

Buddhist's and Taoist's view on epilepsy

Rong-Chi CHEN MD

En Chu Kong Hospital, National Taiwan University Medical College; Taipei, Taiwan

The main religious belief in Taiwan is a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, with some addition of Christian and Moslem teachings. Confucius' teaching advocates the life of morality, and virtue, and being filial to their parents, therefore, people should try to protect their body from being harmed or destroyed, since the body comes from the parents. Taoism asks for happy life by being harmonious with the nature. The best way of governing self and the country is by inaction, or doing non-governing. One should continue to cultivate himself with the purpose of becoming a fairy or god someday. Buddhist teaching stresses on the theory of cause-effect and reincarnation. Men are born with pure bodhi-nature. However, the bodhi-nature is covered up by ignorance. There are four noble truths in human life: by gathering past bad karmas, life is full of suffering; one should follow the noble eight paths to reach the final goal of nirvana, i.e. the status of enlightenment of the bodhi-nature to become Buddha. With these combinations of Confucius', Taoist's and Buddhist's teachings, Taiwan's main religious doctrine is that the human nature is good. Men should insist on doing good deeds. It is popular in Taiwan to "humanize" the power of nature into numerous gods, deities, and buddhas, and even to worship ancient heroes as deities. It is common to see that the statues of Buddhas and Taoist's deities being worshipped together in a family altar, in a Buddhist's temple or Taoist's shrine. Through the belief of reincarnation of "cause and effect", it is thought that good deeds (good causes) result in good effects, evil deeds (causes) result in evil effects. One can improve him- or herself to reach spiritual relief or enlightenment through constant cultivation and learning.¹

Past bad karmas (bad causes, bad deeds of the past or the past generations) induced the bad results (bad effects) or diseases. Since epilepsy is a disease, it is also considered as the result of the past bad karmas. For the treatment of diseases (and also epilepsy), it is a common practice to follow medical doctor's advice. Religiously, it is advised to repent about the past bad deeds, to practice good deeds and do offerings, because

good deeds will cause good rewards (good results). One should pray or ask for God's or Buddha's forgiveness and blessing. In the past, many people in Taiwan believed that epilepsy was part of the human sufferings due to the past karmas, or by the punishment or disturbance of the evil spirits. The disease was accepted as a "payback" in order to relieve (and to minimize) the profound evil effect of the past karmas. Prayers and drugs were both acceptable for the treatment of epilepsy. Drugs or "spiritualized water" which received Buddha's (or the monk's) blessing are even more welcome (and effective). Epilepsy was also called "sheep's seizure" or pig's "seizure".

In the old medical book, the Yellow Emperor's Internal Sutra published in ancient China 2000 years ago, epilepsy was thought to be a disease of the top of the human body, i.e. "epilepsy is the disease of the head"² (probably around the time when Hippocrates mentioned that "epilepsy is a disease of the brain").

A study carried in a rural area (a fishing town) in northern Taiwan (1994) by Chung *et al*³ showed that 83% of the respondents had read or heard about epilepsy, 71% knew someone who had epilepsy, 59% had witnessed someone having a seizure, 80% agreed to let their children play in school with child who has epilepsy. But 72% objected to having their children marry a person with epilepsy, 38% believed that epileptic persons can be employed in jobs as other persons are (75% in a separate study in Taipei City, metropolitan area with small number of study subjects, believed that persons with epilepsy can be employed in jobs as other persons do), 39% did not know the cause of epilepsy, 17% did not know what an epileptic attack was like, 6% believed that epilepsy was a form of insanity. Most people accepted modern medical treatment for epilepsy. In recommendation for the treatment of epilepsy, 53% would ask for an "M.D.", while 14% would ask for a herbal medicine doctor (Traditional Chinese medicine doctor). One percent each agreed for surgical treatment, recommend acupuncture, and asked for folk medicine. There were 24% of people who did not know what to recommend. There were 5% who

thought “epilepsy was untreatable”, 4% believed that there was no need to treat, and 3% would ask for God’s help.

Overall, epilepsy is still a stigma in Taiwan. Consequently, Taiwan Epilepsy Society and Taiwan Epilepsy Association are working in concert to promote public awareness and understanding of epilepsy in order to improve the public attitude toward epilepsy.

REFERENCES

1. Chen RC. Buddhism, folk belief and bioethics in Taiwan. In: Tai CT, Lee MB, eds: Introduction to medical ethics. Taipei: Ministry of Education. 2000: 139-44.
2. Chen CS. The theoretical and clinical progression of the Chinese medicine on epilepsy. Master Thesis No. GICMS-105 of China Medical University, 1992, Taichung (Taiwan): China Medical University.
3. Chung MY, Chang YC, Lai YHC, Lai CW. Public awareness, understanding, and attitudes toward epilepsy in a rural community in Taiwan. *Acta Neurol Taiwan* 1994; 3: 200-6.