Stem Cell Research and Bioethical Issues: A Buddhist Perception

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Introduction

As Buddhism continues to spread in the West, its views on contemporary issues are increasingly being sought. Both its own followers and outsiders are curious about how this ancient Asian tradition will respond to the moral dilemmas confronting the modern world. Buddhist bio-ethics as a field of academic study in the West is not new, but in recent years has experienced a considerable expansion in Asian countries as well. The schools of Buddhism have rich traditions of thought on bio-ethics. Researcher of Buddhist ethics face today is to generate a response to this new problem that is consistent with the spirit of Buddhist values and in harmony with its extensive scriptural tradition. This is no easy task since there are very few signposts or landmarks in this new terrain. After all, the earliest Buddhist canonical literature is well over two thousand years old, and many of the problems we face today are the result of modern social, economic and technological developments which could scarcely have been imagined during ancient times. In building a bridge from the old to the new, there are many possible pitfalls and dangers, and it is far too early to speak of definitive solutions. At the same time, it becomes pertinent to investigate how things work out in practice among Buddhists, who naturally operate in a world in which their religion is one of the factors that affect their behavior.

Debates over stem cell research are commonly framed as being between science and religion. The stem cell research is comparatively a new discipline applicable to scientific experiments concerning primarily with medical treatment which is progressing at a fast pace in modern era. Though initially, it was aimed at reconstructing the vital body organs, but now it is inclined towards cloning the human. There is a rapid and astonishing progress in the field of cloning since the making of “Dolly” – the first cloned sheep, a few two decades ago. So, now we need to assess the situation and decide whether we should go ahead with cloning a whole human being or not. Stem cell research and cloning should be viewed with the focus in mind that it causes injury towards animal and plant species during experimental studies in laboratories. The ethical issues and religious perspectives need to be judged to take a final decision by the scientific forum. Though Judaism and Islam are vocal in their support of cloning research, but Christianity has blanket prohibition. Judging the intensity of human ambitions and the fact that there exists no strict judicious control over stem cell research at present, cloning technology is also not encouraged according to the Buddhist Bioethics. Stem cell research and cloning should be viewed with the focus in mind that it causes injury towards animal and plant species during experimental studies in laboratories. Scientists see great potential for the use of human stem cells in the treatment of many medical conditions, including Parkinson’s and Alzheimer’s diseases, diabetes, spinal cord injuries and degenerative heart conditions. Given the emphasis that Buddhism places on the central virtues of knowledge (prajña), compassion (karuna) and its long tradition of practicing medicine in the monasteries, the prospect of developing cures and treatments that alleviate human suffering should be welcomed. Buddhism, however, also places great importance on the principle of
ahimsa, or non-harming, and therefore has grave reservations about any scientific procedure that destroys life - whether human or animal. While Buddhism has no central authority competent to pronounce on ethical dilemmas, like other religions, it would appear that there is no ethical problem in principle with the therapeutic use of adult stem cells; but research involving the intentional destruction of human life, such as harvesting embryonic stem cells, is morally impermissible. The proposed paper will deal with the benefits of stem cell research, Buddhist concept of life, Buddhist bioethics with regard to cloning and other related issues of stem cell research from Buddhist bioethical point of view.

Bioethics:

Bioethics is a recent contemporary phenomenon as a field of study traceable to several causes and the most important cause is the issues that have captured the contemporary mind because they represent major conflicts in the area of technology and basic human values, those dealing with life, death, and health. Although many bioethical issues have been discussed since ancient times, the introduction of modern biomedical technologies, especially since the 1950s, has intensified some age-old questions and has given rise to perplexing new problems, mainly the prolongation of life, euthanasia, prenatal diagnosis and abortion, human experimentation, genetic interventions and reproductive technologies, behavior control and psychosurgery, the definition of death, animal rights, allocation of scarce health resources, and dilemmas in the maintenance of environmental health. Secondly, there is an intense and widespread interest in bioethics because it offers a stimulating intellectual and moral challenge. The third is, the rapid growth of the field of bioethics has been facilitated by the openness to multidisciplinary work that characterizes many scholars and academic institutions today, especially in matters dealing with personal and social aspects of human behavior.

Bioethics is a composite term derived from the Greek words bios (life) and ethike (ethics). It can be defined as the systematic study of human conduct in the area of the life sciences and health care, insofar as this conduct is examined in the light of moral values and principles. Bioethics extends to the value-related problems, biomedical and behavioral research, social issues and it also extends beyond human life and health to embrace issues involving animal and plant life. The concept of bioethics within it provides the ethical and philosophical foundations for the concept of peaceful and harmonious co-evaluation of humanity and bio-environment. It can be considered both a conceptual science with philosophical dimension and, at the same time, a direction of practical activities. From a philosophical perspective, bioethics closely related to principle of reverence for life. Of paramount importance for bioethics is the philosophical idea that any individual, any form of bios is of unique, absolute value. The underlying philosophical idea of intrinsic unity of human and non-human life entails the responsibility of humans for all bios. The development of bioethics calls for overcoming these attitudes as considering the living things only useful tools and reductional attitudes towards life denying the principal difference between living beings and non-living matter.

What is good, what is bad? What is right, what wrong? What ought I to do or not to do? What, when I have done it, will be for a long time for my sorrow ... or my happiness? (Lakkhana Sutta D. III.157)
Bioethical Issues:

Bioethics has become a truly international phenomenon. Bioethics is grounded in and has implications for the religious, political, and legal elements of cultures. As a field of inquiry, bioethics has coveted an international political forum. Secular Western bioethics in particular lays claim to a universal account of proper and moral deportment, including the foundations of law and public policy, as well as the moral authority for national and international institutions to guarantee uniformity of practice, secure basic human rights, and promote social justice. Bioethical expertise is widely sought in the framing of public and institution policy. Religious and cultural moral diversity runs deep; it strides the divisions that separate regional, religious, and cultural biomedical and moral perspectives. This study would provide a view of the state of bioethical reflection across the world at the threshold of the 21st century. On the one hand, they amply demonstrate that interest in bioethics spans the globe. It is also helpful to consider a number of axes along which moral difference in bioethics can be displayed. We have attempted to discuss the problems of stem cell research in Bioethics. Our intention has been to raise all the issues which are related to Bioethical problems faced by the world which have resulted due to the new technology, different world views and transportation of Buddhism to different societies. As the twenty-first century ills the horizon, one of the greatest challenges facing Buddhism, in this modern world, is to evolve a perspective on bio-ethical issues which is both comprehensive and systematic. Though, it is beyond the scope of any single study to achieve both of these goals.

Recent decades have witnessed an explosion of interest in all aspects of Buddhist Studies while this fundamental dimension of the Buddhist ethos, which is relevance across the boundaries of sect and school, has become an academic backwater. Only recently have the signs appeared that this neglected is to be remedied and the initiative has come not from the Buddhist Studies but from within the ‘emerging and yet ill-defined area of the comparative study of religious ethics’ (Little, D. and Twiss: 1978). This discipline has stimulated some useful periodical literature dealing inter alia with the ethics of Buddhism (Reynolds, 1979). Much of the work on Buddhism, however, is in the form of tentative forays into the field and there has as yet been no systematic study which provides a characterization of the formal structure of the Buddhist ethical system using the typology of philosophical ethics.

Bio-Ethics and Buddhism:

If Buddhism does not rise to the challenge of modern world it will atrophy and die. Buddhism has reached productively to its encounter with new culture and there is every reason for optimism for its engagements with bioethical problems. As the momentum of modernization gather pace, it would be difficult to maintain an ostrich like attitude and hope that problems of modernity will simply go away. Global developments in science and medical technology have meant that the modern world intrudes whatever we like it or not. Buddha had taught the existence of an eternal moral law (dhamma sanātano) and believed that through reason, analysis, reflection and meditation one could come to know the requirements of this law in any given set of circumstances.

Bioethics is quite a relevant aspect in Buddhism and has been extensively used in various Buddhist scriptures. Buddha’s teaching of non-violence and non-aggression exhibits the sublime truths of bioethics. The concept of brahmavihāras or “four sublime moods” consisting of love (maitrī), compassion (karunā), sympathetic joy
(muditā) and equanimity (upekkhā) and the six paramitas of giving (dāna), morality (sīla), patience (kṣanti), vigour (vīrya) meditation (samādhi) and wisdom (paññā) might be interpreted to reconfigure Buddhist ethics for modern world. Further describing sīla, the first one which comes into Buddhist literature is non-killing of living being (panatipāta vermāni). In the Samaññaphala Sutta of Dīgha Nikāya there are references about five kinds of seeds which take birth such as mālabījam, khandhavījam, phalubījam, aggavījam and vījavījam and there is clear instructions about doing no harm to them. In the Mettā Sutta of Suttanipāta, it has been said that the creatures which have not even taken their forms, they must be debarred from killing (bhūta vā sambhevesia vā sabbe sattā bhavantu sukkhitatta). In the Buddhavagga of Dhammapada, it has been remarked that to take birth as human beings is very difficult and at the same time to remain alive is also very difficult. Any type of killing would be akusala kamma, thus resultant would be akusala. In this way cycle of birth and death will be continued. In the Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta of Majjhima Nikāya, there is a description of jāti or birth. Here, jāti is called birth or conception because sense organs are not complete. Birth is also called sanjāti where sense of organs are complete or okkanti (decent) which means birth from womb or egg or abhinibba (coming forth) meaning spontaneous generation a birth from moisture. The appearance of groups (khandhānam patabhāvo) or acquiring of sense-bases (āyatan patilābo) is also called birth. Here in the same sutta we find descriptions about the death. Death has been defined as “cutti cavantā bhedo antardhanan maccu marnaṃ kālandiriyā khandhānak bhedo kalavarassanākkhepo jivātidriyassupacchado (the separation, difference, extinction, death, end due to time factor, extinction of constituent elements of beings, decline of body etc. is called death)”.

Buddhist interpretation of Stem Cell Research
Buddhism is a response to what is fundamentally an ethical problem, the perennial problem of the best kind of life for man to lead. The invitation extended to his followers was to participate in the highest and best form of human life, to live a ‘noble’ life. This form of life embraces both seeing the world in the way the Buddha came to see it, and acting in it in the way he acted. The goal, then, is not simply the attainment of an intellectual vision of reality or the mastery of doctrine (although it includes these things) but primarily the living of a full and rounded human life. No set of ethical teachings, however extensive, can define in advance all the circumstances in which ethical problems can arise. Every age faces new problems, and there is little specific guidance in Buddhist canonical sources, for instance, on the ethical dilemmas we face today as a result of the scientific and technological advances in the 20th century. No doubt responses to these issues could be deduced from the ancient teachings, but it must be said that the Buddhist tradition throughout its long history has shown little initiative in developing and refining the tools of ethical analysis which might assist us in formulating such responses. In comparison with the Semitic religions, for instance, Buddhism has hardly made a start.

Stem cells are blank cells that have the potential to develop into any type of cell in the body: nerve cells or kidney cells. Scientists are trying to harvest the cells before they have been differentiated, then coax them into becoming certain types. From this point of view it appears that Buddhist bioethics would definitely support the good harvests from stem cell research for primordial prevention and treating chronic and debilitating morbid conditions like diabetes, coronary heart disease, Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, stroke, cancer etc. Here it is imperative to mention here that the stem cell
research is comparatively a new discipline applicable to scientific experiments concerning primarily with medical treatment (Barua: 2005). According to Buddhism, organ or tissue donation is a commendable act of compassion; but it is a matter of individual conscience. Therefore, according to Buddhism, organ tissue donation, which is a commendable act of compassion, is an act supported through Buddhist Ethics. Buddhist ethics would definitely bag the good harvests because of stem cell research for treating different types of diseases as mentioned above.

There are however, some risks in stem cell research, which Buddhist would never afford, for the following reasons. Buddhist Ethics epitomized in a single term sīla or morality would represent, apart from its religious significance, some old values reintroduced and reinforced during the 6th century BCE by the Buddha for the welfare of the many, for the happiness of the many. Dr. Ian Wilmut, who created Dolly the Sheep in 1997, is also opposed the idea of cloning human beings through stem cell research because in this process some of the cloned animals like mice and goats died. A similar outcome may also be expected in case of human cloning. There is apprehension if not properly utilized, cloned human organs would be destroyed, ultimately causing injury to living beings (Barua: 2005). Hence such a futile attempt at human cloning would be quite opposite to the statement regarding the non-injury to life as depicted in the Brahmajāla Sutta and the Sāmaññaphala Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya records: pānātipātam pahāya pānātipātā paṭṭivirato samāno gotamo nihita daṇḍonihi sattho lajji dayāpanno sabbapāṇabhūta hitānukam piviharatīti. (Dīgha Nikāya: 1890-1911). These Suttas also note: bījagāmo bhūtagāma samāram bhapaṭṭivirato samano gotamo (Dīgha Nikāya: 1890-1911).

Buddhist teachings which have been codified with the far reaching implications in a simple word sīla which constitutes the very foundation with its two reinforced pillars of mettā (Skt. maitrī), ‘loving kindness’ (Ratnakula: 1999) as also karuṇā, (compassion), of the grand edifice of Buddhism and represents, of properly examined, not an orthodox legacy of Buddha’s ethical teachings, but a set of universal moral codes covering the humanity at large. The Buddha’s profound appreciation for the universal existence of suffering evoked a great compassionate response (karuṇā) and loving kindness (mettā) for all living beings. The very first percept among the Five Precepts (pañcasīla), which form the minimum code of ethics for all the followers of Buddhism, involves abstention from injury to life. Hence, such a futile attempt at human cloning would be quite opposite to the concept of non-injury to life as mentioned in the Dīgha Nikāya of Pāli literature (Dīgha Nikāya. 1890-1911). It is explained as casting aside of all forms of weapons and being conscientious about depriving a living being of life and promotes the cultivation of compassion and sympathy for all living beings. Buddhism also tirelessly advocates the virtues of non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion in all human pursuits.

The Pātimokkha Pāli (Vinaya Piṭaka: 1956) of the Vinaya categorizes the transgression of this rule as a Pācittiya offence. Here, I would like to draw the attention of scholars towards a particular term in Buddhism namely bīja which means seed, germ, semen, spawn which is very frequently used in the figurative sense. (Gupta, S: 2001) According to the Aṭṭhāsalini, another word is bīja-gāma which signifies seed-groups, seedkingdom, seed-creation. There are five kinds of seeds usually enumerated in Buddhist Literature as mūla, khandha, phala, agga, bīja or plants propagated by roots, cuttings, joints, buddings, shoots, seeds (Hienberg: 2001). The above-mentioned Pāli Suttas strictly enjoin abstinence from destroying not only human lives, but also trees and plants or in other words all living beings (Davis: 1906-07).
From the Buddhist ethical point of view, non-injury (ahimsā) to all types of life is commendable. The Kārṇiyamettā enjoins the practice of mettā towards all living creatures, timid and bold, short and long, small and big, minute and great, invisible and visible, near and far, waiting birth and born (Aṅguttara Nikāya: 1885-1900). The Mettā Sutta, the blueprint of loving kindness, tells us how this boundless compassion should be cultivated towards all living beings without any distinction whatsoever (Sutta Nipāta) such as the Buddha’s mettā, in the Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra, is like dharma-rain which makes everyone happy, taking them towards Nibbāna as well (Soothill, W. E.: 1956). In fact the Mahāmaṅgala Sutta (Dharmarakshita: 1977) of the Sutta Nipāta lays down living in a congenial surrounding (paṭirūpadesavāsa) as a blessing or good fortune (maṅgala).

In this perspective, stem cell research should not be encouraged under any circumstance (Damien, K: 1995). From Buddhist point of view karuṇā means compassion which is the sublime emotion that impels one to help another in distress (Saṃyutta Nikāya: 1884-1898). In the Vajrachedikā Prajñāpāramitā Sūtra the Buddha says, ‘The great friendliness marked by providing what is beneficial; the great compassion by protection’. He also taught His disciples to have ‘compassion on all creatures’ (SaṃyuttaNikāya: 18841898) and ‘never to destroy the life of any living creature, however tiny it may be’ (Sarao: 2010). The Buddha strongly upheld the purity of heart filled with loving-kindness marked with the principle of ‘live and let live’ to promote tolerance, compassion and love for all living beings/creatures. If we practice the Buddha’s teachings and truly follow the principle of love and compassion towards all living beings including forests and their inhabitants, that would create a balanced and happy environment which means each of us must make a sincere effort to take seriously our responsibility for each other and for the natural environment (Batchelor, S., & Brown, K.: 1994).

**Buddha’s view on issues of Stem Cell Research as depicted in Pāli Literature**

All of intentional killings (vadhacetanā) according to Buddhist ethics are regarded as immoral acts. Even though killing is done with the object of putting an end to suffering cannot be accepted as morally justifiable, for it is a transgression of the first precept or pānātipāta. With regard to the first precept one should neither injure, nor cause injury to living beings, from a tiny insect up to man. The Buddhist attitude to non-violence is well illustrated in the following lines:

All living beings tremble at punishment, all living beings fear death; comparing others with oneself, one should neither kill, nor cause to kill. All living beings tremble at punishment. Life is dear to all; comparing others with oneself, one should neither kill, nor cause to kill (Dhp. 129-130.). Let him not destroy, or cause to be destroyed, any life at all, or sanction the acts of those who do so. Let him refrain even from hurting any creature, both those that [are] strong and those that tremble in the world (Sn. 393.).

The Buddha laid down the rule that a monk, who intentionally deprives a human being of life, commits defeat (pārājika), and he is not in communion. According to Buddhist ethics, man was not created by God as the conservative held, but created by his own kamma or action. It disagrees with suicide and all types of killings or harming living beings or beings that are about to take birth not because they are against the will of
God, but because they are against the natural formation of life according to the following five factors:

1) **Utuniyāma**: The physical inorganic law, such as the four elements (*dhātu*), namely, earth (*pathavī*), water (*āpo*), fire (*tejo*), and wind (*vāyo*), etc., which constitute human body.

2) **Bījaniyāma**: The physical organic law or the order of germs and seeds, as in the statement: “As the seed, so the fruit”. The scientific theory of cells and genes belong to this law.

3) **Cittaniyāma**: The psychic law or the order of working of mind, such as the functions of consciousness in the process of sensation (*vedanā*) and cognition (*saññā*).

4) **Kammaniyāma**: The kammic law which relating to moral causation or the order of action and its effect.

5) **Dhammaniyāma**: The law of the norm governing the relationship and interdependence of all things, that is the way all things arise, exist and then cease, such as all beings experience birth (*jāti*), aging (*jarā*), sickness (*bayādhi*), and death (*marana*) as a normal conditions. Simply speaking, it is the law of Dependent Origination (*pañiccasamuppāda*). It is the most universal law that contains the first four niyāmas.

Taking life and using any means are regarded as against these natural laws. Buddhism believes that as long as a man is breathing and in procession of his consciousness (*citta*) he may obtain some spiritual achievement. According to Buddhist ethics, mercy killing of poor animals also is not morally justified. It is considered as a transgression of the first precept or *pānātipāta*. However, killing out of necessity and without any anger or hatred towards animals, lessens the intensity of bad results than killing through anger or hatred. The event of a series of animal killings in Western countries due to foot-and-mouth disease, in early 2001, could be seen as a ‘necessary evil’.

**Conclusion:**

Buddhism is widely respected for its benevolent and humane moral values. What is lacking in the primary and commentarial sources, however, is a systematic exposition of the theoretical framework in terms of which Buddhist ethics is to be understood. This means that we are at something of a loss when we seek solutions to new problems for which there is no scriptural paradigm, or when two or more values seem to be in conflict. This problem will come increasingly to the fore as the encounter between Buddhism and the modern West gathers pace. Buddhism responds to the moral dilemmas confronting the modern world. Bioethics is scanty mentioned in ancient sources and have received little attention down the centuries within the tradition itself. The challenge would be to generate a response to new problems that is consistent with spirit of Buddhist values and in harmony with its extensive scriptural tradition. It will be a great challenges since Buddhist literature are 2000 years old and many of these bioethical problems are result of modern social, economic and technological developments.

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102 This needed a reference, which the author neglected to provide, but the editor sought its existence and found it in P.A. Payutto’s Dictionary of Buddhism (Bangkok: Mahachulalongkornrajavidalaya University Press, 2000), p. 194, entry # 214, niyama.
Since Buddhism is considered to be a ‘way of good life’ or a ‘perfect life’, stem cell research for any purpose, whatever may be its need and urgency, cannot be encouraged. Buddhism strictly instructs abstinence from destroying not only human lives but also all living beings and the understanding of death is perceived as a process and is not an event, it supports the total brain death approach and prohibits the premature removal of organs for transplantation. Though selective stem cell research could be considered, but there is no limit to human ambitions. So, there is a high possibility that this stem cell research and cloning technology could be misused in future to pose a threat to the society. Hence, stem cell research and cloning technology for any purpose, whatever might be its need and urgency, is never encouraged by any Buddhist at all. An attempt has been made to conceptualize the modern concept of stem cell research with reference to one Buddhist point of view.
References:


