



Medical Ethics

An Asian Perspective on Organ Transplantation

Michael Cheng-Tek Tai*

College of Medical Humanities and Social Sciences, Chung Shan Medical University, Taichung, Taiwan

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Abstract

Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Shintoism have largely shaped the ways of Asian living. Since these cultural and religious schools were established long ago before the dawn of modern medical technology, and all of them stress the importance of abiding in the natural order of Tao/Dharma, how would they view organ transplantation? This article discusses the teachings of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism with regard to organ donations from both traditional understanding and modern interpretation. We find that the literal interpretations seem to adhere to the value of integrity that what is given must be reverently safeguarded while the modern view emphasizes the value of compassion. (*Tzu Chi Med J* 2009;21(1):90–93)

*Corresponding author. College of Medical Humanities and Social Sciences, Chung Shan Medical University, 110, Section 1, Chien Kuo North Road, Taichung, Taiwan.
E-mail address: tai@csmu.edu.tw

1. Introduction

The dramatic achievement of medical technology in organ transplantation has enabled many patients with organ failure to resume productive lives and live longer. Without this medical technology, these people would have died. This relatively new technology can be traced back to the first successful transplantation that took place in Boston in 1954 that involved two identical twins. The operation was a success largely because their genetic makeup was identical (1). However, the real breakthrough in organ transplantation came three decades later following the discovery of cyclosporin A, a drug that solved the problem of rejection. Today, it is possible to transplant many different organs, including kidney, heart, liver, pancreas, lungs, skin and a variety of tissues such as bone marrow and corneas. When a heart transplant was first attempted in 1967 in South Africa, a voice of profound concern was raised asking how something that represented a person's

personality could be changed at will (2). Should human organs be treated as automobile parts to be replaced with new ones when they malfunctioned? These questions soon diminished due to the benefits that this technology brought to patients compared to their gloomy outcome without the technology. Gradually, transplants have become accepted as a routine procedure for those who can afford such costly operations. Doubt and concern, however, can still be heard from time to time. For instance, Dr Chase Kimball of the University of Chicago said, "You can feed a lot of hungry children on what it costs to do one heart transplant..." (3). Another author questioned, "Is it appropriate for a relatively small number of people to benefit from public financing of an expensive technology when a larger number could benefit from expenditures on a broader range of less expensive health problems?" (4).

In Asia, transplant operations are carried out daily. In some countries, there are rumors that people sell their organs for money. It has also been repeatedly

reported that some criminals, including political prisoners in some Asian countries, are used as a source of organs for transplantation. The controversy over organ transplantation continues to linger despite the fact that this technology has become a normal part of medical treatment.

Asian countries are rich in their religious and moral teachings. How would Asian sages and traditional values see this new technology? If transplant operations have become a major enterprise in Asia, are the traditional moral values of Asia in favor of this enterprise?

2. Traditional Asian thinking on organ transplantation

A Buddhist legend is told about a person on a journey who rested in a remote unoccupied temple. In the middle of the night, he noticed a small ghost carrying a dead body come in. Scared, he hid in a small corner while another, bigger, ghost appeared. The bigger ghost pointed to the dead body and said, "This is mine, why did you steal it?" The small ghost insisted that the dead body was his. As they argued, the bigger ghost noticed the traveler and commanded him to be their judge. He was scared but thought he had better speak his true belief, so he said that since the small ghost had carried this body in, he believed it must be his. The bigger ghost was angered by this and destroyed the traveler's left arm. The small ghost, seeing what happened, immediately removed the left arm of the dead body and transplanted it onto the traveler and it was a perfect fit. The bigger ghost then destroyed the traveler's right leg; the small ghost again replaced the traveler's loss from the dead body and this leg immediately resumed its normal function. This destroying and replacing of body parts continued until the two ghosts left. The traveler, after regaining his tranquility, asked, "Who am I? Much of my body is someone else's. Am I still who I was?"

This Buddhist legend poses an interesting question. Does the person who receives a transplanted organ remain the same person as he was before the transplant? What are the traditional teachings of China's ancient sages?

2.1. Confucian view

One of the underlying teachings of Confucianism is filial piety, which emphasizes the importance of respect, obedience and affection of children toward parents. Filial piety is the basis of humanity (*Jen*) and is the foundation of Confucianism. To practice this filial piety, Confucius taught that children must obey their parents reverently when young, serve their

parents diligently when they become senile, bury their parents respectfully with rites when they pass on, and worship them reverently afterward. The *Book of Rites* further indicates that parents gave a whole body to their children; thus, children must preserve all of this body intact. If they do so, then when passing on themselves back to nature, these children who have preserved all they received from their parents can be called filial (5). In other words, Confucian teachings maintain that one is born with a complete body and should end the same way with a complete body at death. One of Confucius' favored disciples, Tseng Tsu, requested his own disciples to check his body before his burial to ensure that he died with the same body he was born with. "The body, hair and skin are gifts from parents, let no one damage them" (6). These teachings tell us that one must safeguard what one has received from parents and must not disregard them. The duty of each person is to make sure that no part of the body is damaged. Thus, one cannot commit suicide or donate any organ as these acts are considered to be unfilial acts and disrespectful of parents.

On the other hand, many modern Confucian scholars argue that organ donation to another human being reflects the Confucian core teaching of *Jen*. Confucius is reported in the *Analects* as saying, "The man of *Jen* is one who, desiring to sustain himself, sustains others. A man of humanity wishing to establish his own character also establishes the characters of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, also helps others to be prominent. To be able to judge others by what is near to ourselves may be called the method of realizing humanity" (7). Donating one's organ to another is an act of compassion that reflects the Confucian spirit of *Jen*. These scholars further argue that *Jen* and righteousness are valued more in the Confucian tradition than simply preserving the physical body received from parents. In order to fortify their argument, they quoted Confucius as saying, "A man of benevolence will not do anything to hurt the realization of humanness and righteousness. A man of humanity will never seek to live at the expense of injuring humanity. He would rather sacrifice his life in order to realize humanity" (8). This Confucius saying can indeed be interpreted as favoring the donation of organs for transplantation, but by the same token, this saying can be used to justify the argument against organ donation as it is interpreted to be an unfilial act (mutilating the very body given by parents) and thus does not befit a man of humanity.

2.2. Taoist view

The most essential concept in Chinese teaching is Tao. Confucianism regards it as a moral system or truth. To Taoism, it's Tao, the One, that is natural, eternal,

spontaneous, nameless and indescribable. When this Tao is possessed by an individual, it becomes his character or virtue (*te*) (9). The ideal life for the individual, the ideal order for society and the ideal type of government are all based on Tao and guided by it. As a way of life, it denotes simplicity, spontaneity, tranquility and, most important of all, non-action. Non-action (*Wu-Wei*) is not literal inactivity but rather taking no action that is contrary to Nature. In other words, we must let nature take its own course without attempting to change it.

This *Wu-Wei* concept clearly reveals that Taoism will not try anything that is contrary to the natural spontaneous flow of nature. If dying is a natural process, any attempt to reverse its course is unnatural and not spontaneous. Thus, it should not be supported. As organ transplantation is an attempt to change the course of a natural process, Taoists will feel uncomfortable about it.

The balance of *Yin* and *Yang* or the harmony within the cosmos, be it either the micro-cosmos or the macro-cosmos, is essential to a good life. Any disruption of it will cause illness and affect the natural current of living essence. An operation may sever the circulation of *qi*, which is the formless energy circulating within the body. Any attempt to remove an organ or any cutting at all, disrupts the natural flow of *qi* and should be avoided. Simplicity rather than artificiality is the way of life. Any human attempt to change life is regarded as unnatural.

Taoism as a religion also believes that death is another form of life where food, drink, clothing, and money are needed. Any damage to the body will affect the completeness of the dead person's life. Taoism, as a religion and as a philosophy, is not in favor of organ transplantation.

Modern Taoist scholars facing the challenge of medical technology argue, however, that Taoism sees the human body only as a shelter that bears no substantial meaning. The important parts of life are the *Tao* (the Way) and the *Te* (the Virtue) that flow in life. If the physical body is simply a shelter, any attempt to change it or remove any part from it will not affect the essence of life. Life cannot be limited by organs. Life points to all possibilities; thus, donating an organ cannot affect anything at all. In addition, Taoism also believes love to be the natural expression of life, for instance, the mother wolf taking care of her cubs, even to the point of sacrificing herself, is natural and spontaneous. Therefore, donating one's organ for the sake of sustaining another life should not be opposed. Lao Tzu said that the way of *Tao* is to let what is superfluous fill what is insufficient (10). From this point of view, if there is anything that can be said to be more than sufficient, for instance the dying person's organs, they can be used to fill the insufficient, namely, the ill patient in need of an organ transplant.

2.3. Buddhism

The foundation of the Buddha's teachings are found in the *Four Noble Truths*: firstly, all of life is suffering (*dukkha*); secondly, the cause of suffering is craving (*tanha*); thirdly, the end of suffering is getting rid of craving and grasping; and fourthly, the method to use in overcoming suffering is the Eightfold Path:

1. right view—proper knowledge about illness, how a person becomes ill, endures illness and is released from illness;
2. right aspiration—prepare to renounce attachment to the world;
3. right speech—not lying or slandering;
4. right action—abstain from taking life;
5. right livelihood—put away wrong livelihoods;
6. right effort—prevent potential evil from arising and get rid of evil;
7. right mindfulness—avoid and overcome craving and dejection;
8. right concentration—move toward purity of mind and equanimity.

The *Four Noble Truths* and the *Eightfold Path* are the basic teachings of Buddhism (11). From these teachings, our primary impression is that Buddhism would not be in favor of organ transplantation. After all, if life is nothing but suffering, would a person desire to continue the pain of living? If the purpose of living a virtuous life is to escape from the wheel of rebirth, would a person desire to undergo organ transplantation so that suffering can linger on? If craving contributes to the accumulation of karma that traps a person to life, is organ transplantation a life-saving measure or a craving that should be eliminated? Buddhism sees everything on earth as transitory, nothing including self is permanent. Realizing that everything is only part of impermanent psychological processes, organ transplantation to preserve life appears to be foolish as there is nothing to gain. The individual should simply let go because letting go is the end of suffering. Would Buddhism be in favor of organ transplantation to prolong life? The teachings pose a negative tone.

Mahayana Buddhism, however, believes that a merciful Buddha could not suffer seeing people live in foolishness and thus decided to postpone his own entrance to Nirvana so that he could remain on earth to teach and save more people from the condemnation of evil karma. This *Bodhisattva* nature is one of compassion. Based on this teaching, a new interpretation has emerged that Buddhism encourages organ donation for transplantation as it is an act of compassion. Therefore, Buddhism is not entirely negative toward this new medical technology.

Pure Land Buddhism, a branch of Mahayana Buddhism, however, holds a different view and rejects any immediate procurement of organs from newly dead

persons as it strongly believes that a dead person must not be disturbed physically because the soul takes 8 hours to depart from a body in the course of a peaceful migration toward their new destiny (12). Pure Land Buddhism is depicted as being ruled by Amitabha, a Bodhisattva on a Lotus throne in the Western Paradise accompanied by the goddess of Mercy.

If we consider the Buddhist's position on organ transplantation, we have two opposite views. If birth is the source of all evil and life is nothing but suffering, why receive an organ to prolong the suffering? If craving sinks a person to the wheel of rebirth, then organ transplantation is no virtue to speak of. On the other hand, the modern view stresses the compassionate nature of Buddha and argues that donating organs to save others is an act of love and should be encouraged. Yet, from the Pure Land Buddhism point of view, the donated organ would be of no use medically because it has been dead for at least 8 hours.

3. Conclusion

Should one donate organs for transplantation? Should one receive an organ transplantation? According to traditional Chinese sages, the answers will be negative. The modern view, however, is positive. Facing new medical technology and the great demand of people to live longer, the modern views justify organ transplantation by emphasizing compassion and benevolence. According to Taoism, the body is but a shelter not an essence, so donating one's organs does not violate any rule. In the modern perspective, compassion is the key word. Both the traditional and modern views make sense. One wonders if this new understanding is inevitable as it can accommodate the progress of medical technology, otherwise, traditional teachings would soon be eliminated by the tide of scientific development and matter no more.

Organ transplantation, while life-saving, is an expensive endeavor. Dr Robert Orr termed it a burgeoning medical technology (13). Who benefits from this technology? Is not justice one of the major concerns of medical ethics? With the high cost of medical care and the limited supplies of certain resources, there is surely no easy answer. In 1984, Colorado Democratic Governor Richard Lamn created a furor when he said, "We have got a duty to die and get out of the way with all of our machines and artificial hearts so that our kids can build a reasonable life" (3). His sentiment is not shared by many health professionals in the field of transplantation, but his view certainly has some appeal and support.

What would Confucius, Lao Tzu and Buddha have said in response to all the questions on organ transplantation? We cannot know as they never had the chance to confront the dilemma that faces us.

Nonetheless, from their teachings, we can reasonably conclude that Confucius would say that there are other things in life that are more important than life itself. Fulfilling the mandate of heaven and preserving the virtue of humanity should be the primary concerns of everyone. Lao Tzu would have said that flowing with nature is the way of life, and any attempt to block it will surely invite disaster. Buddha would teach that enlightenment puts an end to suffering and invite people to see that there is no permanent self and therefore why crave to cling on. Though death can be postponed through organ transplantation, when death is survived, it is only to face another death. If one cannot conquer death, perhaps to learn how to transcend it by exhausting and extinguishing the very element that causes rebirth is worthy of contemplation.

Chinese sages place something other than physical life as more important, but the modern desire to live a long life motivates the search for a justification for organ transplantation. Indeed, "blessed are those whose organ has failed for they shall receive a transplant" (14), provided that they can afford to pay for it.

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