

D9-- STEPHEN LEVINE INTERVIEW, "SUICIDE ISN'T PAINLESS", SALON, 6/2/97

Death guru Stephen Levine wants to legalize assisted suicide -- but only for physical reasons. In other situations, taking one's life is just impatient, sloppy, a "shortcut."

BY FRED BRANFMAN | Stephen Levine is known as a pioneer in the field of death and dying. His books, including "Who Dies?" have sold nearly a million copies. His latest, "One Year to Live," reports on an experiment he and his wife, Ondrea, conducted in living 1995 as if it were their last year on earth. Early students of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and Ram Dass and co-directors for three years of a telephone hot line counseling the dying and bereaved, Stephen and Ondrea Levine live in a remote area of New Mexico.

People who commit suicide seem to fall into two categories. There are people who get severely depressed, like the writer Michael Dorris, Adm. Michael Boorda or Vince Foster. And there are those, like the Heaven's Gate folks, who commit suicide for what they feel is a higher purpose. When do you feel suicide is appropriate, and when isn't it?

Almost no one kills themselves because they don't want to live. Most people kill themselves because they want to live so much, and this intention is thwarted by some exterior means -- whether it's an untreatable illness, or an illness that has gone to its limit in the treatment, and one is left with just the vague outline of what a life would be. I mean, there's still sensation and still consciousness, but the sensations are filled with pain, and the consciousness is filled with fatigue and dismay and depression.

My sense is that to kill yourself for mental reasons -- for depression -- is impatience. I mean, we all know if we just wait a minute, the mind will change. It changes just like the weather. The clouds part and the sun comes out, unexpectedly.

There are alternatives, and as long as there are alternatives, to kill yourself means really jumping the gun. You know, if you gave a bottle

of blue pills to everyone that had a terminal diagnosis, and you said, "Any time you want, you can take these pills," they'd live longer and more people would even heal. Because if they knew they could get out at any time, they might just say at 4 in the morning, "I can make it just one more day, because I always have this out."

Now, we're talking about mental pain for which people feel only death will suffice. Certainly depression can be medicated. But there are certain levels of physical pain, physical degeneration, where there are no other options -- like in ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis -- Lou Gehrig's disease), in advanced illnesses like AIDS, say. And unless you've lain in their bed for 30 days, you really can't judge. You're laying in a bed from which you cannot move, you may not be able to speak, you may not be able to think clearly. You may have no one around to support or advise you, or even hold your hand, even in silence, when you're going through tough times.

I understand these people taking their life because the physical vehicle no longer can be maintained in a way that life is even recognizable from within. And I think it's very tricky for anyone to say they shouldn't do that. Let's see how those people who judge suicide do when it's them laying in that sweaty bed, incontinent, unable to think or speak clearly, in enormous physical distress.

As you know, the question of assisted suicide is before the Supreme Court now. Do you favor laws that permit assisted suicide?

Yes, but they're very tricky.

But only for physical reasons, not emotional or mental?

Right, right ... and it's very tricky, case by case. I've been with people who've gone through it. I've seen people who thought they had to die, and I've seen them do rituals that allowed it to be a conscious death. How many people know the moment that they're going to die? Only people who are killed by the state, or people who commit suicide.

And also, it should be noted that the taking of one's life volitionally, although we call that suicide, is honored in every culture -- if it's done on the battlefield, if it's done in the protection of another human being. As one of the great Zen masters, Dzogchen, said, you do not create karma by committing suicide. You create karma from the way you commit suicide. We know that all reactions, all karma, all momentum, whatever you want to call it, comes from the intention behind the act.

A Buddhist monk sits down in the streets of Vietnam and immolates himself with gasoline, and all of a sudden we're aware that 100,000 children are burning, covered with napalm, in the jungles of Vietnam. Or there's the 87-year-old fellow who kills himself rather than take the fourth regime of chemotherapy, which will leave his wife a bag lady when he dies.

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Many people really object to the Buddhist monks and nuns burning themselves alive. They say they could have been so much more useful in other ways.

I think that actions done for the benefit of other sentient beings, not done out of a sense of "not-enoughness," but a sense of "enoughness," out of a sense of love and wholeness, that those actions are the actions in the world most liable to breed possibly positive results.

I always worry that someone hearing this could say, "Well, I could be as saintly as the nun or the monk is, if I did the same thing." No! Because she had to go through her own minefield. For somebody else

doing it, it might be showy. It might be theater. They might say, "Gee, that's a sexy way to die. I'll immolate myself."

Some deaths are a form of great giving. But I think that very few people are capable of that. I think most people kill themselves as a means of punishing others. I think that almost no one can kill themselves with a clear intention.

So if there was a law permitting assisted suicide, would you put any limits on it?

I would limit it to the physical. If a person is going to [commit suicide for other reasons], why involve another human being? It's all very tricky when you start to have someone else carry your load for you.

How do you distinguish between an assisted suicide, a Buddhist monk's suicide and what the Heaven's Gate members did?

I think the Heaven's Gate thing was just a waste of good concentration. If those guys had put their consciousness into something that had been more fruitful, they would have gotten some of the levels of consciousness that they thought they had to go elsewhere to find.

I mean, my feeling when I hear about Heaven's Gate is, "Only 38 people killed themselves? Wow, what a good day this must have been." I mean, when you think that 250,000 people die every day, every day, on this planet, that more of it isn't suicide? I think that it's a miracle.

What was your emotional reaction to the Heaven's Gate people killing themselves?

Nothing.

You weren't horrified by it, like most people?

No. I'm more horrified when I see a bunch of people join the John Birch Society, to tell you the truth. Much more horrified.

The Heaven's Gate people's intentions were to know more completely their great nature. The way they went about it was sloppy and more mechanical, in the wrong ranges, from my point of view. But they had the commitment that it takes ... you know, you have to be willing to die to be fully alive. To the degree you're unwilling to die, you back into a corner. You back into safe territory. And you eventually find yourself with a 90-degree view of life, instead of a 360. You're experiencing about a quarter, literally, of what there is to be experienced, as William James pointed out very clearly.

I thought you were making an interesting point. The Buddhist nun killed herself to help her fellow beings. The Heaven's Gate folks killed themselves just to help themselves.

Exactly ... that's right ... Again, it's based on intention. The Buddhist nun's act was for the benefit of all sentient beings. The guys and women laying in the bed, the 38 or 39 of them, was for their own enlightenment. The bodhisattva vow says, I will not take on my final liberation as long as space remains, as long as living beings continue to suffer. I vow, until the final blade of grass is liberated, to stay and serve.

But I'm not going to judge them. I mean, I think it was very American. They were looking for shortcuts.

Well, everybody else was horrified by it, so I just want to offer you the chance to say if you see any negative sides to it.

No, you're asking for something that's not there. You want me to be negative about it. I have nothing negative to say about the Heaven's Gate people who killed themselves.

You won't judge them, even though they killed themselves only for their own consciousness and not for the benefit of all sentient beings?

Those who do not get up this morning and act in their own self-interest, let them cast the first stone. I mean, horrified? Sure. But I say to those people who are horrified, "What did you do today to make the world less suicide-prone?" It's better to act than just to make this kind of judgment, which is actually very suicidal. Because if you judge another, you'll judge yourself. The judging mind doesn't know the difference between "I" and "other." It just judges.

My feeling is it was sloppy. But that's all.

You said there was a real teaching in staying with your suffering, even if you're suffering horribly and contemplating suicide. What precisely is that teaching?

Pain has a lot to teach us. Pain shows us that pain is a given, but suffering comes from resistance to that pain. You know, if there was no pain in the world, there would be no compassion in the world. And if we did not experience the state of mind of compassion, we would remain unwhole.

And pain does another thing. Pain attracts grief. Around the physical pain you can hear the voices of grief: distrust, anger, self-pity, a general sense of dismay, of groundlessness. So it gives you an opportunity to work on things that are very deep, to bring them to the surface. It gives us a chance to touch with mercy and loving kindness parts of ourselves that we have ostracized, that we send hatred into.

So what pain does is to access our suffering, if we can work with it. But you don't wait until you have a 500-pound-pain to do it. You start working with the little daily pains. All the stuff we're able to suppress, that are just little things, that are the things of the preciousness of life that we can work with to free ourselves, so that we build the capacity to keep the heart open even in hell.

Because you know it isn't just our own body laying there racked with pain. What if it's your 5-year-old daughter? How do you stay present, how do you keep your toes from being curled so tightly in your shoes that your "souls," so to speak, are not cramped at night? How do you

keep your belly soft? How do you keep the contact in love instead of fear, instead of rage at God? Instead of absolute confusion and fear and helplessness and forgetfulness?

So I mean, all of this work isn't just for the benefit of ourselves, it's for the benefit of all sentient beings.

How do you handle it if someone who is in a lot of physical pain comes to you and says, "I'm thinking of committing suicide." Do you just lay out the options for them and give them the choice? Or do you encourage them one way or the other?

I show them the options, I show them the practices that can be used to work with physical and mental pain. I show them the value of working with things as they are.

Here's an example. This isn't physical, this is mental pain. A woman comes to us. She says, "Alzheimer's is very strong in my family. The last 20 years of my life have been given to taking care of my mother, father, a sister and a brother, all of whom came down with Alzheimer's around the age of 50. One lived 11 years, another seven. I really haven't had a life of my own. I've given my life to Alzheimer's and my family.

"Now I am the last remaining member of the family. I'm 52 years old. I've never had a life of my own. When my father died a year or so ago, I thought, this is the last one, I have my life back. And then I started to notice some of the symptoms I saw in them arise in me. There is nobody left to take care of me. I'm not going through this in some county hospital in some dark corner, smelling of urine and drooling on my shirt. I'm just not going to do it. I've seen what it's like, I'm going to take my life now, I will not go through it."

We say, "Well, why are you taking your life now? Right at this moment, look at how alive you are. You're completely ambulatory, you're completely present. You have some forgetfulness, but it's not that much that you aren't with the conversations that are going on. Why don't you use your own genius for healing? This thing that's so ready

to run out and kill itself, let's let that sit by itself for awhile. Why don't you spend some quiet time? Look into your heart. Listen to what is called the still small voice within. And see what your genius for healing can do."

Six months later, we saw her, we said, "Wow! You're still alive?" A great way to greet somebody. "You still alive?" She laughed. I said, what did you do? She said, "I came to the workshop ready to kill myself. But I left ready to see another alternative. Because you didn't say, 'Don't kill yourself,' I didn't have to argue with that. I could just put it aside, I didn't have to put tension and fear and self-judgment around it. I could let my heart continue to open to other alternatives, because you didn't close it there."

I said, "What did you do?" She said, "I took my blue pills and I put them in my best crystal goblet, and I put it on the mantle over the fireplace. And next to the goblet with my blue pills, I put a little note that said, 'If you don't know what these pills are for, take them.'"

And that's how she worked it out. Different people have to work it out different ways. But I think to take away from a person the right to alleviate suffering in their body is fascistic.

Most of your work, at least in the public mind, has been identified with people who are either dying or bereaved or dealing with a dying relative or have a terminal illness, in other words, with the process of dying itself. Your new book seems to be a departure. It seems you're reaching for a wider audience of people who may not be facing death immediately.

In 25 years of working with the dying, I've seen remarkable things happen in the last year of their lives. I've seen healings occur, a finishing of business, qualities of creativity and kindness, that hadn't really predominated through a person's life. And I thought, "Gee, it's kind of a shame that it always happens at the end of a person's life." I've always thought, and Ondrea and I have talked about this repeatedly, how wonderful it would be if that happened in the middle of someone's life, so the deathbed wasn't such a scramble for the

light. So there wasn't so much tension, so much unsaid, so many letters to write, recordings to make, amends to make, forgiveness to make and forgiveness meditations to do, etc. etc.

So we are suggesting now to people, don't wait until the June rush to do the work that is to be done before we die. Why don't you take a year now, and start to see what it would be like if you were confronting death? What changes would you make in your life? I don't mean just leaving jobs, which you wouldn't necessarily do during this exercise. More importantly, I've seen relationships heal, I've seen children and parents coming together, and brothers and sisters coming together, and forgiving each other, and lovers really coming to the heart together.

I think this is all a little bit of a trick on the mind, on awareness, to get us to pay attention. If we would pay as much attention to the toast popping out of the toaster as we pay to our body falling away and no longer being able to experience life, then we would be enlightened by the toast popping out of the toaster. But we don't pay attention on that level.

In the actual last year of our life our concentration might not be that good, there may be a million distractions from the side effects of medication, or the side effects of the illness itself. Really, if you're going to have a last year to live, you can't wait till your last year to do it. It's got to be done now.

June 2, 1997

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