

An information sheet on organ and tissue donation published by the
The United Vietnamese Buddhist Congregation of Australia and New Zealand

as endorsed by the President of the Congregation.

Introduction

The UVBCANZ is the umbrella organisation that represents many of the most significant Buddhist temples established by Vietnamese refugees and migrants in Australia and New Zealand. We are a non-sectarian congregation that seeks to reflect and transmit the highest ideals of Mahayana Buddhism.

In Australia, after a person dies they can elect to donate their organs and tissue for transplant operations or medical research. This is usually done by registering on the Australian Organ Donor Register. The operation to harvest and transplant organs or tissue can only occur if surviving family members give their consent.

Deciding whether to donate or not can be difficult, and when the donor or their family is a Buddhist it can be unclear how this decision interacts with their religious beliefs. We have been asked to provide a Buddhist's perspective on organ and tissue donation to assist in these situations.

This document reflects our best understanding of how Buddhist principles and practices apply to the donation of organs and tissue after death. We recommend speaking to a minister of religion if you have any questions or concerns that are not addressed by this document.

As a Buddhist, should I donate my organs or tissue to another person after I die?

During life a person's body is a great blessing that abounds with potential, but once a person dies Buddhism does not consider the body of the deceased to be sacred. So from a Buddhist perspective, there is nothing objectionable about organ and tissue donation for the purposes of life-saving transplantation - in fact it should be seen as an act of great virtue.

For Buddhists the motivation in performing an action is of utmost importance and so if a person decides to donate their organs and tissue out of a genuine intention to benefit living beings - this intent characterises the action.

What are the benefits of organ and tissue donation?

We believe that the act of donation, when motivated by a sincere wish to contribute to the wellbeing of others reflects the highest ideals of Buddhism.

First the act of donation displays a vow by the donor to overcome the attachment to their body.

Second, the generosity of giving up our bodies after death for the wellbeing of others acknowledges the continuity of life and that we give back what we take from this world.

Finally, after making a vow to donate our bodies after death we begin to face death with calm and dignity. Making a vow allows us to become settled in our intention to follow through with our promise. This vow and its fulfilment orientates the donor on the Way and can be a good practice.

What are the most common obstacles to organ and tissue donation?

Attachment to the body

It may be that when a potential donor approaches death they will remain attached to their body and are not willing to give it up for the benefit of others.

From a Buddhist perspective there are many attachments a person must confront at the moment of death and during the transitional or intermediate stages (bardo). It is common to experience attachment to the life already lived and strong elements of it such as wealth, family, reputation, feelings (both pleasure and pain), anger amongst others. Seen in this way, attachment to the body is just one of many attachments a person must let go of at the moment of death. Letting go at this point is crucial to the smooth transition into the next life.

The body of the deceased quickly changes forms. If you bury it, it will rest in a coffin to decay slowly over time. If you cremate it, the resulting ashes must be either kept or scattered. Donating your body for the benefit of others is no different from these procedures - and usually the body is returned to the family once the transplantation procedures are complete. We emphasise there is no right way to dispose of a body as long as there is calm, dignity and respect for the deceased - qualities that are possible to achieve through the organ and tissue donation process.

Preserving bodily integrity

For the surviving family, love, grief and the wish to honour the dead can manifest as a wish to keep the body of their loved one whole and undisturbed for as long as possible after death.

These beliefs may be influenced by the teachings of some schools of Buddhism and the cultural inheritance of peoples of asian descent. The idea is that the body of the recently deceased needs to rest whole and undisturbed for a number of hours or days after death so that appropriate prayers are recited and the spirit can calmly depart to the next life.

These practices may be understood as the concern of the surviving family as to any lingering attachment to the body that the deceased may have and the uncontrollable states of mind (such as fear or anger triggered by death) that may be exacerbated by physically invasive harvesting procedures.

One way to think about this is that if a potential donor has a sincere and solemn vow to give his or her organs and tissue - then the power of this intention and its fulfilment has the great potential to overcome many negative states of mind that may exist at the time of death. Not only does the act of donation overcome the basic attachment to the body but it may also calm and overcome other attachments as well.

We say that a person who has a specific and strong vow to donate their organs and tissue after death should be considered a special case - precautions and cultural practices appropriate for the general population may not be applicable in these cases.

Disagreement as to criteria of death and when organ and tissue harvesting may take place

Obviously organ and tissue donation can only occur after the donor has died.

But while lay persons may have only a general idea of what death means - like when someone stops breathing - the medical profession takes *brain death* as the criteria for death. Taking brain death as its criteria, the medical profession would consider someone whose brain no longer functions dead even if for example their body could still breathe with the help of life support machines.

In the extremely difficult moments surrounding or leading up to the death of a loved one - brain death as a criteria for death may seem too early in the dying process for family members to accept. Some families prefer to see their loved ones stop breathing before they accept that this person has died. While this is an understandable function of the family's love for a member of their family - it should be understood that if they wish to give effect to the deceased's intention to donate then it is best to not wait too long before giving consent.

Buddhism tries to integrate and adapt to the norms of each place it is practiced. From this perspective if the best understanding of medicine right now is that brain death is death - Buddhist practitioners should try to accept this criteria.

Keep in mind that while a person may accept brain death as the criteria for death in general, when a member of their family is dying they may wish to see more physically conclusive signs - like the stopping of the breath or the body becoming cold. This is understandable and acceptable.

Buddhism emphasises that donors and their surviving family only give what they are able - if it is too difficult to give effect to the wishes of the donor then that is okay. But when families are able to honour the expressed wishes of the deceased despite their own hesitance, that would be better.

What should families or medical professionals be aware of when relating to a Buddhist who has decided to donate their organs and tissue for the benefit of others?

If you are in the position to support or override the wish of a person who has recently died, the question should be: did the potential donor have a strong and sincere intention to donate their organs and tissue after death? And was the decision motivated by a desire to benefit others? We encourage this to be the strongest consideration a family should have when asked to consent to a donation or transplantation procedure.

It is important for the donor to renew their wishes or strengthen their resolve to donate close to the moment of death so that when the time comes they can follow through with their intention without fear.

If possible, have a minister of religion, family member or loved one, or a member of the medical profession speak aloud to the recently deceased before the harvesting procedures are carried out to remind them that the harvesting is being done as a fulfilment of a vow the deceased made while alive.