

Embryo as Person: Buddhism, Bioethics and Society

Dr. Suwanda H.J. Sugunasiri

Toronto: Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies, 2005.

You're What You Sense: A Buddhian-Scientific Dialogue on Mindbody

Dr. Suwanda H.J. Sugunasiri

Toronto: Village Publishing House, 2001

For readers of *The Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies*, Dr. Suwanda Sugunasiri's history and qualifications need little or no introduction. He is this journal's editor, a widely published writer on Buddhism, as well as the founder and head of the Nalanda College of Buddhist Studies in Toronto. He is also a tireless promoter of the Buddhist teaching to both Buddhists and non-Buddhists in Canada and elsewhere. The two books under review, *Embryo as Person: Buddhism, Bioethics and Society* (2005) and *You're What You Sense: A Buddhian-Scientific Dialogue on Mindbody* (2001), are part of that outreach. The two books, however, are not equally successful in achieving Sugunasiri's objective. *Embryo as Person* is a compilation of columns written by Dr. Sugunasiri for the *Toronto Star* newspaper, and the book is, therefore, intended to inform primarily non-Buddhists of the Buddhist approach to life. Buddhists, too, however, will find it a useful handbook on some of the trickier ethical issues that Buddhism has always addressed, such as murder. Just as importantly, the book offers a Buddhist perspective on the *new* moral conundrums created by the spectacular advances of medicine and biogenetics, including the possibilities of genetic cloning, organ donation, and extension of the human lifespan. Are these desirable? Ethical? This book provides a valuable perspective.

The title of the book and the third and ninth chapters deal with abortion, an issue that is perhaps particularly urgent in Canada as one of the few nations in the developed world that lacks legislation regulating abortion. Is abortion acceptable from a Buddhist viewpoint? The Buddhist position, as Dr. Sugunasiri rightly points out, is that abortion is killing, i.e., that the fetus is a person from the moment of conception since the being-to-be-born contains, as it were, the spirit (more accurately, the karmic force) of a deceased being. Buddhism sets the following five conditions for deliberate killing, all of which are met by abortion: a living being, knowledge that the being is alive, the intent to take life (the desire for an abortion), the actual attempt to kill (the abortion), and the death of the being (the result).

For Buddhists, killing is not solely an ethical and social issue; it involves karmic consequences in this and future lives that may be unpleasant or perhaps even disastrous, including the possibility of

rebirth in a lower, non-human form. And yet, Buddhism, as presented by Dr. Sugunasiri, remains tolerant: all that it asks is that a woman make this choice fully aware that abortion may be, in fact, killing and that there may be karmic consequences. After that, the decision is, and must be, hers and her family's. Dr. Sugunasiri writes: "Allowing the woman to reach an informed decision is to help her gain liberational maturity" (p. 9). Other helpful factors might include meditation before making this decision and the support of compassionate (*karuṇā*) thoughts and actions from family and friends. In other words, Buddhism says that abortion is wrong, but does not absolutely forbid it as an option. As always in Buddhism, personal responsibility for one's actions is key.

Another example of an ethical dilemma examined in the book is as follows: is it the right of a woman to go about bare-breasted in public, if she wishes? Those who embrace this "right" say that people offended by this sight do not have to continue looking. As Dr. Sugunasiri points out, however, Buddhism teaches that consciousness arises from contact with a sense object, so one look is all that it takes to put a sight into mind where it could stimulate craving that otherwise would not have been present. The same is true, Dr. Sugunasiri suggests, of violence in the media. Contact with violent images puts violence into the mind whether the viewer wishes this or not—by the time she turns away, the damage is done. At this point, Buddhism offers two possible solutions: Avoid contact entirely (which is difficult in a media-saturated culture), or follow the Buddha's advice to his chief attendant Ananda when faced with lust-inducing situations: "Be mindful!" This kind of firm but tolerant guidance is found throughout *Embryo as Person*. The book is filled with useful and clearly presented insights on the sometimes-puzzling ethical issues faced by modern men and women, Buddhist and non-Buddhist.

You're What You Sense is less successful, perhaps because it is more ambitious. It aims to present the key points of *abhidhamma*, the higher teachings of Buddhism, which is a daunting task under any circumstances. The book takes the form of a Socratic dialogue between a "student of Buddhism" (who is called M) and an earnest enquirer (called E). This type of dialogue has a long and honored history in Buddhist teaching. Many of the Buddhist sutras take the form of a dialogue between the Buddha (or one of his chief disciples) and a serious enquirer or even skeptic. Another famous example is the debate between the second-century Buddhist teacher Nagasena and King Milinda, an Indo-Greek ruler in Northern India. In more recent times, *The Monk and the Philosopher* is an often-charged verbal joust between French rationalist philosopher Jean-François Revel and his son Matthieu Ricard, who had taken Tibetan Buddhist orders under the Dalai Lama.

Common to these dialogues are highly intelligent, sometimes highly skeptical questioners who are seeking, in many cases, to find holes in the Buddhist teachings. E, on the other hand, is not of a skeptical frame of mind; rather, he is presented as clay willing to be molded by the teacher M. Therefore, the result is not a “Buddhian-scientific” dialogue in the true sense since E has neither the life experience, nor the philosophical or scientific training to seriously challenge what he is hearing as, say, Revel does with his Tibetan monk son. This absence of conflict robs the debate of some of the drama it might otherwise have offered.

Another problem: In a conscious attempt to create a dialogue that is “lighthearted,” E sounds like an enthusiastic teenager and M sometimes speaks as if he were an overindulgent uncle. The result is dialogue like this: “M: Wow! Your powers of observations are phenomenal!” [Note: since they are talking about sense contact, there is also a bad pun here.] “E: Well, I don’t want to flag it...” “M: Yes, I can see humility written all over your face.” “E: What can I say?” The “gee whiz” quality of the dialogue is a distraction rather than a help.

That said, anyone looking for an easy-to-follow guide to Abhidhamma will find this book helpful and accurate, although Dr. Sugunasiri’s definition of *bhavanga sota*, the stream of being, as “life continuum consciousness” is questionable. In Abhidhamma, consciousness is strictly defined as awareness of an object, and *bhavanga sota* is mind *before* sensory or mental contact. This distinction of terms is important because the nature of consciousness is central to the Buddhist teaching of non-self (*anatta*). The average, untrained person (*puthujjana*) tends to think of consciousness as self. Yet, as Dr. Suganasiri explains, any true “self” must be permanent and unchanging. Consciousness arises and passes away based on contact with objects from the five senses or mental objects; therefore, the popular idea of consciousness as self, as a permanent, stable core, cannot be true.

The same is, of course, true of the other four constituents of “mindbody”: body, feeling, perception, and volitional elements. These five are *all* that can be experienced, and all are transient (*anicca*). Therefore, M asks E, “Is there anything or something behind the process other than the process itself?” (p. 131). The answer, based on close analysis and observation of mind and body, can only be no. To understand this truth is to penetrate what T.R.V. Murti has called the central philosophy of Buddhism in his book of that name.

There are many works on Buddhism on the market; some are of dubious value because they do not fully understand *anatta*. Some Western Buddhist writers, for example, re-interpret Buddhism to include what can only be called the Christian idea of a “soul” or perfect self. This perfected self has no place in Buddhism because, while there can be perfection (*samma*)—such as perfect or right view, perfect action,

and so on—there is no concept of an essential self. This central philosophy of Buddhism is in full view in both of Dr. Sugunasiri's books. They are, therefore, valuable additions to the library of Buddhists and non-Budhists, alike. *You're What You Sense* could, however, do with some revision to be more true to its subtitle: *A Buddhian-Scientific Dialogue*. More science, more actual debate, and less “gee whiz” would make for a more satisfying read.

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Meditation and Psychotherapy
Clinical Psychologist; formerly Director of the Stress, Pain and Chronic Disease Clinic at Toronto General Hospital.
- Feb. 16, 08 **Jack Miller, PhD**
Holistic Teaching and Learning
Professor of Education at OISE / University of Toronto.
- Mar 15, 08 **Kate Partridge, PhD**
Mindfulness Meditation for Stress Reduction
Registered Psychologist; formerly at St. Joseph's Health Care London; qualified teacher of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn).
- Apr 19, 08 **Mathieu Boisvert, PhD**
Facing Death Reality Mindfully
Professor, Dept. of Religious Studies, Univ. du Québec à Montréal
- May 17, 08 **Andrew Olendzky, PhD**
The Buddhist Psychology of Experience
Senior Scholar and Executive Director of the Barre Centre for Buddhist Studies, Mass., USA. Editor, *Insight Journal*.
- June 21, 08 **Mu Soeng (Dharma Teacher-Scholar)**
The Great Way is not Difficult
Resident Scholar at Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, Mass., USA. Author: *Trust in Mind; Heart Sutra: Ancient Buddhism in the Light of Quantum Reality, etc.*