



# Applied Ethics

From *Discovering Buddhism* by Dominique Side

To illustrate how a Buddhist might approach some of the ethical problems of today, we will take the questions of abortion, vegetarianism and cloning as examples of how one can think things through from a Buddhist perspective. It is important to remember that Buddhist ethics vary considerably in emphasis from one tradition to another, so there is no single 'Buddhist' approach to any of these questions. All we can do is outline a range of possible approaches. Furthermore, in Buddhism the ethical quality of any decision is contingent on motivation and on circumstance. Each situation is unique, so the points listed below are those that would be taken into account in coming to a decision.

## Abortion

- A foetus is considered to be a living being in the sense that it is endowed with both a body and a mind. The karmic consequences of killing another being therefore apply to abortion.
- Motivation is important: if I abort my unborn baby for selfish reasons – the timing is inconvenient, I don't want to give up my career, I think I don't have the right circumstances to bring it up and so on – then this is an unethical act.
- There may be mitigating circumstances, such as when the mother's life is threatened by her pregnancy for medical reasons. This is a difficult case, since choosing abortion is tantamount to saying that the mother's life is more important than the life of the child and in Buddhism all lives are equally precious.
- If an abortion is carried out reluctantly for medical reasons, there are purification practices in Buddhism to counteract its karmic effects.

## Vegetarianism

There are many different views on vegetarianism, which make it the subject of lively debate within Buddhism. As a monk, Buddha Shakyamuni would accept whatever food he was offered as alms and did not prescribe a vegetarian diet for his monks. It is interesting to note that Asian countries that are traditionally Buddhist are not culturally vegetarian.

- The Pure Land school in Japan does not consider ethical action to be as important as devotional practice to Amida Buddha, so it rapidly became very popular with fishermen. The Japanese eat a lot of fish because the geography of their country supports little agriculture.
- Theravadins are generally not vegetarians, and Tibetans live in a climate where vegetarianism is impractical.
- Buddhists consider that the karmic effects of eating meat and fish are quite different from the effects of slaughtering animals and fish for market. It is easy to eat a hamburger, but how easy would you find it to slit the throat of a cow?



- Nevertheless, eating meat and fish is a way of participating in the chain of activities that cause animals to be killed for food, so there is some degree of karmic responsibility involved.
- Many Buddhists believe that vegetarianism is the only option if they are to be true to the principles of not killing and non-violence.
- Some Buddhists argue that modern methods used to raise and slaughter farm animals are highly insensitive to their physical and mental wellbeing, so they cause tremendous suffering to the animals and also produce unhealthy meat. They argue that vegetarianism is the only ethical option.
- Other Buddhists point out that vegetarianism is not an ethical solution because of the enormous number of insects killed through the use of pesticides on vegetable and fruit crops. Whatever one eats therefore entails some form of taking life. In Buddhism, insects are treated the same as animals: they are beings with minds, and one refrains from killing any animate being.
- The Dalai Lama has said he supports vegetarianism but occasionally eats meat on the medical advice of his doctors.

## **Cloning**

There are two types of genetic cloning:

- **therapeutic cloning** is intended to produce an embryo that can be used to generate stem cells for medical purposes. Such embryos are not allowed to develop beyond 14 days which is the point at which scientists believe the ability to feel pain is formed.
- **reproductive cloning** is intended to produce a foetus that will grow into an individual animal or human.

How would a Buddhist decide whether or not cloning is a moral activity?

- Buddhists do not have problems with the idea that we are 'playing God' by creating life since they do not believe in a creator God. Cloning and other genetic engineering techniques are therefore not sacrilegious in the way they might be to followers of other faiths.
- Motivation will be the determining factor. In the case of reproductive cloning, if one chooses to clone a child as a way to bypass the discomfort, inconvenience and/or risks of pregnancy, then that would be unethical; whereas if one chooses cloning because it is a way of bearing children without passing on hereditary diseases such as cystic fibrosis, one could be acting out of compassion and the action would be ethical.
- In the case of therapeutic cloning, the question for Buddhists is whether or not an embryo can be considered a person or animal for the first 14 days of its life. Technically, this would depend on whether a consciousness has joined with the embryo or not, and it seems that the point in time when this occurs varies from case to case and is obviously difficult to determine. Some Buddhist masters say that it is possible that, in the first few days, an embryo is not a complete being with body and mind and that therefore this form of cloning may be ethical within that time period. If this were



not the case, however, Buddhists would not wish to sacrifice the life of a foetus to aid the medical treatment of someone else since all lives are equally precious.



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