

Shoyo Sensei's Dharma Message:

Buddha-Dharma: Introduction – 8

Question (1):

What is the essential difference between enlightened decision-making and unenlightened decision-making?

Answer (1):

Suppose there are ten people here and are about to make decisions. They can come up with ten different decision-makings. Look at Terri Shiavo's case, for example. Her life process was ended in a most painful and long dispute between her husband and her parents, involving political, ethical and legal areas. Such is the nature of unenlightened decision-making like ours.

But, in case of enlightened people, it will be different. Even when there are hundred enlightened people, they all will make exactly the same decision, since they all make a "perfect" decision available, it will be only one. Such is the nature of enlightened decision-making.

Unenlightened decisions are based upon ego, likes and dislikes, greed, anger, hatred, attachment, confusion, ignorance and all other negative mentality. Such decisions are harmful and dangerous. By making such decisions, we further harm ourselves.

As opposed to them, enlightened decision-making is based upon the egolessness, the highest compassion and wisdom and the highest level of positive and joyful mind. A decision-making by enlightened people can also be ethically defined as "completely free from any harm, physical, verbal and mental." It is the highest level of "harmlessness." It means, in their function of cognition, even the notion of "non-harm" does not exist. Enlightened people do not recognize even what "harmless" is, for if they cognize the meaning of "harmless," it means they know what "harm" is. Since the notion of "harm" itself is completely eradicated, their decision-making is expressed as the perfect, which is "beyond harm and non-harm." In short, the major difference between the unenlightened and the enlightened decisions is the "harm."

Buddhists are those who aspire to be able to make more and more enlightened decisions in our day-to-day experiences.

Question (2):

What is the Buddhist criterion for us in choosing actions or making decisions?

Answer (2):

The Buddha, in advising the seven-year-old child, Rahula, his only son, taught the criteria of action. The list of criteria given to Rahula was as follows:

1. Actions harmful to oneself
2. Actions harmful to others
3. Actions harmful to oneself and others

Harming includes physical, verbal and mental levels. Compared to physical and verbal, mental action is regarded as the heaviest: Indeed, "Volition is action." Harmful actions result in stress, regret, self-guilt, fear, worry, anxiety, and all other negative mental states, to the agent first of all,

and bring pain to others. On the other hand, good actions are “skillful” since they do not result in the above state. They are:

1. Actions harmless to oneself
2. Actions harmless to others
3. Actions harmless to oneself and others (A. III. 137)

For us, unenlightened people, “harmlessness” is extremely difficult. Therefore, I add the term “less” or “more” to “harmful” or “harmless.” Thus, “less harmful” decision-making or action available can be called the most fundamental Buddhist ethical principle in decision-makings and action-takings.

Question (3):

Why is harmfulness so problematic?

Answer (3):

It is because no living beings wish to be harmed and all wish to avoid dangers. The law of Causal Conditionality tells us that a harmful action necessarily requires greed, anger, hatred, attachment, confusion and ignorance. These negative emotions themselves are already dangerous enough. We, wishing to be happy, peaceful and positive, are constantly harming ourselves and others by making unskillful decisions.

Question (4):

Talking about decision-making, the seven-year legal battle that pitted Michael Schiavo, her husband, against her parents, Robert and Mary Schindler, was one of the biggest issues that not only we Americans but also people all over the world faced. What do you think is a Buddhist position towards the decision-makings related to a person like Terri Schiavo who was in a Persistent Vegetative States (PVS).?

Answer (4):

As my Buddha-Dharma: Introduction – 7 explained, in Buddhist understanding, the human life process is nothing but the function of brain, i.e., consciousness. In Buddhism, therefore, brain death can be regarded as synonymous with death. Whether the brain is functioning or not is the distinction between so called life and death.

Talking about the Schiavo case, the Buddhist approach can be drawn as follows:

Since she was not brain dead (the irreversible loss of all functions of the brain), the next step is to ask: what kind of brain function did she have? This becomes the key factor in making decisions for her. To make any harmless (skillful) decisions, obtaining as much information as possible is essential.

In Terri’s case, if she, as a PVS patient, had brain function, withdrawal of food and fluids from her could be extremely harmful. It was harmful not only for her, but also for her parents and others, who were opposed to doing it. A two-week long period of starvation could be very painful, both physically and mentally.

Question (5):

How much knowledge and information do medical professionals have regarding the function of the brain (i.e., consciousness) today?

Answer (5):

Current medicine, unfortunately, does not yet offer too much knowledge about the function of the brain, or consciousness. According to some, there is medical evidence to dispute the belief that PVS patients are unconscious and many studies show that patients in induced comas do retain some sort of consciousness. Some say that "one cannot help but be engaged in a philosophical activity when dealing reflectively with such matters as consciousness, evidence, purposiveness, awareness, irreversibility, and the self." Some recognize that measuring irreversible loss of capacity for a brain function such as consciousness involves fundamentally nonscientific value judgments. Indeed, George F. Will says in the April 12's NEWSWEEK, "How much progress has science really made in explaining how some matter came to be conscious of itself?"

In America, there are about 200,000 people who are in Minimally Conscious (MC) states and about 25,000 in PVS. Terri's parents believed that she was MC; bedridden, but, showing occasional glimmers of awareness & responsiveness. All but one neurologist who examined Shiavo said she was PVS; the hearts and lungs still work, but a feeding tube may be needed, sleep-wake cycles remain intact, but they lack awareness of themselves and their surrounding, they cannot speak, their eyes are open, but they cannot follow objects, they smile, grimace, moan, cry, laugh or move their limbs, but without willful intent (all reflexes).

Question (6):

Do PVS patients experience pain and suffering?

Question (6):

This question seems to be still inconclusive among medical professionals and this is a disputed issue. Some said there was no reason to believe she was suffering, since she lacked the brain function necessary to feel such a thing, while others opposed that view. If so, the confident assertion that PVS patients cannot suffer or experience pain is premature. Indeed, an attorney for the Terri's parents, Barbara Weller, said hospice workers began giving morphine to Schiavo to ease pain brought on by her body's failure.

Question (7):

For many it will be agonizing to watch someone, particularly a loved one, be in a condition with little hope for recovery. Therefore, isn't allowing PVS patients to die very merciful?

Answer (7)

My Buddha-Dharma: Introduction – 6 discussed this issue in detail: what every living being wishes is to eliminate suffering and pain, not to eliminate life itself. Each individual (whether human or non-human) is an autonomous and independent being and should be respected fully. Although no one belongs to others, when this being's brain is impaired and cannot express its wish, only those who care most can make decisions for this being, never those who take the side of "harm." This is common sense as well as the fundamental Buddhist principle of Compassion.

There is the Buddha's childhood episode that plainly explains this spirit. A dispute arose between Siddhartha and his cousin Devadatta: Siddhartha wanted to keep a wounded swan to care and later to release into the sky, while Devadatta insisted that it was his, because he shot it. They went

to the royal court to settle the case. An old wise man declared, “Each being cares oneself most, therefore it belongs to someone who cares most.”

Coming back to Terri’s case, the Buddhist position is that it is a caring family with a 42-year loving relationship who deserves the guardianship authority. But, Terri’s family was forbidden by the courts to give comfort to their daughter even at the last moment of dying. A spouse may receive the guardianship authority only when he or she makes skillful decisions for his or her voiceless spouse. As Susan Strom questions, “Should a spouse be considered the guardian if a condition like Terri Schiavo’s emerges the day after the wedding, or the day before a divorce, or if there is evidence of an unhappy marriage?” All these questions are to be carefully examined.

Question (8):

Are you saying then that the food and fluid tube should not have been withdrawn from Schiavo?

Answer (8):

What I said in the above is a perspective from a Buddhist ethical standpoint. However, discussion on the issue of a PVS patient is a challenge for us all, since we are not given enough information about the brain function yet. And yet we are faced with tough decisions for those who have no say in the matter. That is why the criterion of our decision-making of “less harmful” for them is very crucial.

The majority of American were in favor of withdrawing the tube from Terri. On April 13, France's parliament approved a law that will allow terminally ill patients to opt for death instead of further treatment.

But, do we have enough information to make a decision regarding such a critical situation related to life and death?

Today, to make the LEAST harmful decision available is so urgent in our society. From the point of view of ethics, the goal of Buddhism is to direct the individual and society into making the healthiest decisions possible so that both the individual and society can live without conflict, dissatisfaction, frustration, grief, worry, pain, and suffering (*dukkha*). According to Buddhism, better decision-making is possible only when self-centeredness is reduced and wisdom and compassion are cultivated.

As a Buddhist, what is important is to make a decision of wisdom and compassion. To make such a decision, gather as much information as possible, and use all obtained information without hatred, attachment, greed, anger, confusion, ignorance, and all other negative emotions, that are harmful and dangerous.

Question (9):

Today, the brain science and neuroscience is one of the hottest topics in medical science. Is there anything that Buddha-Dharma can offer to today’s neuroplasticity?

Answer (9)

Enlightenment is a mental state. In this mental state, ego consciousness is completely eradicated. The primary concern of Buddha-Dharma is all about the function of the brain; how ego arises, how it increases or reduces, and how it completely dies out without any residue. The Buddha explained the mechanism of the function of brain or the process of decision-making. In this

sense, the Buddha's teachings tremendously contribute to current knowledge of today's neuroscience. The study of neuroscience started very recently and I am eagerly waiting for more detailed and solid discoveries about consciousness, the function of the brain.

Gassho,

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