

Abortion is Murder according to Buddha

by Blue Lotus

In the time of Buddha, abortion is the same as murder by common sense. But today, many people would argue that abortion is not murder, especially if performed early enough. In this post, I will explain what Buddha said about abortion.

Common Sense

If one looks deeply enough in Tripitaka, there is nothing that says “abortion is murder” explicitly. That’s because it was a common fact that needs no clarification. Saying abortion is murder back then is similar to saying that a smartphone needs electricity in 2019.

In order to prove that abortion is murder, here are instances when Buddha talked about abortion.

Abortion in Monastic Code

In the monastic code, there are four offenses (known as pārajika) that must never be done. Once committed, a monk is expelled and is no longer a monk. This is the most severe punishment a monk can get. One of these offenses is committing murder or intentionally killing a human being.

Should any bhikkhu intentionally deprive a human being of life, or search for an assassin for him, or praise the advantages of death, or incite him to die (saying,): “My good man, what use is this evil, miserable life to you? Death would be better for you than life,” or with such an idea in mind, such a purpose in mind, should in various ways praise the advantages of death or incite him to die, he also is defeated and no longer in affiliation.

Bhikkhu Patimokkha

Buddha was very specific about what is murder and what is not. Here are some excerpts regarding abortion.

At one time, a pregnant woman said to a monk who is close to her family,

“May venerable sir suggest medicine for abortion.”

The monk said, “Sister, with such medicine, you may abort.”

The woman then got an abortion. With disdain, the monk wondered if he committed a parajika offense. He asked Buddha.

Buddha said, “Monk, you have committed a parajika offense.”

At one time, a pregnant woman said to a monk who is close to her family,

“May venerable sir suggest medicine for abortion. “

The monk said, “Sister, you should make the womb hot”.

The woman then made the womb hot and the pregnancy was aborted. With disdain, the monk wondered if he committed a parajika offense. He asked Buddha.

Buddha said, “Monk, you have committed a parajika offense.”

At one time, an infertile woman said to a monk who is close to her family,

“May venerable sir suggest medicine for fertility.”

The monk said, “Very well sister,” and gave her the medicine.

The woman died as a result. With disdain, the monk wondered if he committed a parajika offense. He asked Buddha.

Buddha said, “Monk, you have not committed a parajika offense. You committed a dukkata offense”

Source in Thai: พระวินัยปิฎก มหาวิภังค์ เล่ม ๑ ภาค ๒ – หน้าที่ 303.

To put it simply, if a monk helps a woman get an abortion, he commits a pārajika offense – the same offense as intentionally killing a person. By this evidence, abortion is murder.

Additionally, on the last case presented above, a monk gave fertility medicine to a woman and she died because of his action. Buddha said this is not a pārajika offense because the monk had no intention to kill anyone with his action. However, the monk still committed a minor (dukkata) offense.

Life Begins at Conception

Still, one could argue that the fetus is not a person. Killing a fetus is not murder. To counter this argument, I will show more pieces of evidence from Tripitaka to prove that Buddha recognized a fetus as a human being from the start.

In the monastic code again, Buddha created a rule specifically about killing animals.

Should any bhikkhu intentionally deprive an animal of life, it is to be confessed.

Bhikkhu Patimokkha

As stated, the offense for intentionally killing an animal is much less severe than killing a person. Killing an animal only requires the monk to confess his wrongdoing. By this difference in severity, Buddha acknowledged that killing a person is more severe than killing an animal. Since Buddha made assisting in abortion a pārājika offense, rather than a minor offense like killing an animal, logic says that human life begins at conception. Abortion, at any stage, is murder.

To further reinforce this argument, here are additional references.

Some are born in the human womb,
evildoers in hell,
those on the good course go to heaven,
while those without effluent: totally unbound.

Dhammapada 126

If a human being is born in the human womb, then life begins at conception inside the womb.

Over and over, the fool goes to the womb.

Over and over, he's born and he dies

Udaya Sutta

Again, "fool goes to the womb" means a being is born in the womb, not outside of it.

Consciousness before Conception

In one sermon, Buddha mentioned consciousness in a mother's womb.

From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-and-form.' Thus it has been said. And this is the way to understand how from consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-and-form. If consciousness were not to descend into the mother's womb, would name-and-form take shape in the womb?

Maha-nidana Sutta

This sermon is difficult to understand for people who do not study Buddhism. Basically, the sermon is about the cause and effect of life in rich detail. This part says that in order for a being to come into a womb, there must be a consciousness first. Consciousness can be any living being. If a consciousness is in a human womb, the consciousness is a human being from the start.

"No Uterus, No Opinion"

By the same logic stating that women should get to choose what they do with their body, the human being inside the womb should get to choose too. Since that human being is too young to choose, women should not have the right to make a life or death decision for that being. If a being has to choose, it will choose to live. That is the basic instinct of all living beings, especially the young ones.

Hard the winning of a human birth.

Hard the life of mortals.

Hard the chance to hear the true Dhamma.

Hard the arising of Awakened Ones.

Dhammapada 182

A human birth is very difficult to obtain but it is rewarding. That is because only human can learn Buddha's teaching (Dhamma) better than any beings. Women who get abortion steal the human birth from their child.

Women should respect the rights of the human beings inside their womb to live.

Karmic Consequences from Abortion

If Buddha saw no harm in abortion, he would have not mentioned it. However, there is indeed a great karmic result in hell.

Abortion-mongers 'scape not thy dread stream, Vetarani.

Silk-cotton trees with thorns foot long of iron wrought, 'tis said,

On either bank, Vetarani, o'erhang thy gloomy bed.

All clothed in flame, one mass of fire, they stand against the sky,

And all ablaze with brilliant light tower a full league on high.

Samkicca Jataka

Here is my own modern English translation from the Thai Tripitaka which contain slightly different details.

Women who aborted their children step down a jagged path to a river in hell. The path is difficult to walk with sharp edges like a knife. Then, they fall into Vetarani River. There are several trees with sharp metallic spikes sixteen inches long. Their branches cover the Vetarani River on both sides, making it hard to traverse for the hellish beings (the women) who are sixteen kilometers tall. These beings are on fire constantly on their own, like a bonfire from afar.

Source in Thai: Samkicca Jataka

Of course most people think there is no hell in Buddhism. On the other hand, most people do not believe in heaven and hell at all. Take it for what is worth. Buddha described several hell realms with great details. The one described here is specifically for abortion.

Conclusion

As the evidence from Tripitaka shows, Buddha saw abortion and murder as the same thing. Buddha taught that life begins when consciousness enters a womb. He made no distinction if abortion is early enough or too late for it to be murder. Finally, Buddha said that the karmic consequence of abortion is reincarnation in hell.

May all beings appreciate all human lives.