

The Sacrifice of Baby Fae, Another Look: A Buddhist Sketch to Decision Making

by Ronald Y. Nakasone

In a stinging commentary, "The Sacrifice of Baby Fae,"¹ Ellen Goodman, a columnist for the *Boston Globe* questions the motives "for tinkering with newborns and baboons." She states that "experimenting on terminally ill human beings has not always been handled honestly." Dr. Christian Barnard, who performed the first heart transplant, writes in his memoirs that he was not completely honest with Louis Washkansky, his patient. Mr. Washkansky was told that his odds for survival were strong; he was not told by Dr. Barnard that these were the odds of surviving merely the operation. Louis Washkansky, and more recently Dr. Barry Clarke, recipient of the first artificial heart, were fully aware of the risks of experimental medical procedures. Both were willing to take a chance for life and to make a contribution to medicine. The question for Ms. Goodman is whether a parent has a right to subject a child to such experimental medical procedures. She writes:

All medical evidence of this case . . . suggests that this infant had no chance to survive into toddlerhood, let alone adulthood. Given that, we have to conclude that Baby Fae's body was donated, alive, to science. The rationale that she was "going to die anyway," implies that it is open season on dying, that we can try even the most outlandish experiment on these human beings . . . Those who cannot give consent should be the last not the first people we use for experiments.

To be sure, this medical event has stirred the entire gamut of moral, ethical, religious and medical responses. The techniques Dr. Bailey and

his team at Loma Linda Hospital were trying to develop may some day prove applicable in adults with heart disease. Some concur this cross-species organ transplant was a "tremendous victory," and Dr. Leonard Bailey "has opened new vistas for all."² Some physicians, of course, suspect that the motivation for the procedure was more experimental than therapeutic. Dr. John S. Najarian, the University of Minnesota transplant expert, matter-of-factly said when Baby Fae died that it was "unfortunately not a surprise," but "reasonably close to what could be expected."³ Whatever opinion each of us have or may have had concerning this medical event, our emotions, I believe, fluctuated with Baby Fae's 21-day fight for life.

The Buddhist community, together with the rest of the world, deeply mourned the passing of such a young life. Although it is no fault of Buddhist teachings not to offer a clear-cut response to the propriety of cross-species transplant, these ancient teachings articulate the cultivation of four social virtues or *Brahmavihāras* which, I believe, Buddhists can use to respond to questions of medical experimentation and ethics. They are: 1) *maitrī* (*mettā* in Pali) or friendliness; 2) *karuṇā* or compassion; 3) *mudita* or sympathetic joy; and 4) *upekṣā* or equanimity.⁴ Although each of these emotions emerge from differing levels of insight, we do not abandon one when we realize a more profound virtue. Each is to be practiced with the other three in mind. As we proceed with our discussion, note that concern for the self becomes less pronounced when we move from friendliness to equanimity.

First, *maitrī*, or friendliness, is characterized by the desire to do good to others and to provide

them with what is useful; it quiets ill-will and malice. Once these negative qualities are stilled, we are able to quicken tender thoughts towards others. But there is a darker side when we cultivate friendliness towards others; our actions are almost always to our own advantage.

It is certainly more pleasant to be on good terms with your neighbors or those with whom you work. A friendly atmosphere makes the neighborhood more congenial and the work place more pleasant. There are no suspicions or finger-pointing. Friendliness is enlightened self-interest: you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours. Was Dr. Bailey's desire to place a baboon heart in Baby Fae in accord with genuine concern, or was an obscure physician at Loma Linda University Hospital, according to a recent article, trying to be more highly visible which would make it easier for him and the hospital to attract grant money? What was the real benefit of Dr. Bailey's treatment of Baby Fae? Were a few more days of life filled with hope and despair, pain and suffering, worth any new advance in understanding the underdeveloped immune system in a newborn? It is difficult to know what or who benefited the most. Choices based on friendliness are still rooted in self-interest; they must be transcended by compassion.

Karuṇā, or compassion, is a great virtue for Mahāyāna Buddhists. It is due to his great compassion that the *bodhisattva* renounces nirvāṇa and remains in the world to help others; but it is through his concern for others that the *Bodhisattva* identifies with the sufferings of others. The 48 vows of the *Bodhisattva Dharmākara* crystallize this concern. Śāntideva (seventh century A.D.), a Mādhyamika thinker, goes so far as to maintain that *bodhisattvas* need only to learn compassion; this in turn leads to the acquisition of all the attributes of Buddhahood.⁵

Compassion is a virtue which extinguishes our desire to harm others, thereby extending to others whatever aid we can offer. Reports of needy and unhappy children have always met with unbounded generosity from the American public.

Compassion makes us so sensitive to the misfortune of others that we make them our own. Yet despite the nobility of compassion, to contemplate on too much suffering and affliction is apt to depress us. Strangely enough, though, there is a certain pleasure which accompanies the contemplation of the suffering of others. The Reagan administration denied reports that it had refused to aid the starving millions because Ethiopia is a Marxist regime. They felt the decision to create collective farms decreased in part the food production in Ethiopia; the Ethiopians brought on this calamity themselves. We often gloat over the misfortunes of others. One may be sensitive to the suffering of others but avidly watches it.⁶ We were, to be sure, drawn by compassion to the plight of Baby Fae and her parents. Were we also drawn to their suffering?

In order to overcome the negative aspects of compassion, we must practice sympathetic joy (*mudita*). This virtue is characterized by joy, faith, and freedom from craving, jealousy, insincerity, and hostility. With sympathetic joy, we identify with the joy and success of others. Sympathetic joy is placed above compassion because it is much more difficult to share in the happiness and success of others. Rarely, if ever, are we happy with the achievement of a co-worker who is promoted ahead of us, or a colleague who is more successful. Rather, we are filled with jealousy and envy. To rejoice with the achievement and successes of others requires a rare spiritual perfection.⁷ With sympathetic joy, one rejoices in, and identifies with, the great achievements of our spiritual heroes. To identify with the great spiritual achievements is to approach the community of saints.

The perfection of sympathetic joy leads to *upekṣā*, or equanimity, the last and most profound of the social virtues. Equanimity is characterized by even-mindedness and a purity of mind which is not affected by the actions and conditions of others. Only the mind of equanimity can respond with equal concern for the sufferings, petty or profound, of beings. This characteristic of equanimity is crystallized in the concern of the Amida

Buddha whose Great Compassion embraces all persons—good and evil. The Great Compassion is especially generous to those who are most in need of help. Shinran Shōnin recognized this characteristic of equanimity when he wrote: "Even a good person is born in the Pure Land, how much more so is an evil person."⁸

Great Compassion is magnanimous. It mourns the death of an antelope slain by a hunter. By the same token, Great Compassion fathoms the anguish of the Masai Hunter, who kneels beside his slain prey and says, "I know all life is sacred. I profoundly regret that I must take your life. But I have children to feed. Please understand and forgive me." Compassion goes out to Baby Fae as well as to the baboon who sacrificed its heart. Equanimity assures equal concern for all living beings without attachment or hatred.⁹

In addition, the mind of equanimity is unaffected by the suffering and actions of other beings. This does not mean that the *bodhisattva* does not feel the pain or joy of others, but rather he does not fall into gloom when contemplating suffering. Nor is the *bodhisattva* infatuated by something or someone of whom he is especially fond. And because of this, the mind of equanimity is able to perceive and understand the reasons and causes for suffering and sorrow. Robert Aitken, a contemporary teacher and exponent of Zen, expresses this idea of the objective and yet heartfelt sadness which flows from the mind of equanimity in dealing with the decision to abort a child. He writes:

A woman is likely to feel acutely miserable after making a decision to have an abortion. This is a time for compassion for the woman, and for her to be compassionate with herself and for her unborn child. If I am consulted, and we explore the options carefully and I learn that the decision is definite, I encourage her to go through the act with the consciousness of a mother who holds her dying child in her arms, lovingly nurturing it as it passes from life. Sorrow and suffering forms the nature of *samsāra*, the

flow of life and death, and the decision to prevent birth is made on balance with other elements of suffering. Once the decision is made, there is no blame, but rather acknowledgment that sadness pervades the whole universe, and this bit of life goes with our deepest love.¹⁰

The mind of equanimity forms decisions on the "balance" of other sufferings and joy. The decision to attempt a cross-species transplant offered hope for life; not to operate meant certain death. The decision to place a baboon heart in Baby Fae meant the destruction of another sentient being, unforeseen problems, and untold anguish. Yet this decision also quickened hope and incalculable joy, however short-lived. Whenever any decision, proper or improper, is made, we must understand that it carries with it its own set of inexorable consequences. A decision which touches many must take into account all the elements of suffering and joy; and such a choice must not emerge from self-interest, pity or false optimism.

The four social virtues of friendliness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity discussed above are guidelines for directing our spiritual energies when interacting with others. These virtues are grounded on the capacity to identify with the needs of others. In the final analysis, the practice of these virtues are meant to nurture and uplift ourselves and those with whom we come into contact. When we practice these virtues, we exercise the Buddha-nature inherent in us.

FOOTNOTES:

1. "The Sacrifice of Baby Fae," *San Jose Mercury News*, Nov. 23, 1984, p. 3B.
2. "Legacy of Baby Fae," *New York Times*, Nov. 18, 1984, p. 2E.
3. "Baby Fae's Heart Gives Out," *Newsweek*, Nov. 26, 1984, p. 94.

4. The idea of *brahma-vihāra* is also found in non-Buddhist documents. It is not an original Buddhist contribution to Indian religious thought, but the Mahāyānist appreciated these social virtues and adopted them into their practice. The translations of the "four social virtues" and the commentary on these expressions are taken from Edward Conze's *Buddhist Thought in India* (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1962), pp. 80-91. Conze has another discussion in "Love, Compassion and Sympathetic Joy," in *Further Buddhist Studies* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer Ltd., 1975), pp. 33-55.
5. Har Dayal, *The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Buddhist Sanskrit Literature* (Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 1932 and 1978), p. 179.
6. Edward Conze, "Love, Compassion, and Sympathetic Joy," in *Further Buddhist Studies* (Oxford: Cassirer, Ltd., 1975), pp. 52-3.
7. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1962), pp. 88-89.
8. *Tannishō*, Ryūkoku Translation Series (Kyoto: Ryūkoku University, 1962), p. 22.
9. D.T. Suzuki, *Outlines of Mahāyāna Buddhism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1907 and 1962), p. 417.
10. Robert Aitken, *The Mind of Clover, Essays in Zen Buddhist Ethics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), pp. 21-22.