

## PERSONAL OPINION

# VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA AND SUICIDE

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Voluntary Euthanasia is a form of suicide in which another person gives assistance to hasten the end of incurable patients, *in as painless a way as is possible*. The very mention of the word suicide evokes emotion in the minds of many people, probably because we had been conditioned by Western culture and religion during our colonial past. Let us, for a moment, shed our emotions and go over the problem in a scientific and rational manner.

### WESTERN VIEW

In the West a person who had committed suicide was often pronounced to be of unsound mind, sometimes qualified by the word "temporarily". His body was denied a grave in the cemetery, and had to be buried at the cross-roads. This, at best, could only be a lesson to the others, because the corpse could not feel any humiliation, while its soul would have already reached hell and could not have any more interest in the body which it had abandoned voluntarily.

It is difficult to believe that every person who had taken his own life was of unsound mind at the time of the act, merely on the grounds that he had gone against the religious teachings or the laws of the land. If such a deduction were true, then all the murderers and other offenders should also be, by the same logic, labelled as insane for they too have transgressed the laws. It is also common practice to call suicide a cowardly act. Perhaps the opposite would have been more correct. If you try to prick one of your fingers with a needle, you will find the finger moving away from the needle even before it has reached the finger. This shows the instinctive aversion to hurt oneself. Furthermore, if taking one's life is a cowardly act, how can the taking of a dozen people's lives in the battle field, often from a hide-out, be called valour, as has been done all through the centuries? Also, those who get mowed down during a foolish or suicidal infantry charge receive posthumous decorations!

### EASTERN VIEW

In Eastern societies the attitude to suicide has been different. To the Japanese hara-kiri is an honourable form of suicide, in which a friend can give a helping hand without fear of prosecution. *Sati* (meaning faithful wife, anglicised to suttee) was originally a bereaved widow's voluntary suicide in the funeral pyre of her dead husband. The word originates from Sati, a goddess, who had immolated herself in a sacrificial fire when her husband was insulted. The practice of suttee fell into disrepute when physical force came to be used on unwilling widows to follow the custom. In spite of the legal ban on it, voluntary suttees are being reported occasionally.

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Led by their queen, the women of Chitorgarh, who killed themselves to the last person in a huge fire to avoid falling into the hands of their victorious enemies, still evokes admiration in the minds of students of Indian history. Moti, a Rajput nurse, who exchanged her small son's clothing with that of the prince, knowing full well that he would be murdered by the enemies of the prince, managed thereby to save a dynasty. But after achieving it, she stabbed and killed herself to join and suckle her real son in the other world. Poets — including Sir Edwin Arnold of "The Light of Asia" fame — have been singing her praise since then, as well as that of the ladies of Chitorgarh.

In more recent times we have read of the self-immolation of Buddhist priests in Vietnam in the presence of admiring crowds, and dying without showing any signs of suffering. The lookers-on did not try to douse the fire either. They just wondered at the courage of conviction of the dying priest.

### VALIDITY OF CONSENT

It is often assumed that a person suffering from severe pain of terminal illness is not in a normal state of mind to ask for voluntary euthanasia or give consent for it. As before, there is no evidence for this and should, therefore, be considered as mere conjecture. It is only the wearer who knows where the shoe pinches. For other people, including doctors, to classify two terminally ill patients into sane and insane just because one of them can tolerate the pain and the other cannot do it (or probably does not expect to get salvation that way) would be rash, because pain is a subjective sensation which cannot be objectively measured. One of my own patients who was suffering from the intractable pain of incurable cancer, confirmed by a specialist, and facing slow death took his own life by hanging after I had refused his pleas for voluntary euthanasia. He appeared to be perfectly sane when he begged for a painless exit, and was willing to sign any document absolving me of crime.

Do we label a suffering patient as insane if he refuses an operation, such as an amputation for gangrene, which could end his suffering and even save his life? Should we dub all politicians who had, for certain political objectives, fasted to their death as of unsound mind? Perhaps slow suicide as in these two groups is excusable! Was Mr. Cuppola of Richmond, U.S.A., committing suicide when he pleaded recently to be electrocuted, and was granted his wish, rather than serve a jail term for life?

As for the need for a valid consent, whoever gets the consent of the unborn child, who at that moment is legally entitled to a share in the family property when an abortion is done for population control!

### THE ASSISTANT'S ROLE

If legally permitted, doctors who perform abortions for family planning or on eugenic grounds (e.g. Down's syndrome, meningomyelocele or certain inherited metabolic

diseases) cannot give any valid objection to voluntary euthanasia of a terminally ill adult patient suffering from unnecessary pain, to no one's benefit. The need for an assistant would also act as a check on the incurable nature of the disease. As a counter-check, he or she should not be a beneficiary in any material way.

### SUICIDE

It is argued that a person in full possession of his physical and mental capabilities cannot be stopped from suicide. Most of such people do successfully manage to do it, though some have ended up with broken bones or stricture of the oesophagus and prolonged suffering. The present-day cynic might well say that it was not by his choice that he had come into this world, and that if he doesn't want to remain here what right others have got to stop him from leaving it? After all, he hurts only himself, not others. He has eminent authorities to support him.

Seneca in the first century A.D., in his *Moral Epistles*, LXX, had said: "This is the one reason why we cannot complain of life: it keeps no one against his will. Humanity is well situated, because no man is unhappy except by his own fault. Live if you so desire; if not, you may return to the place whence you came". Epictetus, also in the same century had written: "But remember the principal thing: that the door is open. Do not be more fearful than children; but as they, when the play does not please them, say 'I will play no longer': so do you, in the same case, say, 'I will play no longer', and go; but if you stay, do not complain". (*Discourses XXIV, 4*). About six centuries earlier, Socrates is reported to have said just before swallowing the lethal poison: "I should only make myself ridiculous in my own eyes if I clung to life and hugged it when it has no more to offer. Come, do as I say, and don't make difficulties".

Now, what about those not in full possession of their physical powers due to illness, who are likely to form the bulk of those wanting euthanasia? Their last wish is to have a painless exist. Attempts at suicide would very likely increase their suffering and pain, for a shorter or longer period depending on the method they use, but that was exactly what they wanted to avoid.

Moral norms, the laws of the land and even religious attitudes are changing rapidly these days due to our increasing habit of questioning the validity of our actions and traditions. Society's acceptance of abortion and cremation are two such examples. Therefore it appears that Voluntary Euthanasia is bound to catch up, even if it be too soon for some people's liking.

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