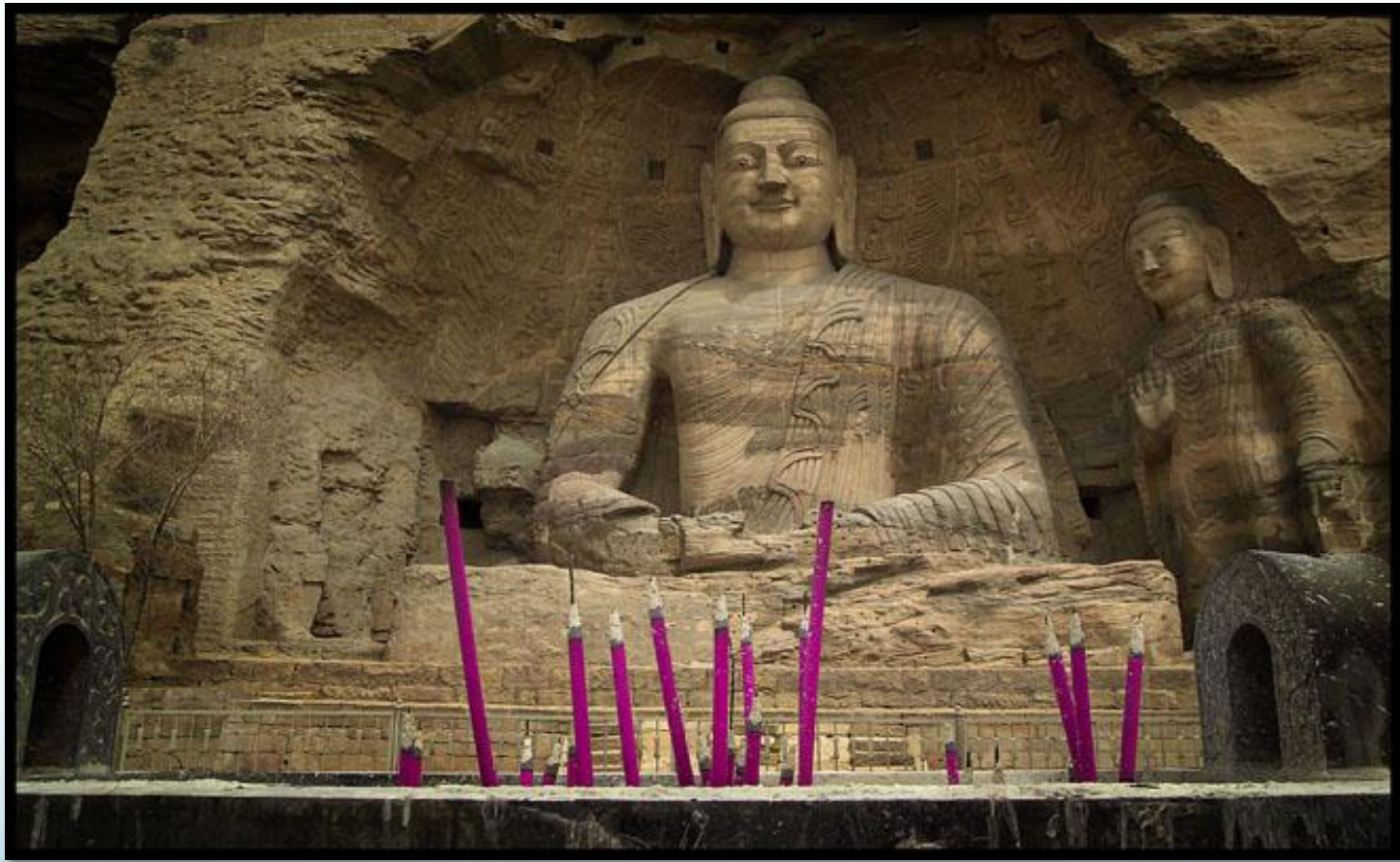


Buddhism and Medical Futility



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Tuck Wai Chan

Senior Associate Director, Institutional Review Board, National
University of Singapore, Singapore

Dr. Desley Hegney [corresponding author]

Professor of Nursing, School of Nursing and Midwifery, Curtin
University and Research Consultant, Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital,
Perth

e-mail: desley.hegney@curtin.edu.au

Abstract

- Religious faith and medicine combine harmoniously in Buddhist views, each in its own way helping Buddhists enjoy a more fruitful existence.
- Health care providers need to understand the spiritual needs of patients in order to provide better care, especially for the terminally ill.
- Compassion from a health professional is essential, and if medical treatment can decrease suffering without altering the clarity of the mind, then a treatment should not be considered futile.
- Suffering from illness and death, moreover, is considered by Buddhists a normal part of life and is ever-changing. Sickness, old age, birth, and death are integral parts of human life. Suffering is experienced due to the lack of a harmonious state of body, speech, and mind.
- Buddhists do not believe that the mind is located in the brain, and, for Buddhists, there are ways suffering can be overcome through the control of one's mind.

Introduction

- Current definitions of medical futility are filled with societal and professional controversies influenced by ethical and economic perspectives ([Halliday 1997](#)).
- Depending on whom one speaks to, medical futility has many meanings and implications.
 - For doctors, medical futility brings out issues of the professional control of treatment pathways and the professional question of discontinuing treatment with no beneficial outcome ([Schneiderman, Jecker, and Jonsen 1990](#)).
 - For policy-makers and administrators, medical futility involves the allocation of already scarce health care resources and the overconsumption of services and drugs with no positive outcome ([Gabbay et al. 2010](#)).
 - For some governments, health care allocation is also driven by principles of social justice in terms of priorities in health care budgets.
 - For dying patients and their families, futile treatment may mean hope and miracles—a chance to be cured, no matter how slim that chance may be ([Hakim et al. 1996](#)).

The Case

- A 72-year-old Buddhist man suffered a cardiac arrest and was placed on life support and intravenous medication.
- The day following the cardiac arrest, the doctors reported that tests indicated brain death and suggested that life support should be removed and all other treatment ceased.
- The family refused to remove the life support because the man's heart was still beating and, therefore, in their belief, the man's "mind" was still in the body and not ready to move onto another rebirth.
- To prevent the cessation of life support, the family took legal action against the hospital and, at the same time, the hospital fought legally to remove the life support.
- Eventually agreement was reached that all medication could be ceased but not the life support.

A Brief Introduction into Buddhism



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- Buddhism is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, who lived in India in the 6th century BCE.
- The sight of a baby (birth), an old man (ageing), an ill person (sickness), a dead body (death), and a holy man led this former prince on a spiritual search to explain the cause of suffering and to find means to its cessation.
- Because of this journey, death is a prominent theme in Buddhist scriptures (*sutta* in Pali) and an important part of the Buddhist practice.
- Buddhism focuses on personal spiritual development. Buddhists strive for a deep insight, through meditation, self-reflection, and practice, into the true nature of this life and aim to achieve a state of perfect peace through a mental and physical state known as “Enlightenment” (*Nibbana*).

Impermanence

- From a Buddhist perspective, all existence is impermanent because there is nothing, internal or external, that is permanent, stable, lasting, not subject to decay and destruction.
- Nothing ever remains the same. Everything changes continuously, from moment to moment. Buddhist patients understand that the human body consists of material elements such as flesh, bones, and blood, which are impermanent.
- From the moment of birth, the body constantly undergoes change. The change can be experienced as happiness or suffering. Whether it is happiness or suffering is, again, ever-changing.

Suffering

- The Truth of Suffering is the first of the Four Noble Truths taught by the Buddha ([Loy 1983](#)). Buddhists believe that all emotions are painful (or cause suffering).
- This applies not only to “negative” emotions, such as pain, anger, or aggression, but also to “positive” emotions, such as love or kindness.
- All emotions imply duality—human beings experience or hope for the emotion while its presence or absence causes suffering. Emotions are therefore seen as something without an independent existence.
 - (For example, when thirsty people see a mirage of water, they feel pleasure or happiness, until they discover it is not real—the mirage disappears.)

There Is No-Self

- Perception of impermanence should be cultivated for the elimination of the conceit “I am,” since perception of not-self becomes established in one who perceives impermanence; and it is perception of not-self that arrives at the elimination of the conceit “I am,” which is extinction (*Nibbana*) here and now. (The Buddha cited in Wijeselera 1982, 12).

Karma

- The law of Karma explains why illness, accidents, and disasters may occur to some persons, while others may enjoy a happy life—free, healthy, and joyful ([Keown 1996](#)).
- The law of Karma is known in many religious teachings, as well as in many other cultures. It is represented by The Golden Rule, which says: *Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.*
- Buddhist teachings emphasise that whatever you do to others will be done to you, in this life or any future reincarnation.
- Karma means that what we have done earlier affects our life now.

Conclusion

- The case study, provided along with this brief explanation of Buddhism and its relationship to medical futility, provides some guidance for health professionals.
- Specifically we note that, although the concept of medical futility is not discussed openly in Buddhist scripture and text, one can see how the teachings of impermanence, suffering, emptiness, and Karma would influence the decisions of the Buddhist on the level of further participation in medical treatment.
- Health professionals should also realise that, to the Buddhist, the mind is not in the brain. The mind, like the body, is constantly changing.

Discussion

- Although there is a moral precept against intentional killing, withdrawal of treatment and letting a person die of natural causes would be acceptable in Buddhist doctrine, if the intention is to reduce further suffering and the actions taken do not interfere with the ability of the mind to complete its tasks at the time of death.
- In contrast, participating in unnatural shortening of the lifespan is not good Buddhist practice and has karmic implications.
- In this case study, the Buddhist family were agreeable to removing the medications that might unnatural keep the heart beating, but were not convinced by the brain death diagnosis that the mind of their father was ready to move from this life (and, thus, were not ready to remove the other forms of life support).
- While the heart continued to beat on its own, the mind was still present.

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Thank you

