

BUDDHIST VIEWS ON THE DONATION OF VITAL ORGANS

By: Ven. Dr. K. Dhammananda

With the prevailing prejudices and superstitions, it is an uphill task for the authorities and other concerned groups to persuade a person to part with one of his kidneys in order to save the life of a patient. Nevertheless, the great work that many voluntary organizations are doing is having its impact in gradually changing the attitude of people to support the noble cause of bringing health and happiness to the unfortunate. The following is the text of a talk given by Ven. Dr. K. Sri Dhammananda at the Mandarin Hotel in Singapore on Sat 28th JULY 1984. A crowd of more than 1,300 people, representing all the major religions were present. It is interesting to note that during the last seminar in 1983, there were only 20 people present. Could this be a sign of a new awakening?

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Man is a social animal. All human beings are dependent on one another. In order that members of a society may live in harmony, people must be prepared to extend their love and sacrifice some of their own needs for the greater need of the group. Individuals should not be selfish and think only of their own personal comfort and needs. They should learn to love and care, to give without expecting to receive. It has been said that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

For a society to progress and prosper, its members must be prepared to put the interests of the group before their own. All the religions of the world put great emphasis on this fact. All religions emphasize the need to practise charity. The greatest happiness comes from bringing joy to others. And it is this sense of charity as preached by the great religious leaders that has provoked men and women to serve mankind to the fullest.

From the Buddhist point of view, one must recognize the Illusion of Self. Through ignorance, certain people become selfish, working only to satisfy their own bodily needs. Buddhists are taught that it is unwise to cater only for material needs. When one becomes aware that the body or the personality is merely an illusion, then the need to satisfy the personality by claiming "This is mine, or that is mine" becomes unnecessary. Many other religions preach the same truth, but Buddhism stresses that worldly possessions are not important,

and it is very important that one should practise charity to give what one can for the welfare of others. The greatest merit is obtained by giving freely.

In this connection, it is to be noted that the highest and noblest form of charity which can be equated to spiritual attainment, is to donate parts of one's own body, like blood and certain vital organs such as the kidney, if one is able to help in saving the life of another person. Modern science has advanced to such an extent that "blood transfusion" is now a common day-to-day occurrence. Modern science has also made a "kidney transplant" possible from a healthy donor to a patient suffering from a defective kidney. A few years ago, publicity was given in the Malaysian Press of a case of a young man who was suffering from a kidney failure. His life was dependent on the replacement of a kidney. The sister of this young man volunteered to offer one of her kidneys to be transplanted to her brother. The operation was duly carried out in the Adventist Hospital in Penang. Both the young man and his dear sister are now living healthy lives in Calgary, Canada. The name of this young man is Mr. Lee Chin Liang and his sister is Madam Lee. This is the case of a brother and sister. We have read of innumerable other cases in many parts of the world where kidney transplants had occurred and where many lives had been saved through the generous and noble acts of friends or relations.

Whilst medical science has made it possible to carry out a transplant from a healthy person to another suffering from a kidney problem, it is also possible to transplant kidneys from a person who is clinically dead, due to an accident or other causes. In such cases, it would be a wonderful act of charity and religious-esteem if the person concerned, had it willed that his kidneys be donated, in the event of his death, to someone who is in need. Such a sacrificial act will be held in the highest regard by humanity.

Whilst there are noble healthy people who are prepared to sacrifice certain vital organs or tissues in order to save lives, there should be no impediment by their relatives to enable the person concerned to carry out this generous wish. Whenever a person is declared clinically dead his or her relatives should permit certain vital organs to be utilised as transplants to prolong the lives of others in dire need. These relatives should overcome their immediate grief to quickly donate the organs on his behalf, because in that way he could still be useful to humanity. The old superstition that the dead body should not be dismembered for fear that there would be defects in the next life, should be eradicated. According to Buddhism, the greatest merit would accrue to the donor for the noble sacrifice of helping others. Such an act of charity constitutes the basis or foundation of a spiritual or religious life.

DANA is the Pali term for charity or generosity. The perfection of this virtue consists of its practice in three ways, namely:

- (i) The giving or sharing of material things or worldly possessions.
- (ii) The offering of one's own bodily organs and,
- (iii) The sacrifice of one's own life for the welfare and happiness of others.

It is through such acts of charity that one is able to reduce craving, attachment and other selfish motives from the mind and begin to develop and cultivate the great virtues of loving-kindness, compassion and wisdom, paving the way for one's purity and perfection.

The teaching of the Buddha is for the purpose of reducing suffering here and now, and paving the way for the complete cessation of all forms of suffering. This is achieved through the practice of DANA, SILA and BHAVANA or Generosity, Morality and Mental Culture, which in turn paves the way for the proper understanding of the nature of life and death as well as the inherent laws which support or govern the whole universe.

The fear to participate in a noble act such as a kidney donation, lies primarily in the lack of understanding of the real nature of life and death and the life hereafter. There are some people who believe that when any part of the body or organ is removed, they will have to go without that organ in the next life or that they will not be eligible to enter the kingdom of heaven. Such ideas arise from ignorance concerning the real nature of existence.

According to Buddhism, death takes place when one's consciousness leaves the disintegrating material body. And, it is that relinking consciousness (VINNANA) which determines the next life. Some religionists may call this relinking consciousness "soul" others may call it "spirit" or "mental energy." Whatever term is used, it is clear that it has nothing to do with the physical components of the body which are subject to decay – and which will eventually return to their respective sources of energy. The earth element returns to the soil; the water element returns to the sea, the rivers and wells; and the heat or gaseous elements return to the atmosphere. No matter how well the body is preserved, whether in a metal or wooden coffin, decomposition of the body is inevitable.

Instead of allowing the kidney, the eyes and certain other parts of the body to rot away and go to waste, today's technology and surgical methods have enabled its component structure to be used or transplanted to restore the health of many needy people. We have often heard of wealthy millionaires who have given large sums of money for the poor. And how often have we piously declared that our generosity will be unbounded if only we win a lottery! Now, we do not have to win a lottery to be generous. We must remember that we already have won a 'lottery' by being born as human beings, endowed with intelligence and in full possession of all our senses. We have much to give – our kidneys, our blood, our eyes, our skin and so on. We only have to give

them away *after death* when we no longer need them. Why should people be afraid of making such a sacrifice? Sacrifice means giving away what we need – therefore we should not be afraid of giving away what we do not need after death.

With the ever-increasing number of kidney cases in the country, the time has come for more understanding members of the public to come forward and volunteer to donate their organs in the event of their death.

I fervently hope that all understanding citizens of this country will join us in this noble cause to help restore the health of the sick.