

# Chapter 1

## Buddhism and Human Genetic Research

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### ABSTRACT

*What the author is trying to do in this chapter is to explore how Buddhism, especially Theravāda Buddhism as adopted in Thailand, responds to the advancements of human genetic research in the modern world. Buddhism has a certain number of doctrinal beliefs normally differing from those in the theistic tradition, making Buddhism respond to genetic research in a certain way. The way Buddhism responds to genetic research could be characterized as a kind of humanistic view. This kind of view is mainly based on human wisdom and rational investigation of the problem. Belief as normally understood in terms of religion plays a lesser role in Buddhist ethics. The following will show the positions of Buddhism on the problems raised by genetic research. As the concept of personhood plays the key role in the debates over human genetic research, the author will start with this point. As human genetic research raises so many issues that it is impossible to explore all of them, the chapter will then focus on some of these issues, namely human cloning and the use of embryonic stem cells in medical practice.*

### THE CONCEPT OF PERSONHOOD IN BUDDHISM

The concept of personhood plays a significant role in modern bioethical debate as a number of the biomedical problems are concerned with the question of what should be counted as a person. For example, the embryo explored by the scientist

could be harmed in some cases. Normally such harm is meaningful only if it occurs to a person. The problem then arises that if the embryo is a person, then the work done by the scientist in these cases can be debated in terms of morality. Abortion seems to be an explicit case showing that the definition of personhood is the most basic task. To judge whether abortion is morally wrong or not, we must first decide whether the fetus is a person.

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The question concerning personhood is problematic in that it is closely involved with human biological developments in the womb. Certainly, at some stage of development we could argue that the fetus is person because he or she can express some basic human qualities, such as the response to external objects, the reaction implying the feeling of pain, and so on. But at some stage of development, the very beginning state in which the fetus has no biological properties indicating that it is different from a cluster of cells, the concept of personhood seems hardly attributable to the fetus. There have been attempts by philosophers and scientists to establish a clear-cut definition of personhood through empirical measures such as medical data. For example, they use the appearance of the nervous system as a clear indication that the fetus is person, whereas before that it is not. Even though this method greatly benefits us, that does not mean it is unproblematic. It could be said that such a definition of personhood is more practical than philosophical. Something practical does not necessarily need strong justifications. So those who adopt the definition of personhood as stated above can be questioned as to why something without a nervous system should not be counted as a person.

It seems that ultimately the views concerning the problem of personhood can be grouped into two sets. The first set looks at the issue in terms of convention. For the philosopher of this set, personhood is merely a convention of society. We stipulate conventions for the purpose of social utility. For example, to protect good people from harm by bad people, we stipulate that people have the right to their life and property, and we say that in such a case people are persons in the sense of those who can claim rights over their life and property when these things are violated. The murderer before committing murder is counted as a person also, but after that his personhood can be changed. In the case of the death sentence, it seems that we do not accept that the murderer is a person. If we accept him as a person we can

never punish him that way. From the above, we find that one may be person at some time and not a person at another time. It is a convention of society to determine personhood through the process of law. Another set of philosophers do not agree with this theory of personhood. For them, the study of personhood should not be associated merely with legal convenience. On the contrary, legal reasoning must be based on metaphysical reasoning or something deeper than legality. It seems that for the philosophers of the second set ontological investigation must be inevitably applied to the study of personhood.

In general, Buddhism shares the idea of the second set. One of the major characteristics of Buddhist philosophy is its naturalistic feature. Being naturalistic in this context means that truths are out there in nature, not in human imagination. So, in exploring truth, Buddhism explores nature. In the case of personhood, what is explored by Buddhism is the nature of human beings. This leads to questions concerning the basic concepts of human life, such as: what is the meaning of personhood according to Buddhism; when does personhood occur; what should be counted as a violation of personhood. We will examine these questions below.

## **The Meaning of Personhood**

Normally, Buddhism is viewed as a religion that rejects the existence of the self. This sometimes leads to the belief that there is no concept of personhood in Buddhist teaching. As understood by Buddhism, there are two meanings of personhood. One is the substantial meaning, and another is the non-substantial one. The Hindu theory of personhood can be cited as an example of the first meaning. For Hinduism, the self (*ātman*) is the essence of human life. The definition of personhood in Hinduism is based on this self. The self as taught by Hinduism is rejected by Buddhism, as Buddhism states that human life is composed of the five aggregates—namely, materiality, feeling,

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