



The buddhism's view on biotechnology

Paulina Wachowicz

studentka, Wydział Biotechnologii i Nauk o Żywności
Politechnika Łódzka, Łódź

The buddhism's view on biotechnology

Summary

In this paper, the Buddhists' teaching related to modern biotechnology is presented. Buddhists live in accordance with nature and according to their beliefs any intervention in the nature is wrong.

1. Origin

Buddhism is a religion that originated 2500 years ago in Northern Asia from which it expanded into China, Japan and Tibet. Nowadays, this religion involves about 350 million people throughout the world. Though, as many other religions, it possesses its own teachings and truths, it differs on disbelief in God.

The name of Buddha, after whom the religion is named, means the 'enlightened one' or 'awakened one', but it is not the name of God. The story claims that the precursor of Buddhism, Gotama Siddhattha, was the prince born in Northern India around the IV century BCE. He came from a wealthy and privileged family. After the years of life in pleasure, at the age of about 30, he began to realise that life was a subject to old age, sickness and death and it would pass. From that moment, he started his way to achieve enlightenment. What he practiced to enhance this was, among others, starvation, various body activities and lifestyle leading to ascetism. After six years, he realised that nothing had changed, so he came back to normal life. However, he continued to take care of his body to maintain health and vigour. One day, determined to achieve the state of enlightenment or death, he began to meditate. Finally, the aim was achieved.

Adres do korespondencji

Paulina Wachowicz,
ul. Gogoła 15/9,
92-513 Łódź.

biotechnologia

1 (68) 166–171 2005

He realised that the key to achieve the desired state was the balance in the life, and Gotama Siddhattha became the enlightened one – Buddha (4,5).

2. Important beliefs

The Buddhists believe that the condition of our bodies and nervous system affects our minds and this dependence is mutual. The Buddhist teaching, Karma, insists on purity of mind as well as the body (1). So, the good action done by the organism and mind leads to happy states, while the bad action leads to unhappy ones. The definition of good and bad in Buddhism is following: 'good is this what gives you and others the benefits, while bad brings harm to yourself and/or others' (5). They don't seem to be concrete, but the application of them in the real life could be helpful and, in some way, not as inexact as it seems (5). If all people acted due to this statement, our lives would be simply better. Similarly to Christian religion, intention is the issue of great importance. If we do the bad deed by accident, without bad intention, no karmic consequences will be drawn, but even though we do not manage to do wrong deed but we intended it – we will be punished (4,5).

What is significant in the religion, the Buddhists believe in reincarnation. The Buddhism teaches that when we die – we are reborn. This is not regarded as a transfer of soul into another body, but as the 'continuum', natural cycle of soul life. The life as a human being is very scarce and precious because of the highest chance to become enlightened, so after the death as the human being, the soul can shift to one of the six 'realms'. This would depend on the one's deeds. That derives from the statement of karma saying that even if we do a wrong deed and avoid the punishment, the karma will get us (4).

3. The medicine and health care

An important issue here is the understanding of the Buddhist statement that body and mind are 'one integral unit' (2). If the body is ill so is the mind, so thus health requires accordance of both (2,5). Moreover, the body is concerned as one organism, while nowadays the medical science treats the body as a divisible organism composed of different parts that can be isolated or replaced. What is interesting, the Buddha emphasized the value of optimisation, balance and psychological and physical well-being. For Buddhists, the illness traced to empirical causes is evoked by karma or past action (2). As the karma claims, the past deeds, for example egotism or hatred, influence mentality and, therefore, body. Moreover, external and societal conditions influence body condition and health. 'Therefore, diet, daily regimens, alteration of the season, stress from unusual activities, and past actions affect human's mentality and body' (2). The Buddhists believe that when someone is ill, his

or her mind cannot be at peace. So not only the body should be healed, but also the mind (5).

4. Environmental issues

As genetic engineering is able to change environment as well as human nature, the Buddhists regard this technology the greatest, but also the most dangerous (2). In their beliefs, for example during the meditation, physiological changes take place in our organisms that bring human closer to the enlightenment. The deeper the meditation, the bigger the changes in our body. Buddhists believe in the connection of geographical location with depth of meditation (some are more enhancing, but some are less). Similarly, if we change the environment by genetic engineering, it may effect the body in a way it inhibits the meditation and makes it more difficult (1,2).

The Buddhists notice the whole world as a one single unit that consists of many 'parts' that interact among each other. The well-being of each of a single part, for example human, greatly depends on a health of other parts of entirety. Each component of the world supports another. Neither of the organisms or systems could exist by itself. Each life is able to exist due to existence of other components of nature. Moreover, this dependence is not matched in chain, resembling the biological nutritive one, but each organism mutually depends on each natural component (1,2,4,5).

In Buddhism, personal health is considered as dependent on the mentality as well as on the environmental conditions (1). Buddhism refers to 'nature' as an issue influencing and enhancing the sentient life on the way to enlightenment. It is believed that each of the 'sentient' organism on Earth has a right to be treated with respect and all action towards it should be 'non-harming' (2). This derives from the convincement that all 'sentient' organisms are on their way to enlightenment (1-3). What is worth to be mentioned is that 'sentient' organism is the one that possesses the central nerve system and could feel pain, so the plants are not regarded as 'sentient' (1). So, one of the teachings is its preservation from harm. As Buddhism regards the environment as 'the group of different ecosystems that have great mutual impact on each other', it is believed that humans, animals and other sentient beings are dependant on one another. Therefore, the harm done on any of the 'members' of any ecosystem influences the health of the whole environment. What may be concluded, due to a belief in mutual interaction in the nature, even the harm of a micro-organism can influence life of a more complex organism (1,2).

Another important issue is meditation. To achieve this 'condition', which makes the human closer to the enlightenment, many environmental factors are helpful and enhancing (4,5). As previously mentioned, 'some geographical location possess special natural energies that influence depth of meditation' (2). Therefore, any change in the environment could diminish the ability of transformation that could be possi-

bly achieved during the meditation. It could be more difficult. Moreover, the transformation of the environment that do not effect us directly could have the significant effect on us. Regarding nature as 'the sum of the ecosystems that are dependent on each other', the summary is simple – changing one part of the integrity influences every other single unit (1,3).

Furthermore, for each entity there is a place where natural energy is favourable and enhancing for meditation and development. In other words, each human or sentient organism possesses its place in nature that it is able to resonate with (1). If we assume that nature influences our condition, we have to admit that we influence nature as well. Buddhists cannot imagine the consequences caused by genetic changes done on human that could possibly cause the disability of resonance with nature. The effect, not easily foreseen, could be irreversible (1,3).

Due to the viewpoint of Buddhists assuming coexistence of all components of nature, they gather strenght to care for all forms of life. The efforts are reinforced due to the beliefs that a care for each organism is a care for their well-being. Consequently, the minimum exploitation and utilisation of natural resources, and maximum recycle of renewable sources should be applied (2). This prospect is in accordance with the modern environmental ethic that is accepted by other religions or atheistic people. What is worth to mention, the Buddhists do not remain without any action. They actively make effort to change presently quite poor ecological situation of the environment on Earth. 'The work promoting biodiversity and preserving the environment is performed' (2). The known cases, among others, include the sanctification of trees against the deforestation and displacement of people and animal inhabitants, as well as demonstrations and physical protection of natural environment (1,2).

5. Brain death and organ transplants

First of all, I would like to compare two definitions of human death from medical point of view and that of Buddhists'. In medicine, death is defined as 'the stop of the activity of brain that is consequently followed by the stop of action of the heart and deterioration of other human organs' (2). If the heart is still active, the organs could be used as the transplants. Buddhists have their own view on this issue. Due to the doctrine 'death is the dissolution of body and mind' (2) and is a consequence of the karmic events. They connect life with feeling, in other words, although the brain stopped its action but the heart is still beating, a man could feel any stimulation of his body, including pain. The vision of the pain felt during the cut of the organs and their removal while the heart is still beating, although not proved scientifically, is deeply believed and condemned by Buddhists (2). So, Buddhists do not approve the manipulation and instrumental usage of human or other beings by scientists while the heart is still beating (1,2).

There is also another aspect in the beliefs of Buddhists. According to them, since life is only instance and death is destined to every being, it does not make any sense to prolong it artificially at the expense of another human (2). Moreover, as death is a consequence of karmic life events, 'the maintenance of life of the human being is the action done against the nature' (1,2). Though transplantation of organs to human is not supported by Buddhism, some Buddhists allow the usage of artificial transplants underlining the importance and meaning of life as most precious (1).

As in other religions, the views on certain issues could differ depending on the culture, nationality and personal experiences. For example, the case of transplantation of organs in China is quite strict. Due to great respect to parents, human should be buried as one entire body, as he or she took all of pieces of body, including internal organs as well as skin and hair, from his or her ancestors. In the other way, if the organs are removed for the transplantation, the act is regarded as inglorious (2).

Also, Korean Buddhists believe that the person should be buried with all parts of the body, in other way, he or she will not avoid suffering in the next phase of life because of the karma consequences (2,5).

In East Asia, the stop of the action of brain and heart, and the deterioration of the body organs, are not connected with the death of human being. According to their beliefs, during the mortuary rituals of a dead body, 'human proceeds transformation from the material and physical being into spiritual being' (2). The transformation and rites connected with them may even last for 33 years! (2).

Modern biotechnology allows the transplantation of organs from animals to human body. Buddhists opinion on that, as connected with the belief that any of sentient organism cannot be killed or harmed, is not surprising. In their point of view, the creation of genetically transformed animals possessing human organs is impermissible. Due to their opinion, human is not the main and most important organism on Earth, but only a part of ecosystem equal to animals or other beings. Therefore, why does a human dare to kill others? Summing up, the shortage of regard on animals resulting in killing and using them, even for the protection of human being, is not in accordance with the convictions of Buddhism (1,2).

6. Cloning

Cloning was undoubtedly a great breakthrough in science in the whole world. The views and opinions on this topic are shared although no one refuses its greatness. As previously mentioned, Buddhism is a religion that accepts natural order of life of whole being in the world. It also respects all lives and puts great importance on ancestors (1,2). 'Therefore, cloning puts a shadow on continuity of a family and relationship between an ancestor and descendent' (2). Also, the question of identity appears. Every human is unique and unrepeatable and his soul in the human body is

on its way to enlightenment, if we clone him or her, these features start to be untrue because the scientists cannot clone the soul and mind (1,2).

7. Conclusions

Buddhism is a religion that respects not only human beings that are adherents, but also other beings present in whole world. It does not matter for Buddhists what they deal with. They try to treat people with as strong regard as animals and other nature constituents. This derives from the conviction that human life is only one stage on its way to enlightenment and this stage could be in a mouse body or somewhere else as well. Moreover, they believe that due to karma, all our deeds enhance our way to enlightenment or contrarily, make it away. This makes adherents become close to nature and accept natural order of life. This is connected with another issue. Buddhists live in accordance with natural cycle of life and, therefore, the acceptance of the dark sides like illness, weakness, suffering and death (1,2). Obviously, they accept aid and curing of people who need help, but the condition is that no one and nothing suffer at its expense.

Their view on biotechnological changes in the environment is similar. They are the followers of ecology, they care for nature and try to fight against destroying it. However, any artificial interference in nature is condemned.

Apart from the aspects mentioned in this essay, Buddhists have quite similar point of view on other cases as the people of different religions or atheists. Mainly, they are afraid of interfering in nature as they do not know the future and the consequences of the changes. I think that these problems are shared by most of the world population aware of biotechnology.

Literature

1. Ron Epstein, (2001), Religion East and West, Issue 1, (June), 39-47.
2. Ronald Y. Nakasone, (2000), *Encyclopaedia of Ethical, Legal, and Policy Issues in Biotechnology*, vol. 2 ed. by Thomas H. Murray, Maxwell J. Mehlman, 914-924.
3. Ron Epstein, (1998), edited from a talk delivered at "Spiritual Dimensions of Our Technological Future", AHIMSA 6th Annual Conference, International House, University of California at Berkley, 3 (October).
4. Materials given by the www.Buddhism.about.com found in the April/May 2004.
5. Materials given by the www.Buddhanet.net found in the April/May 2004.