

A Concept of Person in Buddhism

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A concept of person plays significant role in modern bioethical debate as a number of the biomedical problems are concerned with a question: "That thing should be counted as person or not." For example, the embryo explored by the scientist could be harmed in some cases. Normally the harm is meaningful if it occurs to person. The problem then arises if the embryo is person, the work done by the scientist in such cases can be debated in terms of morality. Abortion seems to be the explicit case showing that the definition of personhood is the most basic task. To judge whether abortion is morally wrong or not, we must know first the fetus is person or not.

The question concerning personhood is problematic in that it is closely involved with human biological developments in the womb. Certainly, at some stage of developments we could point out that the fetus is person because he or she can express some human basic qualities such as the response to outer objects, the reaction implying the feeling of pain, and so on. But at some stage of developments, the very beginning state in which the fetus has no any biological properties indicating that it is different from a cluster of cells, the concept of person seems to be hardly attributed to the fetus. There is some attempt by philosophers and scientists to set up a clear-cut definition of personhood through empirical ways such as using medical data. For example, they use the occurrence of nervous systems to point out that after the occurrence of the nervous systems the fetus is person, before that is not. Even though this method greatly benefits us, this does not mean at all that there is no problem in it. 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 that why a thing without nervous systems should be counted not person.

What I try to seek in this paper is something that combines both practical and philosophical nature together. It seems that ultimately the views concerning the problem of personhood can be grouped into two sides. The first side looks at the issue in terms of convention. For the philosopher of this side, personhood is merely a convention of the society. We stipulate conventions for the purpose of social utilities. For example, to protect good people from the harm by bad people, we stipulate that people have the rights to their life and property; and we say that in such a case people are person in a sense of those who can claim the 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 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 above, we find that one can be person at some time and cannot be at another time. It is a convention of the society, through the process of law, to determine personhood; and nothing else. Another side of the philosophers does not agree with that theory of personhood. For them, the study of personhood should not be merely associated 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 side ontological investigation must be inevitably applied to the study of personhood.

In general, Buddhism shares the idea of the second side. One of the major characteristics of Buddhist philosophy is its naturalistic feature. Being naturalistic in this context means truths are out there in nature, not in human imagination. So, in exploring truths, Buddhism explores nature. In the case of personhood, what is

explored by Buddhism is the nature of human being. This leads to the questions concerning the basic concepts of human life such as: what is the meaning of person according to Buddhism; when personhood occurs; what should be counted as the violation of personhood. We will examine these questions as follows.

The meaning of person

Normally, Buddhism is viewed as a religion that rejects the existence of the self. This sometimes leads to the understanding that there is no concept of person in Buddhist teaching. There are two meanings of personhood, as understood by Buddhism. One is the substantial meaning, and another is the non-substantial one. The Hindu theory of person can be cited as the example of the first. For Hinduism, the self (*atman*) 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, perception, mental formation, and consciousness; and these aggregates are not substances. But the rejection of the self does not mean that there is no concept of person in Buddhist teaching. Personhood according to Buddhism is still possible even though there is no self in human life.

Buddhism defines personhood through psychological facts. For example, somewhere in the Buddhist texts, the Buddha says that suppose someone tries to kill you and you feel that you dislike the action of that man, the same action done by you is also disliked by other people. Buddhism believes that all human beings share a set of psychological properties such as self-love, death-hatred, and willing to have a good future. These psychological facts are something to be respected by other persons. The killing is wrong in Buddhist teaching because it violates self-love. Other moral codes in Buddhism can be also understood within this light.

The concept of person in Buddhism can be more understood if it is related to the contents of morality taught by Buddhism. The Five Precepts are the basic moral codes in Buddhism. They state that killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying or taking intoxicant is wrong. The first four statements are involved with other person, while the last one involved with oneself. As Buddhist ethics is naturalistic, any moral code in Buddhist teaching is understood to be justified by some natural facts. In the first four precepts two things are mentioned. The first is person's life and the second is person's belongings. Killing is concerned with person's life, and we see from above that killing is wrong because it violates a psychological fact called self-love. Stealing, sexual misconduct with other's beloved person or lying is wrong because it violates person's belongings. It should be noted that when we say that killing is wrong Buddhism does not think that it is wrong because it violates the self of other person. The transcendental self is something beyond our observation, but psychological facts are totally observable. So using these facts as the grounds of personhood is more reliable. The last statement of the five precepts is involved with oneself. Taking intoxicants is wrong because it violates self-love. One who takes intoxicants does not love himself or herself, Buddhism argues.

It should be noted that the concept of person in Buddhist teaching is in some sense closely connected with the concept of human life as the composition of the five aggregates. The connection between these two concepts can be illustrated as follows. First of all, the five aggregates play the role as the foundation of personhood. The dead man cannot be a person because he possesses only the body which is just one component of the whole five parts. The man in a coma state is counted by Buddhism a person because he possesses the whole five aggregates, even though he is not conscious. In the case of the man in the coma state, it declares that according to Buddhism the five aggregates under some conditions need not to function (to be assigned as aggregate). When we sleep and do not dream at all, it could be said that the mind and its components (mind and feeling, perception and mental formation) are temporarily out of function. So killing a sleeping man is wrong

because the man has the whole five aggregates. This line of argument is applied to the case of person in coma state or in any deeply unconscious state. Euthanasia given to person in such a state is viewed by Buddhism not different from killing conscious person. In conclusion, if that thing is proved having the whole five aggregates it is counted by Buddhism as a person.

It seems that in such a definition of person in Buddhism there is some problem concerning epistemological properties of the theory. We know that a sleeping man has the whole five aggregates because he can awake from sleeping. The patient in the coma state in some cases is very difficult to determine whether or not he or she will awake again. So the point is we know that a person has the whole five aggregates *after* his or her coming back from sleeping or deep unconscious state. Suppose we have a patient in a coma state who finally dies in that state, the question is in the view of Buddhism this person has the whole five aggregates or not. How we know that?

The answer to this question from Buddhism is partly based on a religious belief that cannot be justified by sense experience. Buddhism argues that the body of human beings cannot survive without the support of the mind. As far as the body of the patient still survives, we can assume that the mind still exists. As the five aggregates are equated to the body and the mind, so in such a case we can say that the person still possesses the whole five aggregates; and that makes him or her '*person*' in Buddhist perspective.

Summarily, the Buddhist concept of person is centered on the belief in the equal roles of the five basic parts that constitute human life. According to that belief, there is nothing playing the role as the core of human life, like the soul in theistic belief. Even though the mind seems to play the role as the leader of life, the relation between the body and the mind in Buddhist perspective is known among those who study the Buddhist teaching that not the same as dualism says. For dualist philosophers like Descartes, the body and the mind are two independent entities and between these two things the mind plays the role as the commander of the body. It is clear that Hinduism says the same thing with Descartes. For Buddhism, the mind and the body are not completely independent. Buddhism accepts that the body as biological organism has its own history. Some modern biologists say that the history of human body is the history of the gene. The gene learns to survive and that makes a thing called evolution. Desire in the view of biologists is an instinct created by the gene to serve its survival. Buddhism accepts that desire is not completely located in the mind only. It is also located in the body too. So in practicing the teaching of Buddhism, Buddhists are advised to take care of the mind and the body equally. The enlightenment of the Buddha is well known among Buddhists as a state occurring from the balanced training of the mind and the body of the Buddha himself.

When personhood occurs

Normally the soul theory claims that personhood occurs when the soul enters the body. In the Buddhist texts there are some passages mentioning the seemingly alike as the soul theory says. The Buddha says that when three conditions appear: mother and father have sexual intercourse, the mother holds a good biological state, and the mind is present; the occurrence of person arises. This statement mentions two components of human life. The first is the biological (or material) process, and the second is the immaterial one. What is called "mind" in Buddhism means something containing properties of energy rather than substance, like the soul. So the image of 'Buddhist mind' could be understood like the image of electricity. According to Buddhism, only biological fertilization is not enough to give rise to a new life. Modern Buddhist scholars seem to believe that when the egg and the sperm have united, if the mind does not enter as another condition the process of fertilization can never start. In the case of natural abortion, they explain that it occurs because of the departure of the mind from the going on fertilization process.

The Buddha did not give the explicit definition about when personhood starts, but the indirect sources seem to mention that according to Buddhism personhood starts at the first moment of fertilization. It is recorded in the monastic rules that one time a monk committed an abortion for a girl; the Buddha judged that his action is seriously wrong and that brought him a highest monastic crime. A monk who was given this kind of monastic crime judgment must be expelled from the monk community. Normally a crime done by the monk in the above case is the killing of an adult person. The Buddha considered the embryo as person like the adult, so the monk who killed the embryo through abortion was judged by Buddhist monastic rules as committing the highest crime as same as killing the adult. In the commentary to the rule said above, it is stated clearly that killing human being means destroying human life from the first moment of fertilization to human life outside the womb. So, even though the Buddha himself did not give the clear-cut definition about when personhood occurs, the Buddhist tradition, especially the Theravada tradition, clearly states that personhood starts when the process of fertilization takes place.

It is widely argued by philosophers that why the embryo should be counted as person like people outside the womb. Some philosophers said that to equate the embryo to perfectly developed man is like equating the mango seed to the mango tree. For them, these two things greatly differ. It seems that two sides of philosophers in the world are divided as they look to the different angles of the matter. The first side of philosophers looks to the embryo as merely biological unit. Certainly, as biological units the mango seed and the mango tree are not the same. Likewise, as biological units, the embryo especially at the beginning stage and totally developed person are not the same. One of the major differences between the embryo and the fully developed person is that the embryo has no any psychological properties such as thought, feeling, emotion, and so on. As these psychological properties are viewed by as the essences of personhood, the embryo is not person as it lacks these properties.

Another side of philosophers looks into another dimension in human life. They believe that the embryo is something more than biological unit. The soul is the essence of human being and this thing has been placed inside the embryo already. So, the embryo is person as it has the soul. Even though in general Buddhism shares the view with the second side, Buddhism seems to accept that we should not overlook the biological facts of the embryo. In the Buddhist texts, the biological differences of man and animal are mentioned and these differences make moral actions given to different man and animal different also. Killing elephant and killing monkey are not the same as Buddhism thinks that killing elephant is more wrong. The different weights of wrongfulness in this case are closely connected to the different sizes of the two animals. The size should be understood as the example of biological properties. In detail, other deeper properties such as the complicated developments as explored by modern biology should be added. Normally Buddhism accepts that killing human being is more wrongful than killing animal. In the texts, it is said that because human being possesses moral properties while animal does not. Moral properties in this case mean the potential to think and judge in terms of morality. In the view of biologists like Darwin, moral properties are shared by man and animal. The difference is merely the degree. That is, these properties are more developed in human being. Buddhism seems to share this view. So the concept of person in Buddhism is partly based on the acceptance of biological facts.

Animals in Buddhist perspectives are also person like human beings. Being person in the Buddhist context means containing moral properties that must be respected by others. When a man kills a tiger, he commits a wrong doing. Likewise, when a tiger kills a man, the tiger must be responsible for the action in terms of morality too. However, as Buddhism accepts that personhood in man and animal differs in degree, morally bad actions done by animals are viewed less blamable comparing with those done by human beings. This can be applied to morally good actions too. It should be

noted that man differs from animal in biological facts. Buddhism accepts that animals have the mind like human beings, but the animal mind has the limited potential because it is placed inside the lower developed organism comparing with human body. In the case of human being, a mad man is also person. So harming the mad man is morally wrong in Buddhist perspective. However, as personhood in the mad man is lower than personhood in ordinary man, the actions done by the mad man are much lesser blamable comparing with ordinary people.

The point concerning the Buddhist concept of person is that personhood in Buddhist perspective has the varieties of degree. When applied this to the status of the embryo we will find that even though the embryo is counted as person the degree of personhood of the embryo cannot be compared with fully grown person. This seems to be the middle way between the two extreme views as said above. The belief that the embryo is person makes us to be extremely cautious when we have to deal with embryonic experiments. On another side, the belief that personhood of the embryo cannot be compared with one of the fully grown person makes us have more ways to choose when we are confronted with a serious moral dilemma as found in the case of the use of embryonic stem cell for curing the disease of fully grown people. Even though Buddhist ethics is considered to be absolutistic in general, the utilitarian considerations in some cases are allowed by Buddhism. In the Buddhist texts sometimes the Buddha says that if we are compelled to do the evil things, choose to do the lesser ones. Abortion in some case is considered by Buddhist ethics as doing the lesser evil, so it is not questioned by Buddhists. In Buddhist Thailand, there are two cases of abortion allowed by law. The first is the abortion committed by a girl being raped and getting pregnant. The second is the abortion taken to protect the life of the mother. These cases are never questioned by Buddhist church in Thailand because we well know that Buddhist ethics considers the utilitarian reasons in the cases like this.

Personhood is violated under what conditions

Normally Buddhism views that killing is the violation of personhood. The first precept in Buddhist morality prohibits killing on the grounds that it is the violation of personhood. It seems that killing in this context does not include the moral suicide. In some religion suicide is prohibited as an evil. Buddhism considers suicide as something to be examined in detail before judging in terms of morality. That is, Buddhism does not view that all suicides are wrong. Taking one's own life for the benefits of other persons could be counted 'suicide' but this kind of suicide is not wrong in Buddhist perspective. In the Buddhist texts, there are a number of stories telling the tales about the merit accumulation of the *Bodhisatta* (a person with intention to be a Buddha in the future). To be the Buddha in the future, the *Bodhisatta* must practice the things called 'perfections' (*parami*). One of the major perfections is the donation (*dana*). It should be noted that there are two kinds of donation in Buddhist perspective. The first is property donation and the second is life donation. Of these two, life donation is the most excellent. The story tells that in some circumstances the *Bodhisatta* donates his life. This seems to imply that the taking of one's own life in reasonable circumstances is not the violation of personhood and counted as good deed in Buddhist perspective.

The basic problem concerning the use of stem cell from the embryo for medical purposes is centered on the concept of personhood violation. The major objection to the use of stem cell is that it is not different from killing one person and using the body of that person to cure the life of another person. This objection is very strong and this makes any attempts to support the view that we can use stem cell difficult. However, Buddhist ethics has the idea that in terms of social morality if we consider that between allowing and not allowing the use of embryonic stem cell allowing is more reasonable the use of stem cell in such a case is possible like allowing reasonable abortions as said above.

The embryo whose stem cell is used is not in the position to judge that he or she is willing to donate his or her life or not, so the taking of stem cell can be either killing (in the case the embryo is not willing) or devoting of life (in the case the embryo is willing) and between these two possibilities we can never know which one is true. According to Buddhist ethics, the killing of the willing person is counted as killing and that action is wrong. There is only one case in which the taking of willing person's life is not killing. It is the taking of life done by the life owner and done on good motivations such as to protect a great number of people or to cure the life of more valuable persons comparing with the life donor. We find that this principle cannot directly be applied to the case of the embryo as we cannot know that how the embryo thinks. Actually, the embryo at the beginning stage, say within two weeks, has no any thoughts. How we should deal with such a situation. Some people argue that this case is like the case of a person in the deepest comma state. A man in a vegetarian state has no any thoughts. So the society must make decision in behalf of such a person. Normally when we have to judge on behalf of another person we use ourselves as the frame of reference. Buddhism, Confucianism, and some philosophical theories in the world share the ethical principle that the good thing is what we want other persons to do for us and what is bad is what we do not want other persons to do to us. In the case of the embryo we could apply this principle that: suppose the embryo were a member of the society and knowing the situations concerning the need of the embryonic stem cell as we know, how he or she will judge the matter. Suppose again that the embryo in our imagination says that in such a case it is unreasonable not allowing the use of the embryonic stem cell, what we can conclude is that the use of embryonic stem cell in that case is morally right.

Capital punishment in its nature is the violation of personhood, but some of us think that the society have to allow this thing on the grounds of social necessities. In terms of personal ethics, Buddhism views that killing a criminal who commits very serious crime is wrong as it is a violation of personhood. But in terms of social ethics, Buddhism views that if death sentence is proved to prevent serious crimes this thing can be allowed in a Buddhist community. So we can say that the violation of personhood can be possible in some cases within social dimensions. The use of embryonic stem cell is partly like the case of death sentence, abortion and euthanasia. These things can be either moral or immoral mainly depending on the reasons behind the actions. Buddhism is well known as a religion that considering ethical issues in terms of conditioned phenomena. According to Buddhism, for example, we cannot ask that: "Is killing wrong in Buddhist perspective?" What we can ask is that: Is killing in such conditions wrong?" So, killing in some case could be wrong while in some case it is not necessary to judge so.

What said above does not mean that Buddhist ethics is relativist ethics or situational ethics. Buddhism believes that things in nature have some essential properties and these properties will determine the results of what we have done. For example, killing regardless of conditions is the violation of personhood, so killing is a bad thing in itself to some extent. However, Buddhism teaches that killing when judged as situation related to conditions can vary because of various conditions. It may be possible that in some case the weight of necessity found in conditions seems to dominate the badness of killing, in such a case Buddhism teaches us to use wisdom. Capital punishment in some conditions could be pointed out necessary, this makes killing legally and morally possible even though it is the bad thing as said above.