



The Koan of the Clone

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The bones of our late master still exist, and so with these words from Tao Wu's discussion on Condolences we have some explanation that suggests that those we love are never lost. There is something very comforting in these words, reassuring even as we each face our own mortality.

As a Zen student I am cautioned often enough to leave the mind's road, still it remains an intriguing and fascinating thoroughfare. So, for example the koan what did your face look like before your parents were born? appears to offer itself as a nonsensical question, and yet at the same time it may inspire one to search for a substantive foothold into the nature of existence. In Susan Murphy's book "Upside down Zen" she says of a Koan that (from the Japanese) it means a 'public case' whereby there is an opportunity to engage in an exchange of understanding with the Dharma. A Koan has the reputation of seemingly being paradoxical and that no particular resolution is correct, but in fact many Koans are straight forward questions that invite an insightful (if not correct) response. To help me think into the question of what my face may have looked like even before my parents were born I can refer to Dogen Zenji, a thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master who spoke of firewood and ash in a way that can illuminate this point:

Firewood becomes ash, and it does not become firewood again. Yet, do not suppose that the ash is future and the firewood past. You should understand that firewood abides in the phenomenal expression of firewood, which fully includes past and future and is independent of past and future. Ash abides in the phenomenal expression of ash, which fully includes future and past.

While Dogen was teaching on birth and death with this metaphor, it can be extended to the nature of existence. There is no beginning and there is no end.

On February 27, 1997, the journal Nature published an historic article. Scientists in Scotland reported that they had successfully produced a viable mammalian offspring derived from the transfer of an adult cell nucleus to an enucleated egg, creating a clone. The baby lamb took on the delightful name of Dolly becoming the poster pin-up lamb for both the promise and the threat of the burgeoning molecular technologies.

Despite the rush to ban human cloning experiments in most jurisdictions and the ensuing moral outrage, the ethical implications here are especially interesting for a Buddhist. How is one to think about this koan, concerned with my face in the age of molecular technologies and what indeed are we to do with the bones of our (never too late, possibly) teachers?