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The Way of Asian Bioethics

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“What Heaven imparts to man is called nature. To follow our nature is called the Way. Cultivating the Way is called education. The Way cannot be separated from us for a moment. What can be separated from us is not the Way” (Confucius)

“Look to your own duty, do not tremble before it, nothing is better for a warrior than a battle of sacred duty....Perform necessary action, it is more powerful than inaction. Without action you even fail to sustain your own body” (Bhagavad Gita)

It is not easy to discover exactly what Asian people are thinking. Asia as a whole is characterized by the widest cultural diversity. Asia is not one but many. To add to the complexity, all of Asia, by the impact of rapid development, is caught in a web of social revolution and Asian people are searching for a new identity and a fuller human life. Therefore a search for an Asian bioethics must be done through relating to the cultural past and to the changing cultures of the present.

Many cultures shape Asian minds including Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, Islam, Christianity and other religions. This cultural diversity reminds us that an easily identifiable Asian bioethics is not easy to be found but when we look into the Asian ethos, in spite of its plurality, we can discern common features that Asian cultures emphasize -- humanization and harmonization between a human and fellow humans (Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism), between humans and other parts of nature (Hinduism, Taoism, Shintoism, Confucianism), between humans and ultimate reality (Hinduism, Shintoism, Islam).

Bioethics Demonstrated in Asian Ancient Healers

a. Confucian Healers

When we delve into the medical records including the anecdotes of the famous healers of the past, we find the ancient healers of Asia held similar norms and behaved with a certain demeanor in their lives. These norms and demeanor founded Asian bioethics on that the Asian healers practiced their arts of healing. They might not take an oath to pledge how they would behave as healers but the invisible code of ethics had been demonstrated through their lives. One of the most distinguished norms that we find was compassion.

Hua-tow was a famous physician in Chinese history. Throughout his life, he demonstrated this virtue of compassion wherever he went. This virtue had become part of him that whenever he saw a sick person, he would extend his art of healing to save life regardless if he was paid or not. Here is a story:

“In a heavily raining evening, physician Hua-tow was forced to rest in an inn in his trip to a country side. A small boy’s harsh cry coming from next door awoke him. As he listened to the sound of the cry, he immediately sensed that this small boy was sick with a serious illness that could cost his life if untreated. He knocked the door from where the cry came, saw the sick boy and found that the boy was indeed seriously ill and must be treated right away. He volunteered himself to search for a certain herb medicine that night. The inn keeper and the boy’s parents offered to go themselves but Hua-tow insisted that only him could recognize and find the herb. He went out and searched the right herb. After much difficulty, he found it and brought it back and prepared it to treat the boy. He also showed the parents how to identify the herb and advised that the herb should continuously be given to the boy till his complete recovery. The cough was suppressed that night and boy’s life saved. Next morning as the boy’s parents went to thank Hua-tow’s timely treatment, he was nowhere to be found. Inn keeper said that he left early in the morning. Since the village was called Pai, the herb was given the name Pai-chien (in front of the village Pai) in memory of this great physician.” [1]

This story clearly demonstrates the compassion has been part of Chinese medical healers and a norm of Asian bioethics. Another example also reveals yet another bioethical virtue in Asia :

“Tong-hua was a physician during the Warring State. He treated his patients with compassion regardless if he/she was able to pay. The poor who were treated yet unaffordable to pay, would be told to plant almond tree by the hill as a form of payment. Tong-hua suggested that the number of tree to be planted depended on the seriousness of illness, the more serious case, for instance, five plants if affordable, or less or even one. As the years went by, the hill was covered with hundreds of almond trees. Tong-hua would pick the fruits yielded from the trees to help the poor. Whoever needed the fruit could also come to harvest yet only to the amount of their needs. These almond trees and fruits had actually helped and saved many people. This is why in Chinese language, the word almond (杏) stands for “ medicine”.” [2]

This story again reveals the principle of compassion and also of justice in Asian bioethics that whoever needs medical attention should be treated and whenever a treatment is received, some form of gratitude must be given. The patient must pay in the way he/she can afford such as planting the almond trees that eventually benefited the whole village. Tong-hua set an example that he would treat the sick regardless of social status, financial affordability but the patient was also expected to pay the favor received back in some way.

Sun Szu-miao perhaps was the first Chinese physician regarded as a bioethicist. He wrote his —Great Physician's Manual in 7th century in which he said: *"A great physician must be tranquil, free from desires and accountable of what he does. To be compassionate is the first requirement of physician who must be devoted to treating the ill and helping whoever is in need."* [3] Sun also said that human life is heavier than thousand pounds of gold thus a physician should not have the excuse not to treat the ill. Almost all of the principles of Western bioethics can be found in Sun Szu-miao's work. These above-mentioned examples prove that Asian bioethics has been there for a long time.

b. Indian Medicine

Atharvaveda is known as the fourth veda in Hinduism. It is a collected poetry of a popular medicine man who aided individuals in their homes with rituals to alleviate personal and family crises. His rituals were usually intended for times of illness, but atharvan also had materials for protection against demons and sorcerers, spells for securing the affection of lovers and the birth of children...etc. The attention to this magico-religious tradition has later been shifted to a more empirico-rational medicine of Ayurveda. Ayur means life and veda knowledge or science. Deepak Chopra explained that *"Ayurveda is the science of life and it has a very basic, simple kind of approach which is that we are part of the universe and the universe is intelligent and the human body is part of the cosmic body, and the human mind is part of the cosmic mind, and the atom and the universe are exactly the same thing but with different form and the more we are in touch with this deeper reality, from where everything comes, the more we will be able to heal ourselves and at the same time heal our planet."* [4]

Many Ayurvedic practices were handed down by word of mouth and were used before there were written records. Two ancient books are thought to be the first texts on Ayurveda —Susruta Samhita and Caraka Samhita which was edited by Caraka around 100 A.D. It is important to note that Caraka considers mind, body and spirit as

tripod supporting the world structure and defines long life as the goal of medical science. Seeking a balance within the body and the mind, between an individual and the rest of the world, is the key to a healthy good life. According to him, successful medical treatment crucially depends on four factors; the physician, substances (drug or diets), nurse and patient. The heart of therapeutics is the employment of the strengths of these total quadruple in order to reestablish equilibrium and thus gaining health for balancing the mind, the body and the spirit. These quadruples are [5] :

1. physician who needs to have a clear grasp of the theoretical content of the science, a wide range of experience, practical skill and cleanliness;
2. drugs or substances that needs to be abundant, applicable and use repeatedly to be in efficacy,
3. nurse/attendant must posses knowledge of nursing technique, practical skill, attachment for the patient and cleanliness. Caraka also states that care-giver should also be of good behavior, possessed of cleverness, imbued with kindness... and skillful in waiting upon one that is ailing and never unwilling to do anything that may be required.
4. patient has to have good memory able to describe the symptoms and more importantly, he must be obedient to the instruction of the doctor. Patients are classified by body type which are determined by proportions of the three doshas. The doshas regulates mind-body harmony. Illness and disease are considered to be a matter of imbalance in doshas. Treatment aims at restoring harmony and balance to the mind –body system. [6]

Ayurveda has long been the main system of health care in India, although western medicine is becoming more widespread especially in urban areas. About 70 percent of India's population lives in rural areas and about two thirds of them still use Ayurveda and medical plants to meet their primary health cares needs. Ayurveda and variations of it have also been practiced for centuries in Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Tibet. [7]

Ayurveda sees the person as grounded in nature, a microcosm within the macrocosm. Diet, soil, season, time and place... are all factors that effect a person's being. Since a person is a composition of physical, mental, social and spiritual elements, keeping balance of all these is important. Ayurveda views the person as an integrated whole and not just an aggregate of several body parts.

In regard to ethics, Caraka states that besides competence and of good character, a physician must be compassionate and friendly toward his patient and make the patient the focus of his practice. [8] To a young doctor Caraka Samhita says: *"when you join the medical profession ... you should always think of the welfare of all living beings... you should make effort to provide health to the patient by all means. You should not think ill of the patient even at the cost of your life."* [9] One interesting note of Caraka's instruction is what to tell patient especially when death is fast approaching. Caraka says: *"the physician though observing the signs of death, should not disclose the approaching death without having been requested for. Even on request, he should not express it if it is liable to cause patient's death or affliction to some body else."* [10] [11]

Obviously, Indian medicine regards life as sacred and the bioethics derived from it upholds the values of compassion, competence, respect and good character on the part of physician and veracity, obedience and health-preservation on the part of patient. All these are derived from the belief in a harmonious relationship of the microcosm to the macrocosm, the value of respecting all life, to be kind to patient, and not think ill of the patient in anyway... etc.

Humanization as the Goal of Asian bioethics

a. Confucian perspective

Humanization can be understood as the process where human life and his dignity are affirmed in the context of human relationship. Asian sage, Confucius' primary concern was to create a good society based on harmonious human relations. To this end he advocated the importance of virtue and moral example and taught that each person must cultivate his inner good for the sake of others. He encouraged each person to cultivate Jen (benevolence), and the criterion of its result is weighted by righteousness as opposed to profit. Here we see two virtues, Jen that is internal and righteousness that is external. In other words, he advocated that one wishing to establish his own character must also establish the character of others and wishing to be prominent himself must also help others to be prominent. In these balanced and

harmonious aspects of the self and society, Jen is expressed in terms of conscientiousness and altruism. For the family he particularly stressed filial piety and for society in general, proper conduct or propriety (Li). To Confucius, a humanistic foundation is based upon some fundamental concepts such as the Rectification of names, the Mean, the Way, Heaven and Jen (humanity). [12]

In insisting on Rectification of Names, Confucius advocated not only the establishment of a social order in which names and ranks are properly regulated but also the correspondence of words and action, name and actuality. By the Mean, it means not only moderation, more importantly, is balance, the harmony of Yin and Yang and that of substance and function. In Heaven, Confucius asserts that Heaven is purposive and is the master of all things. He repeatedly refers to the Mandate, Will or Order of Heaven according to which civilization must develop and men should behave. In all these, Confucius made Jen the main theme of his teaching. In the Analects' fifty eight of 499 chapters are devoted to the discussion of Jen and the word appears 105 times, no other subject, not even filial piety engaged so much attention of the master. He transformed Jen as a particular virtue into a general virtue that every human kind must develop and hold.[13] Thus harmonious relationship based on Jen among people abiding to the Mandate of Heaven is the center of Confucian teaching. Promoting a harmonious relationship between physicians and patients, biotechnology and human body therefore form the essence of Asian bioethics from Confucian perspective.

b. Hindu Perspective

The highest good in Hinduism is moksha. In order to reach this goal, a person must observe the dharma of life. Moksha may denote an individual pursuit of freedom from earthly fetters. It however, demands a self discipline willing to renounce egoistic desires. This is similar to Confucian teaching of Jen that one must know his place in life according to the Rectification of names and live accordingly without being selfish considering only his own interest. A person not in harmony with his fellow men, society and nature cannot reach moksha. A physician who cares only his benefit and treats his patient without compassion is far from the state of moksha.

Moksha however cannot be realized unless one is morally qualified by living a life that is characterized by truth, non-violence, sacrifice and renunciation. According to Adhikara, one must be free from bias, self-interest and double standards when pursuing truth. It implies that a physician cannot be pretentious, self-centered,

arrogant, quarrelsome but kind, compassionate and caring regardless who his patient is. [14] To help patient experiences humanness in order to holistically be healed becomes the goal of this bioethics. Thus we can say that Asian bioethics sees the process of humanization in clinical care as the aim of medicine. Physicians have a duty to provide a way for those who are not well so as to experience a holistic wellness. This duty is implied in the concept of dharma in Hindu thought.

Dharma signifies that which upholds or embodies law, custom and religion. It can also be understood as responsibility and is bound by virtues. For one to abide in dharma he must realize that life itself is sacred. There are three dimensions of dharma, namely, Asrama dharma, Varna dharma and Sadharana dharma. Asarama dharma provides the framework within which an individual may express the total needs of one's personality. These needs are incorporated within the doctrine of the four values of life that are identified as success, passion, virtues and self-perfection. There are four stages, students, householder, forest dweller and sannyasin (hermit). Each stage has certain duties that a person must fulfill before advancing to another. Varna dharma shifts from the ethical organization of the individual to the ethical organization represented by varna dharma. Realistically speaking, all persons are not born equal, they differ in their talents and callings and thus each bears different duties accordingly. Sadharana dharma binds upon human on human that common duties are so named independent of caste and station in life, for instance, steadfastness, forgiveness, veracity, charity, truthfulness, benevolence...etc.

The Hindu text of Bhagavada Gita, the most influential religious text in India, describes the dilemma a great warrior, Arjuna has faced. This sensitive warrior is contemplating the grim duty that Hindu society requires of his caste and he recoils at the thought of the evils that will follow and of the guilt that its performance may entail. He is bound by duty to fight the forces of his enemy and he reflects with horror on the injuries and disorder that his fighting will produce. Being confused about what is right, he asks for the advice of Krishna who is serving as his chariot driver, but actually the incarnation of the ultimate reality. Krishna responds first with a precise argument that disgrace descends on all who flee their duties. He said if we perform the duties of our stations simply as a service to God and with no desire to make any personal gains, those acts will have no real connection with us in the operation of the processes of retribution. [15] In other words, fulfilling one's duties precedes all other things. Disgrace falls to those who fail to do so.

Applying this teaching to medical ethics, obviously, it calls for physician to be answerable to their duties. If the missions of physician are to heal the sick, to reduce the pain, to comfort the uncomfortable, to prevent illness from spreading and to promote healthiness, physician must try his best because it is a dharma for him.

Conclusion

Hinduism clearly gives us a good bioethics of respecting life and being responsible while Confucianism asserts that promoting a harmonious relationship in all medical settings based on compassion is what physician must strive for. Dharma and Jen are the two key words that stand up for this Asian bioethics.

In Hinduism, the respect for life can be attributed to the teachings on Samsara and Ahimsa that all life is One and sacred. No one is superior than another and everyone must refrain from hurting others. As a physician, one should treat all coming to him kindly and avoid inflicting any harm. Three basic principles of Hindu philosophy and religions that contribute to this bioethics are:

- 1.the transcendent character of human life expressed through the principles of the sanctity of life and quality of life.
- 2.the duty to preserve and guard individual and communal health
- 3 the duty to rectify imbalances in the processes of nature and to correct and repair states that threaten life and well-being, both of humans and non humans. [16]

Both Confucianism or Hinduism, uphold that life is sacred and must be guarded with respect. A health professional is expected to do all that can be done to fulfill this duty to bring forth harmony within the earth. Thus any medical procedures and biotechnology that sustain, enhance and promote humanity and harmony are deemed as ethical. Asian bioethics values the virtues of compassion, ahimsa (do no harm), respect, dutifulness and righteousness and these are the principles of Asian bioethics.

Asian bioethics concurs to the words of Prof. D. S. Sheriff, a former professor at VMKV Medical College in Salem, India, that *“Respect, caution and proper vision must guide those in authority to see that humans are not dehumanized and disrespected. Commercialization and materialistic approach to every sphere of life and profession may erode the basic values of human life and destroy the social fabric of a system built over the years by our ancestors.... It is imperative that medical technology and medical education must be guided by sound ethical values to upkeep the nobility of the profession and the sanctity of human life.”*[17]

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3. Su Chung-shu: The Medical History of China. Cheng-chung Book. Taipei. 1997:78
4. Deepak Chopra: Perfect Health. New York: Harmony book. 1991.
5. Crawford SC: Hindu Bioethics for the 21st Century. State University of New York Press. New York. 2003:107
6. Vata, composed of air and space, governs all movement in the mind and body and must be kept in balance. Too much vata leads to worries, insomnia, cramps, constipation.. Pitta is composed of fire and water, governs all heat, metabolism and transformation in the mind and body. Controlling digestion and metabolizing sensory perceptions. Too much pitta lead to anger, criticism, ulcers, rashes and thinning hair. Kapha consists of earth and water. Kapha cements the element in the body, providing the material form physical structure. Is responsible for emotions of attachment, greed and long-standing envy. Too much kapha lead to lethargy, weight gain, congestion and allergies.
7. Burtler K: A Consumer's Guide to Alternative Medicine. Prometheus Book. 1992.

Also see: <http://www.skeptdie.com/ayurvedic.html>

8. Crawford SC: 108
9. Caraka Samhita chapter 8:13
10. Caraka Samhita chapter 7:62-63
11. Crawford SC; 103

12. Chan WT: A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. 1963:15

13. *ibid.* :16.

14. Crawford SC: 12.

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16. Crawford SC: 16.

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