously it has been established that the destruction of life, one’s own or another’s, is not accepted in Buddhism. But now it is becoming apparent that the Buddhist standpoint has more layers to it. The Buddha did not criticize the morality of committing suicide in order to move on to the next world to begin with. This has to do with the fact that Buddhism has always recognized one’s own right to determine when they should move on from this existence to the next³³. Basically every person is free to regulate their own fate, and only they can decide, so to say, in what manner they shall be reborn. In the case of an undesiring mind which is indifferent toward life and death and at peace with itself even to the point of dying, it will achieve nirvana. If these are the circumstances under which a person commits suicide, it is accepted by the Buddha. If, however, a person kills himself with a mind that is eager to escape from some sort of suffering, he will simply be reborn and meet with suffering once again. This implies that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with committing suicide, as long as it is not done out of fear or anger etc. What takes priority in judging such an act is whether the mind is in harmony with itself, and whether the body lives or dies is secondary. Only when the mind is not in harmonious balance, and is overcome by desires of freeing itself from suffering, is suicide regarded as an unacceptable action.³⁴ It appears that this is viewed as the standard case of suicide, while the other “correct” way appears impossible to common people, and therefore it is in general not permitted.

³¹ Becker, *Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia*, 547.

³² Becker, *Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia*, 547.

³³ Becker, *Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia*, 547.

³⁴ Becker, *Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia*, 547.

As I have discussed, the general Buddhist attitude toward suicide is dependent on the mindset of the individual rather than the act itself. Such a conclusion should actually not come as a surprise, since it answers to one of the most prominent ideologies within Buddhist traditions, which is the consciousness-only doctrine of the Yogācāra school, which is derived from the Mahayana tradition. There the underlying idea is that reality is shaped by our consciousness, as it is a product of the constant transformation of the various layers of consciousness.³⁵ Accordingly, nothing besides consciousness has intrinsic existence and all things exist dependently on the mind. Therefore, the meaning of any action comes not from the action itself, but from the intention behind it, by which it is produced. This also holds for suicide, as the action by itself is empty of existence and is therefore not intrinsically wrong. However the state of the mind that is generally held during the act is not a correct one, which renders suicide in the general sense not permissible.

It has been established that in developing a certain attitude toward death, the Buddhist tradition is the most dominant element among the Japanese people. I have already gone through the general view of suicide and euthanasia within the Buddhist context. Previously I briefly described the two main Buddhist schools that are the most prominent in Japan, the Pure Land tradition and Zen. For what concerns this paper, the two differ in that one addresses the issue of death quite explicitly, building a coherent system upon the correct manner of dying, while the other does not focus on death as such because it views it as a sort of illusory part of our being. In the following sections, I will delve deeper into the philosophical insights of both schools, in order to better understand the influence they have on the approach to dying. As we will see, the Zen tradition and the Pure Land tradition are quite different in their ideas and values, but both will in their own way adhere to the previous arguments.

Zen and Death

Though destroying a life is not permitted in Buddhism, the Zen tradition seems to prioritize the adherence to the doctrine of emptiness to such moral virtues. This means that the underlying principle of Zen resides beyond the realms of morality, temporality, causality and relativity.³⁶ Here it is also noteworthy that in the past, samurai warriors

³⁵ Vasubandhu, *Thirty Verses*, 44.

³⁶ Suzuki, *Philosophy of Zen*, 7.

were mostly influenced by the principles of Zen Buddhism and Taoism, and yet it was not only accepted, but even required and glorified among the warrior class to destroy the lives of others as well as to kill oneself by performing *seppuku*. So we can see that by differentiating the individual schools, quite remarkable contradictions arise within the Buddhist tradition in general. Which begs the questions: What does Zen truly signify? And how does its significance apply in developing such a drastically different attitude toward dying? Let us do a closer examination to see whether answers to such questions can be found.

The difficulties for philosophical endeavor in Zen Buddhism lay in the seeming simplicity of the tradition. Though there is much wisdom in the Zen learning that is presented in such a poetical manner, there is little to no philosophical argumentation within the teachings. The problems already arise in the attempt to define Zen, as Zen is beyond conceptualization and it is actually what enables us to conceptualize.³⁷ It is said that Zen is life, that wherever there is life-activity, there is Zen.

“As long as we cannot imagine life being limited in any way, Zen is present in every one of our experiences, but this ought not to be understood as a kind of obscure immanentism. There is nothing hidden in Zen: all is manifest, and only the dim-eyed are barred from seeing it”³⁸

From this we can already infer what in my opinion is one of the most crucial points for this paper, that Zen is inseparably and closely associated with freedom. Almost as if saying that above all else, Zen is freedom.³⁹ Another apparent point in this quote that is worth noting, is the clear implication that the presence of Zen is conditioned by the understanding that death is nothing more than an illusion, as the imagined limitations to life must include death. Let us dive deeper to see why that is so.

As I touched upon earlier, Zen has been developed from a certain enlightenment experience which is best described by the doctrine of *śūnyatā*, or the doctrine of emptiness. Emptiness, in the general context of Buddhism, is not a negative term, though it may sound so. In fact, it is that which enables all existence. However, this is not to say that emptiness is an independent entity which is active in making existence possible or

³⁷ Suzuki, *Philosophy of Zen*, 3.

³⁸ Suzuki, *Philosophy of Zen*, 3.

³⁹ Suzuki, *Philosophy of Zen*, 8.

directly causes existence, like a notion of God. Emptiness is not a thing from which all other things originate. Rather it means that since nothing has a permanent and independent essence, things can arise, interact and pass. This idea is inherited from the Mahayana thought of dependent arising.

A metaphysical interpretation of emptiness as an independent entity that exists within all things or underlies reality is therefore incorrect. Rather, we ought to view emptiness as a description of the nature of things, that they are empty of inherent existence. It is not immanent in the sense of being contained in all things as a property, and it is not transcendent as if it were some divine force outside of the world. It is a way of understanding the lack of self-nature in all things and phenomena.

What can we infer from this with regards to attitudes toward death? Since there is no inherent being to begin with, death is not a transition from being to non-being. Therefore, the ethical principles derived from Zen Buddhism are not about preserving or destroying a self-natured entity, but rather about acting in harmony with the ever changing flow of reality.

Furthermore, emptiness is not something to be conceptualized or reasoned about. Instead it is to be experienced, meaning to be made aware of, however, in a unique manner.⁴⁰ Conventionally, we experience things in a subject-object relation, in which the subject is aware of something and the object is that of which the subject is aware of. This is not so in the experience of emptiness. In order to experience emptiness, according to Zen, we need to transcend this dichotomous dimension of the world, while still remaining in it.⁴¹ To be aware of emptiness, we must free our minds from clinging to concepts and reason. The experience of emptiness dissolves any dualities, and destroys all such distinctions as self and other, and even life and death. Only then are we able to perceive reality with a non-deluded pure mind in a non-conceptual awareness. Suzuki takes this a step further as he brings reason into concern.⁴² The question he poses is that how are we able to experience and talk about emptiness, if emptiness is its sole master in seeing and knowing itself. His answer is because we are emptiness as well, and because of it we are able to reason. Reason is a capacity of emptiness that is manifested through humans. Though we are able to reason because of emptiness, this also means that emptiness is beyond reason. He claims that while we are occupied with reasoning, which

⁴⁰ Suzuki, *Philosophy of Zen*, 5.

⁴¹ Suzuki, *Philosophy of Zen*, 5.

⁴² Suzuki, *Philosophy of Zen*, 6.

comes from emptiness, we are at the same time urged to move beyond reason, because emptiness seeks to see and know itself, but that cannot be reached through reason.

As duality and conceptuality is dissolved, death as well is not taken as a conceptual object or event anymore, and therefore it becomes resistant to abstract ethical reasoning. This means that no principles or rules can be imposed on it. Instead of viewing death as some separate event, it is now perceived as a mere part of an ongoing stream of impermanent reality. Several points are to be noted with regards to all this before we move on further. First is that, since we have rendered death as not an abstract problem, the decision making about death, according to Zen, should not be made on ethical grounds, but rather they should be inferred from a state of mindful presence.

The second point concerns the different attitudes toward active and passive euthanasia. According to what we have seen, neither one of these is inherently wrong in Zen Buddhism. That which decides the righteousness of either action is the state of the mind. Let us say that a terminally ill patient demands active euthanasia out of fear of pain or of unpleasant death. That which fears is the falsely perceived self or ego, which appears to be trying to take control over its imminent death. Due to this, the demand for euthanasia comes from a place of wanting to assert one's autonomy. This is in the Zen framework viewed as the incorrect way of perceiving things, which renders the act "wrong" so to say. Zen stresses an attitude of non-attachment, even to the self, and teaches the practitioner to let go of the self along with its fears and desires. From this position, one is able to accept death in peace as a natural transition within reality.

The third point is that Zen ethics is intuitive, as it does not arise from principles, but from attunement with nature. Moral clarity in dealing with the dying or death itself comes from mindful and compassionate presence, and not from universally applicable principles. Therefore, such an approach to euthanasia that is influenced by Zen would not be in explicit opposition or agreement with it. Rather, such things as awareness, intention and the degree of the self's clinging would be considered.

Pure Land and Death

The Pure Land tradition is another one of the most influential Buddhist traditions in Japan. In contrast to Zen which emphasizes direct experience and non-conceptual realization, the Pure Land tradition actually addresses death as a transitional event

which can possibly lead to a sort of heavenly rebirth that seems comparable to the Christian heaven at first glance. In this way, it is perhaps able to provide a better sense of salvation to people. The underlying ideas of Pure Land Buddhism are based in the multitude of celestial Buddhas throughout the cosmos, each one of them residing and operating within their respective dimensions, which are referred to as buddha-fields.⁴³ Buddha-fields are cosmic domains which are created and sustained by a fully awakened Buddha, and each of them represents the qualities and aspirations of their respective Buddha. Especially in the case of the Pure Land tradition, the buddha-field serves as a supportive realm for sentient beings to progress toward enlightenment. This buddha-field is referred to as the Pure Land and is the domain of Amida Buddha, the Buddha of infinite light and compassion.⁴⁴

One of the great differences from Zen is that the fundamental principles of the Pure Land tradition revolve around the faith in Amida Buddha. We can deduce from the previous paragraph that Pure Land Buddhism is similar to the Christian religion in the way that both offer an idea of rebirth in paradise. The Pure Land is not to be treated as a physical place, but rather as a spiritual ideal. It is a realm which, if achieved upon rebirth, offers ideal conditions for attaining enlightenment. There is no suffering and delusion in the Pure Land, and therefore sentient beings are able to freely progress toward their enlightenment. This also means that the rebirth in the Pure Land is not permanent and beings reborn in that state are expected to break away from the cycle of rebirth and eventually attain nirvana.⁴⁵ The Pure Land, as an intermediate stage between samsaric existence and nirvana, is actually more similar to the Christian idea of the purgatory than that of heaven, as it is a realm in which the souls of sinners must suffer to atone for their sins before being permitted entrance to heaven. That can be perceived as a realm of punishment, which is in contrast to the Pure Land being a manifestation of the Buddha's compassion for suffering beings.

I have previously touched upon the conditions for entering the Pure Land. If one wishes for such rebirth, they must completely submit to the higher will of Amida Buddha. In this way, the Pure Land tradition emphasizes the surrendering of individual autonomy to a higher power and retaining unconditioned faith in it. As Taitetsu Unno emphasizes, this act of surrender is not passive resignation but a transformative acknowledgment of

⁴³ Hirota, *Japanese Pure Land Philosophy*.

⁴⁴ Hirota, *Japanese Pure Land Philosophy*.

⁴⁵ Hirota, *Japanese Pure Land Philosophy*.

the limits of human effort.⁴⁶ Unno describes the Pure Land path as one of deep humility, where liberation is not attained through moral perfection or spiritual achievement but through entrusting oneself completely to Amida's vow. One of the 48 vows of Amida Buddha, through the power of which the realm of the Pure Land is manifested, is that whoever recites the *Nembutsu* upon their death and retains the image of Amida Buddha within a pure mind will be granted rebirth in the Pure Land.⁴⁷ This means that the person must utter "*Namu Amida Butsu*" with a sincere heart, which reflects their deep trust in a higher power and their reliance on it over the power of self-effort. Therefore, in the real-life experience of humans, the Pure Land has the following significance.

The one I will point out is the notion of faith. Faith is a thing on which a great many people rely on during their life paths. It is one thing to imagine oneself in contact with a higher power in a day to day manner, while praying in gratitude or for support in difficult times. But what is more important for this paper is the idea of faith when death is imminent. By adhering to higher power, one automatically acknowledges their limitations as a human being that is necessarily subjected to dying, and surrenders their soul to the guidance of something that transcends beyond death. Despite the fear of dying and leaving the world of the living forever, through faith one is able to remain hopeful that a realm where there is no suffering awaits him if he submits to a higher power, and is therefore able to die more peacefully. Though this is rare amongst Buddhist schools, the Pure Land tradition offers such faith to common people who are unable to devote themselves to monastic living and prioritize deep meditative practices. In this way, the Pure Land tradition is benevolent and recognizes that in the world we currently live in, moral perfection through such practices is unattainable for most people, and offers them a chance for heavenly rebirth despite that.

Such undistorted faith is rewarded with the infinite compassion of Amida Buddha. This is another significance which I want to point out, as this actually ties the Pure Land tradition with the idea of suicide. As one receives the Buddha's ultimate benevolence in exchange for complete faith, we will see that suicide is quite a significant matter in the Pure Land paradigm. There are a number of stories of common people and poor families committing collective suicide while chanting the name of Amida Buddha in hope to attain heavenly rebirth.⁴⁸ In such cases, it would seem unlikely that they were

⁴⁶ Unno, *River of Fire, River of Water*.

⁴⁷ Hirota, *Japanese Pure Land Philosophy*.

⁴⁸ Becker, *Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia*, 548.

allowed to be reborn in the Pure Land, as the acts were fueled by desire for a better future, and were therefore futile. This did not necessarily have to be so. In the Pure Land tradition, the decision making in whether someone will be granted heavenly rebirth or not does not so much depend on holding the “proper thoughts” at the moment of death. What is viewed as more important is the sincerity of heart with which one holds the image of Amida Buddha in their mind when dying. In contrast to other traditions, followers of the Pure Land commit suicide out of fear or desire, but if their faith in Amida Buddha is stronger, they shall be granted the heavenly rebirth. The Pure Land tradition therefore emphasizes prioritizing faith to all else, including fear, pain and desire which are secondary and do not necessarily cause one to remain in the samsaric cycle.

What is on the other hand similar with the Zen tradition, is that the result of such a strong faith includes disregarding one’s self-will. As we will see, it is not always the case that the faith in Amida Buddha is stronger than the self, and that there is a danger of deceiving one’s own self regarding the motive of their suicide.

In the monastic life, however, there was a peculiar concept of suicide by drowning in the river.⁴⁹ This was an act which was supervised by companions who held the other end of a rope which was tied to the drowning monk. This was done to assure the monk’s success of attaining heavenly rebirth. If he were to not retain a peaceful mind while drowning and showed even minor signs of struggle which indicated his clinging to life, the companions would use the rope to pull him out of the water to save him from an inappropriate death. If the monk retained an undisturbed mind during the drowning, his companions would let him die in peace.

Upon the death of Saint Ippen, one of the Buddhist masters who had fostered this ideology in Japan, six of his disciples committed suicide in hope to accompany him in the Pure Land. Ippen’s disciple and the second patriarch of the Ji School, Shinkyō, declared that the six have not reached the Pure Land in their rebirth, because their action was self-willed, and not relying on the power and will of Amida Buddha. Such assertion of one’s own will goes against the reliance on the higher power that is demanded by the Amida faith.⁵⁰

Becker discusses two important points which come from this ideology, one of which should prove very significant for this paper. Firstly he states that in Pure Land Buddhism, suicide in itself is not viewed as wrong by the Buddha. However, the default

⁴⁹ Becker, *Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia*, 549.

⁵⁰ Becker, *Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia*, 549.

state of mind, so to say, that people retain in their dying moments during suicide is considered to be a desirous one, in which the person wishes to free himself from suffering, or hopes to be reborn in a better situation. That according to Becker's view of the Pure Land tradition is what renders suicide wrong. In such a case when the person kills himself with an assured and calm mind, not clinging to anything, he attains enlightenment in his rebirth. As it seems, any means of successfully attaining enlightenment entail the rightness of the path taken, and therefore under such conditions suicide would be considered right.

The other, in my view, more important point in terms of the discussion at hand has been put forth by Ajisaka Nyudo, an aspirant of the Pure Land tradition who died by drowning himself in the Fuji river. He did so upon receiving advice from Saint Ippen, that the only way to reach the Pure Land is to die holding the Nembutsu, which is the name and figure of Amida Buddha, in his mind.⁵¹ His famous words "*Nagori o oshimuna*" criticize suicide out of sympathy when someone dies. However, more importantly, they signify that we should not cling to the remains which are left behind by a deceased person, such as the name etc., and we should let their spirit pass freely on to the next world.⁵² The saying is closely tied to the word "remain", and not only does it address the remains of a dead person and that the living should not cling to those, but it also stresses that those who remain in this world should not criticize the manner of death of the person who dies with an appropriate state of mind. The deaths of those who die with calmness and assurance in their mind are to be respected by those who remain living and not resented. This argument is very crucial for further discussion regarding the standpoint toward euthanasia.

While various strands of Japanese religiosity, such as Shinto, Confucianism or folk spirituality, have shaped popular attitudes toward death, it is Zen and Pure Land Buddhism that offer cohesive and philosophically grounded responses. As Carl Becker notes, these traditions emphasize the inner transformation of the dying subject rather than the moral justifiability of the act of dying. Zen emphasizes the clarity of non-attachment and presence, while Pure Land stresses the sincerity of faith and letting go of self-will. Neither one of them demands coherence with universal ethical principles, and both sidestep the logic of utilitarianism and deontology. Instead, they offer a vision

⁵¹ Becker, *Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia*, 549.

⁵² Becker, *Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia*, 549.

of death not as a problem to be solved, but as an opportunity for spiritual alignment. The next chapter will apply these insights to specific forms of euthanasia, challenging the fruitfulness and coherence of evaluating these issues from an ethical lens.

Chapter 3: Examining Japanese Categories of Euthanasia from Two Major Buddhist Standpoints

Building on the cultural and philosophical foundations established in the previous chapter, this chapter turns to the categories of euthanasia introduced in *Chapter 1* and reinterprets them from the framework of Zen and Pure Land Buddhism. The aim is not to weigh these practices against ethical principles, but to evaluate how Buddhist understandings of death and the self may offer a wholly different paradigm for thinking about end-of-life decisions. Both Zen and Pure Land reject the idea of a fixed self, and thus the notion of moral agency grounded in individual autonomy becomes destabilized. What replaces it is the focus on the quality of intention, the state of consciousness, and existential readiness with which one faces death. These schools suggest that euthanasia, if it is to be understood at all, should be approached not ethically, but spiritually and ontologically.

I have previously stated that the idea for this paper is rooted in the concept of *seppuku* and that at some point in time, it was a required and accepted practice. This idea should most definitely not be left out from the discussion on the Japanese view of death. *Seppuku* is a ritual suicide which mostly concerned the samurai warrior class but was also common within the premises of the nobles and criminals. To put it briefly, it signifies the preference of death to the loss of honor in life and failure in duty. This concept is complex enough in itself, and delving too deep into it would lead us astray from the discussion at hand. But it nevertheless should not be left out, as it provides very relevant insights into our topic.

The reason why it is so significant for this paper is that in a sense it is comparable to euthanasia. Though euthanasia as we perceive it in the present day did not exist during the times in which *seppuku* was considered a common practice, the similarities, despite the great difference between the situations in question, are very noteworthy. This realization is what inspired this paper in the first place. Becker actually goes on to

draw such a comparison between the two. My preliminary ideas were at first that the two are similar in the following ways. One, they both are each in their own sense a ritual suicide. And two, the purpose of both, again each in their own sense, is to retain the dignity of the concerned person and allow him to choose the time and manner of death and die with a sense of honor.

In his text, Becker adds two more similarities, and even labels *seppuku* as the “moral equivalent” of euthanasia for the samurai.⁵³ He states that the reason for a samurai’s suicide are to either avoid inevitable death at the hands of others, or to escape a longer period of unbearable pain or psychological misery, without being an active member of society. It appears that if we equate this to the present day, these are precisely the situations under which euthanasia is desired. Instead of facing inevitable death at the hands of enemies, one faces it at the hands of a deadly disease.

The reason why I bring this up is because this comparison is supportive of a certain approach that I want to propose with regards to a correct treatment of euthanasia. In short, it is an approach which is not derived from Western ethical principles. What *seppuku* and active euthanasia have in common is that they are not exactly rationally justifiable, for the simple reason that taking a life is not appropriate.

Seppuku is derived from a sense of duty and perhaps justice, both of which are dictated by those who are currently in power. That is why, throughout various periods in Japan, the practice shifted from an obligation to protect one’s honor and emperor to something impermissible and not aligned with the proper Way of the Sages. Both of these characters of *seppuku* have been dictated by the ones that ruled over the lands at their respective times.

Euthanasia is treated similarly, but with two major differences currently at hand. One, it is a very young concept that is still in its earliest stages. Therefore we cannot observe its evolution and the change of standpoints toward it over time as well as with *seppuku*, which at this point can be viewed as an “extinct” tradition. Instead of this, we are able to actually take part in creating the progress and history of euthanasia. And two, in contrast to *seppuku*, euthanasia is not exclusive to Japan. Quite on the contrary, it is a much more discussed topic in the Western world. Due to this, we are able to collect opinions on the matter globally in order to enrich the discussion and introduce various

⁵³ Becker, *Buddhist Views of Suicide and Euthanasia*, 550-554.

perspectives from different corners of the world, rather than just treating the problem within the borders of one nation. Since there already are countries in which euthanasia has been made lawful, and at the same time many others in which it is punishable, it is clear that there is no global consensus on the rightness and wrongness of euthanasia. Therefore, no country can claim the ultimately correct standpoint toward it. That being said, similarly as it was with *seppuku*, instead of concrete and objective principles, we have fluid opinions on euthanasia, which are subject to change according to whatever powerful organs are in charge and dictate its treatments all over the world.

Non-ethical Buddhist Treatment of Euthanasia

Let us now see how the individual categories of euthanasia in Japan would be theoretically treated by each of the two Buddhist schools. My aim in this chapter is to show that both Zen and Pure Land suggest a non-ethical orientation towards one's own death. They prioritize spiritual awareness and relational harmony over moral doctrines, as Zen advocates for transcending the ideas of life and death through meditation and the Pure Land urges one to devote themselves to faith to attain salvation. In contrast to these attitudes, the traditional Western bioethics tend to emphasize universal ethical principles such as autonomy and beneficence, which do not quite align with Buddhist principles and may therefore overcomplicate individual decisions within these paradigms.

Before I begin I want to clarify what I mean by a non-ethical standpoint. In the West at least, ethics is understood roughly as the strive for maximizing individual and societal well-being by means of certain principles which are derived from abstract reasoning. Such ethical principles are not necessarily concerned with either spirituality or religion. To put it simply, in Western ethics the decision making about rightness and wrongness of actions are based on how they either harm or benefit other beings, instead of what is so to say dictated by God in scripture as right or wrong. Therefore, with regards to euthanasia, it is incredibly difficult to derive universal principles from such ethical standpoints alone.

One reason is that, in any case, destroying the life of a human being is ultimately wrong, as it is perhaps considered as the most harm that one can inflict on another. Since it is such a serious matter, dealing with it becomes very problematic. The second reason is that there may occur multiple conflicting notions of wellbeing, since euthanasia

usually does not concern just one person. Other parties, such as family members and physicians might have a different perspective on the wellbeing of the patient, and they are also concerned with their own wellbeing. The third reason is that the potential cases of euthanasia are likely very distinct situations. Each euthanasia candidate is a unique person which faces death in their own way, and this also goes for their family members. Therefore the coping of both the patients and their families in each of the cases must be as diverse as humans themselves. Introducing universal ethical principles would mean to generalize the issue which would disregard the diversity of the individual states of mind.

This also appears to be a great issue in the overall terminal care of Japan. The general ethical conduct of physicians, in many cases if not in most, is to withhold the complete information about the patient's disease.⁵⁴ The idea behind this is that since the disease is terminal, it would be cruel to impose even more stress onto the patient, and it is better to let them live out what they have left in greater peace instead of causing them more pain. Such a standpoint is derived from ethical reasoning about the wellbeing of the patient, but at the same time it can easily be argued against, also by means of ethical reasoning.

On the one hand, this attitude can be considered ethically right as there is no possibility of prolonging the patient's life. This shall allow him to live on without a fear of the coming death, and therefore make his final time more pleasant. On the other hand it may seem incredibly wrong. The physician abuses his position of power to make decisions regarding the wellbeing of the patient without even being able to truly understand the patient's experience. He does not truly know how immense the pain is, or how prepared the patient is to die, or what his reaction would be to any sort of news that he is not getting in the first place. In this way, the physician rids the patient of his autonomy and freedom of decision and action. This is by no means to say that all physicians who adhere to this method are evil. It is to point out that by trying to form universal ethical principles which concern the deaths of individuals in this way, will naturally result in internal conflict of further ethical reasoning, no matter what the principles are. Therefore, it is incredibly difficult to treat the problem of euthanasia solely from the perspective of rational ethics.

By calling the Buddhist standpoints non-ethical I do not mean that they stray from ethics. They are in their own sense ethical with accordance to their paradigm.

⁵⁴ Hinohara, *Facing Death the Japanese Way*, 153.

However, they do not derive their ethics from abstract reasoning. Even though neither Zen nor Pure Land emphasize individual autonomy, they do recognize it in the sense that, with the correct state of mind, only we are to decide when to traverse between one life and another. Instead of imposing universal principles which individuals are forced to follow regardless of their will, the individual free will takes priority in decisions regarding one's own death.

Treating Euthanasia Categories from Zen Perspective

Let us now take a look at how the Zen Buddhist school would theoretically treat each of the categories of euthanasia in Japan, addressing the concerned parties such as the patient as well as the physician or family members. Starting off light with pure euthanasia, there is not much to say about it in this paradigm. As I argued earlier, pure euthanasia is quite different from the other categories in that it does not take deliberate steps toward shortening life in order to eliminate suffering. This category is also not very relevant to Zen in this discussion, since it only aims to lessen the patient's pain without altering the flow of life and death in any way.

In contrast to the first category, indirect euthanasia might actually prove problematic for Zen. The significance of this type lies in a premature death which is an incidental result of the administration of a pain relieving drug. It is clear that humans do not have full control of such things and it is impossible to predict everything under all circumstances. Therefore, the Zen school might hold a benevolent standpoint if the action is fueled by an appropriate intention. It would likely be accepted if the physician administered the drug with a sense of compassion to the suffering patient, while truly not aiming to kill him but to merely lessen his pain. However, if he had done it with some sort of desire that is tied to his ego, like for instance the impulse to take control over the patient's state, or even the fear that the patient's pain might get worse, then it would be deemed wrong. Perhaps the main thing worth noting here is that if the drug was administered with non-attachment, then the result of premature death would be morally neutral to Zen.

The next category, active euthanasia might prove to be a very interesting issue for Zen. It has been established that the destruction of life is not permitted in Buddhism. We have also seen that such an attitude is conditioned by the particular state of mind during

killing, which is a desireful one. Whether it is out of fear, hunger, compassion, anger etc. it is never acceptable because it is a horrible action done out of some form of attachment. But we have later also found that killing as such is not inherently wrong if the clinging of the ego is absent, and if the action arises from intuitive attunement with reality. In theory, if active euthanasia was performed in an enlightened state in which such dualities as self and other, life and death are dissolved, it would be accepted by Zen. Naturally, that is not expected, but theoretically it might be appealing to Zen.

Earlier I have discussed that Zen prioritizes the adherence to emptiness, an ideology which is inherited from the Mahayana Buddhist thought. In the Yogācāra tradition, which is a branch of Mahayana, it is argued that the only thing which exists, besides emptiness which expresses the nature of all other things, is consciousness. All existing consciousnesses collectively take part in producing the reality as we perceive it.⁵⁵ Therefore, we can view the aforementioned intuitive attunement with reality to be an attunement with another consciousness, as that is the only real reality. So as the notion of the self and other are dissolved, the physician and the patient may come into mutual attunement which would result in pure understanding of why in this particular case it is preferred to undergo the transition which we conventionally call death. Under these circumstances, active euthanasia would perhaps be accepted by Zen, as both the patient and the physician are in a mutually enlightened state.

Passive euthanasia is the category which clearly aligns the most with the principles of Zen, as it strongly resonates with the practice of letting go of clinging. Upon the realization that no matter the treatment, death is closing in either way, one is perfectly in their own right to cease his resistance to death and let his existence take on the most natural course. Such an act is on the one hand an exercise of one's own freedom, for which Zen strongly advocates, and on the other hand it embodies the principle of non-attachment. Such an attitude would not only be accepted in Zen, but also likely be praised, due to the high value of accepting the impermanence of both life and death.

I have previously expressed my opinion that for certain reasons, physician assisted suicide might seem the most ethical to many people. To the two reasons which I mentioned I will add on the fact that in contrast to passive euthanasia, in which the

⁵⁵ Vasubandhu, *Thirty Verses*, 30–36.

patient withdraws his treatment and suffers through the disease until he finally dies, in this case the suffering is eliminated rather immediately. I believe this also supports my previous claim. However, my aim here is to examine these acts from standpoints which are not derived from standard ethics. Therefore, this category might not emerge as favorable.

For the Zen framework, physician assisted suicide presents a significant challenge, but as we shall see, it will once again all come down to the state of mind during the act. Also, I imagine the Zen treatment of this category to be a sort of combination of the previous two. I will first point out that if a person suffers so much that they are willing to end their own life in this particular setting, this will is likely fueled by fear of pain, a desire to escape the pain, or even the desire to take control of one's death as a form of protest against the disease. Any sort of action motivated by attachments such as these, would render the act unacceptable to Zen. Therefore, it would be of no surprise if this were the default attitude of Zen toward this type of euthanasia.

However, if we put together the conditions which make the previous categories acceptable, we might find a solution. I believe that the key factors to the acceptability of this type lay in the dissolution of dualities and exercising freedom. Let us now consider the following. It seems that the wrongness of this act is conditioned by the desire to free oneself from suffering. This entails that that which wants to free itself from suffering is the falsely perceived self. However, there is no way to free the self from pain or anything else, because it is actually not real - there is no freeing anything. First and foremost, what we are clinging to is not the desire for pleasure or for the elimination of pain. It is really the illusion of the self which carries these desires. With this realization, the act of physician assisted suicide may take on a new and perhaps more appropriate motivation, namely the freeing from the self.

If the desire to escape pain belongs to the self, then physical pain must also be tied to the self. This means that a terminally ill person who experiences intense physical pain is at a disadvantage to a healthy person, because their self is much more distracted by the desire to escape pain, which would significantly obstruct his path to enlightenment. Under such special circumstances, the person shall be free to break away from the false self by any means necessary, as long his aim is to attain enlightenment. In this case the patient would not be freeing himself from pain, but by leaving behind the clinging self, he would achieve true freedom from any attachment. Such an act cannot be

fueled by desire, as desire belongs to that which is being left behind, and should therefore be accepted by Zen.

Treating Euthanasia Categories from Pure Land Perspective

In this section I will again examine the five categories of euthanasia in Japan, this time from a Pure Land Buddhist standpoint. In the previous passage I have discussed some possible conditions under which the more controversial variations of euthanasia would be permissible. However, those conditions would require deep meditative practice which is basically exclusive to monastic training. Therefore the requirements are thought incompatible with the specific situations at hand, such as the medical setting, the mental states of the patient and the physician, as well as their mutual relationship. This means that due to the incredible difficulty in attaining these conditions in a life which is not devoted to monastic practice, such categories as active euthanasia and physician assisted suicide are deemed generally unacceptable from the Zen standpoint. Not because of the nature of the acts, but because of the unrefined minds of the participants.

As we will see, the categories will likely be treated in a similar manner by the Pure Land, since both of the traditions offer perspectives that are not based on conventional ethical reasoning. The significant difference, however, shall be that the Pure Land might actually be even more benevolent in the sense that its ideology is accessible to common people of any class as much as it is to the monks. The Pure Land practice is not primarily rooted in meditative training, as the unconditioned faith in Amida Buddha takes priority over all else.

As for pure euthanasia, like with Zen, there should be no issue whatsoever, since no harm to life is done. What is an interesting point, however, is that the treatment of the patient's pain would bring relief upon which the patient is better able to maintain serenity and focus on his *Nembutsu* recitation. For this reason, pure euthanasia might even deserve encouragement from the Pure Land tradition.

The appropriateness of indirect euthanasia should rest primarily within the mental states of both the patient and the physician. Like I said above, the administration of pain relieving drugs might be encouraged due to the effect that it would have on the patient's attention to his faith. The thing which poses a problem here is the physician's intention behind the act. If they have impure motives, such as ridding themselves of the

stress that the patient's suffering brings upon them, then even if the resulting death were incidental, the act would likely be deemed unforgivable. If, however, the physician truly recognizes the sincere faith within the patient's heart and decides to administer the drug in order to provide better circumstances for the realization of the patient's faith, there should be no issue even if the patient dies incidentally. Quite the contrary, because this way the patient actually has a better chance at attaining rebirth in the Pure Land. Since the disease is lethal, they would soon die either way. If the drug was never administered, the patient might actually suffer for a longer period, without being able to adequately maintain his faith in Amida Buddha in his heart due to the distracting pain, and therefore not attain heavenly rebirth.

The question regarding active euthanasia becomes a bit tricky. The deciding factor here is perhaps on one hand the assertion of one's own will and the devotion to the will of Amida Buddha on the other. Active euthanasia is done in compliance with the patient's request. Therefore, in order for this act to be acceptable in the first place, it must not be out of his own volition that the patient desires active euthanasia. It must be requested in full devotion to the mercy of Amida Buddha. It must be rid of all desires for freeing oneself from pain, and only the name and image of Amida Buddha should be kept in heart.

Since this act concerns not only the patient but also the physician who participates in an active killing, he must also meet similar conditions, otherwise I imagine it would be highly unacceptable for him to take a life, and it could even pollute the act even if the patient retains the correct state of mind. Does this mean that the physician must also maintain the image of Amida Buddha in his mind? Perhaps not necessarily, but more importantly he must not assert his own will in the act. The patient's request should not be answered by the personal knowledge and opinion of the physician. The physician should give up his will on this matter in order to not obstruct the will of Amida Buddha which is manifested through the patient. He should recognize the patient's devotion and act as a mere extension of the Buddha's will, without having his own say in it. Similarly to the monks that assist in the aforementioned ritual drowning. They are not there to judge the act, they are there to act as mere tools which are responsive to the either appropriate or inappropriate state of mind of the drowning monk. They are not there to express their own thoughts or act upon their own will. If

these conditions are met, then the Pure Land perspective should not have an issue with such an act.

Passive euthanasia is arguably by far the most accepted type of euthanasia in all of Buddhism. The righteousness of this category is conditioned by the appropriate intent of the suffering patient. Though no destruction of life is permitted in general, we saw that what could be considered a preliminary stage of passive euthanasia was the only loophole in Buddhaghosa's Théraváda paradigm. In the Pure Land paradigm, as well as in Zen, it retains this great importance. The reason why passive euthanasia might even be praised by the Pure Land is the explicit disregarding of one's will. The patient might be so much devoted to his faith in Amida Buddha, that no suffering could obstruct focus on it. As I have said in the Zen treatment, the suffering belongs to the false self, and one wills in compliance to the self which is influenced by pain. By choosing to withdraw treatment, the patient puts his suffering and his will below the grace of Amida Buddha. Disregarding his suffering self, he devotes his remaining time to his faith and the recitation of the *Nembutsu*, while not taking action to end his life prematurely of his own will. In this way, he frees himself of his desires, as well as from his pain, and allows the will of Amida Buddha to guide him to his death and ultimately to his rebirth in the Pure Land. I imagine that in such circumstances, this method could be favored and praised from the Pure Land perspective, as it clearly demonstrates the absolute devotion to the grace of Amida Buddha over one's own self-will.

With the physician assisted suicide, we have a similar case at hand as with active euthanasia. What makes this type more problematic is that the patient needs to take action instead of the physician, which puts him at much greater risk of asserting his own will in the act. Since this act is generally motivated by despair, fear and the idea of escaping the immense suffering, I imagine it would be strongly cautioned against. However, if the patient truly acts with mindful presence, retaining his sincere faith in his heart and with it properly reciting the *Nembutsu* while completely disregarding his own self-will, the Pure Land tradition should have no issue with the act. Under such conditions, the patient should be granted heavenly rebirth, in which case there is nothing that can be inherently wrong with the act.

This chapter has shown that Zen and Pure Land offer profound and distinct approaches to the issues of euthanasia, which do not rely on the apparatus of Western moral theory. Zen focuses on the mindful detachment from suffering and egoic desire, while Pure Land invites surrender to Amida Buddha's compassionate vow. Neither tradition frames death as a problem requiring ethical justification. Instead, death is a horizon of potential spiritual realization. Euthanasia in this context is not morally defended or condemned. Rather it is situated within a broader path of awareness, surrender and relational care. These perspectives reveal that the exclusive use of ethical frameworks may not only be inadequate in addressing euthanasia, but it also might obscure the more fundamental spiritual work that death requires. The concluding chapter will reflect on how this reframing challenges the dominant modes of bioethical thought and opens new philosophical space for thinking about dying and the human condition.

Conclusion

To speak of euthanasia as a moral dilemma is to presuppose a framework in which human life is subject to rational evaluation through categories of rights, duties, and consequences. Such assumptions are deeply rooted in Western moral philosophy, whether it is deontological, utilitarian, or liberal in character. Yet, as demonstrated throughout this thesis, Zen and Pure Land Buddhism offer perspectives that fundamentally disrupt this normative moral discourse. They invite us to ask: What if death, and by extension, euthanasia, is not primarily an ethical problem at all? What if the emphasis on justification itself misses the point?

Both Zen and Pure Land Buddhism situate death not within the confines of ethical adjudication but within a broader, more ancient horizon of spiritual practice and existential transformation. From this point of view, death is not merely an endpoint to life nor a problem requiring resolution. It is a passage, a moment where one's inner orientation, whether of attachment or release, fear or faith, reveals the deeper shape of one's being.

In this sense, Zen and Pure Land share a fundamental critique of the Western fixation on moral universality. Zen, through its emphasis on non-attachment and direct experience, teaches that clinging, whether to life, to health, or to the desire to control one's death,

perpetuates suffering. Death approached through non-clinging becomes not a defeat but a culmination of practice. The final letting-go that completes the arc of one's existence in harmony with the impermanence of all things. As has been emphasized, Zen is less concerned with moral rightness than with the presence or absence of a clinging mind. Euthanasia, viewed through this lens, is not inherently problematic if it aligns with the conditions of inner peace and non-attachment. The question is not whether it is right or wrong, but whether the individual decision to undergo euthanasia arises from clarity or from fear.

Pure Land Buddhism, conversely, frames death through the lens of faith and surrender. Not faith as adherence to doctrine, but faith as the relinquishing of egoic striving into the compassionate vow of Amida Buddha. Here, the emphasis shifts from moral calculus to trust and gratitude, recognizing one's limitations and placing one's destiny within a broader cosmic order. The sincerity of entrusting oneself to Amida, not the circumstances of death, governs spiritual liberation. From this perspective, death is not mastered but embraced as part of a compassionate unfolding, where the conditions of one's mind at death matter more than the mechanics of one's passing. Euthanasia may be less about agency and more about whether one meets death with serenity and trust.

These orientations reveal a deeper philosophical point. Both Zen and Pure Land articulate a vision of "death with honor" not as heroic self-assertion but as acceptance, clarity, and readiness. In contrast to modern secular ideals that equate dignity with control and autonomy, these traditions suggest that honor lies in one's disposition at death, not in the circumstances of dying. To die well is to die free from clinging; to die well is to die in faith. This is not ethical in the Kantian or utilitarian sense. Rather it is existential, ontological, and relational.

Such a view challenges the Western presumption that ethical coherence must govern end-of-life decisions. Instead, it proposes a mode of understanding rooted in spiritual maturity rather than moral justification through reason. Carl Becker notes that Japanese attitudes toward death often privilege relational harmony and spiritual composure over rights-based claims or ethical consistency. Damien Keown's work further highlights that Buddhist ethics resists rigid universalism in favor of attention to mental and karmic conditions. In both traditions, the moral weight of euthanasia dissolves into questions of presence, faith, and non-resistance to impermanence.

Therefore, this thesis suggests that a non-ethical approach to euthanasia is not a retreat from responsibility but an embrace of a deeper, culturally and spiritually grounded responsibility. The responsibility to meet death not with fear or judgment, but with unclouded awareness and acceptance. In this sense, Zen and Pure Land perspectives contribute not merely to the debate on euthanasia but to a broader rethinking of how we approach death itself: not as a problem to solve, but as the final practice of living with honor.

Such a reframing carries implications beyond Japan. It invites re-examination of bioethical assumptions globally, proposing that in matters of death, clarity of mind, depth of presence, and spiritual openness may offer a more humane compass than abstract ethical principles. In this way, Zen and Pure Land Buddhism illuminate a path not toward universal solutions but toward individualized, compassionate, and honorable endings. Toward a philosophy of dying that transcends the need for justification.

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