

Organ donation and religious beliefs



**A guide to organ donation
and Buddhist beliefs**

Organ donation

Organ donation

Organ donation is the gift of an organ to help someone who needs a transplant. Thousands of people's lives across the UK are saved or improved each year by organ transplants. But every day across the UK someone dies waiting for an organ transplant.

Organs that can be donated by people who have died include the heart, lungs, kidneys, liver, pancreas and small bowel. Tissue such as skin, bone, heart valves and corneas can also be used to help others. Living donation of a single kidney or part of a liver is also possible.

Why is it important to think about donating organs?

With medical advances it is now possible to use transplanted organs and tissues to enhance the life chances of those suffering from a range of terminal conditions such as kidney, liver and heart failure. More people than before now suffer from these conditions and some ethnic

groups seem to be more affected than others.

The person in need of an organ today may be a stranger, but tomorrow that person could be someone you know and love. So please take the time to decide whether you want to be an organ donor, record that decision on the NHS Organ Donor Register, then tell your family.

Family involvement

Families play an important role in organ donation in all areas of the UK, regardless of whether an opt in or opt out system is in place.

If you die in circumstances where you could be an organ donor, a specialist organ donation nurse would check the NHS Organ Donor Register to see if you had registered your decision, and speak to your next of kin to discuss whether you wanted to be a donor. The voice of your family is critical to what happens. So, whatever your decision, it's important they know what you want. This will make it easier for them to honour your decision.

When can organ donation take place?

Doctors and other healthcare staff are committed to doing everything possible to save a patient's life. Organ donation is only considered once all attempts to save life have failed and after death has been confirmed by doctors who are entirely independent of the transplant team.

Most donated organs in the UK come from people who die from a severe brain injury, and who are on a ventilator in an intensive care unit. The brain injury will have damaged the vital centres in the brain stem which are essential for life. Doctors call this confirmation of death using neurological criteria, also known as 'brain stem death'. This is not the same as being in a coma or 'vegetative state'. Tests are carried out by two senior doctors, who are independent of the transplant team, on two different occasions, following strict national guidance.

When death is confirmed using neurological criteria, the patient will still be on a ventilator (a machine that pushes air into the lungs and supports the circulation of blood around the body). This prevents the organs from losing the oxygen-rich blood supply, which is necessary for a healthier transplant outcome.

Organs can also be donated from people, who, with their family's agreement, are having life-sustaining intensive care treatment withdrawn. If the heart stops and circulation ceases soon after, death will be confirmed and donation can occur. This is known as 'donation after circulatory death'.

Care and respect

The removal of organs and tissues is carried out with the greatest care and respect. The family can see the body afterwards and staff can contact a chaplain or local religious leader if the family wishes.



“What loss do I suffer to give an unwanted organ after my death to give another person life?”

Dr Desmond Biddulph, Chairman of The Buddhist Society

Buddhism and organ donation

There are no injunctions in Buddhism for or against organ donation. The death process of an individual is viewed as a very important time that should be treated with the greatest care and respect. In some traditions, the moment of death is defined according to criteria which differ from those of modern Western medicine, and there are differing views as to the acceptability of organ transplantation. The needs and wishes of the dying person must not be compromised by the wish to save a life. Each decision will depend on individual circumstances.

Central to Buddhism is a wish to relieve suffering and there may be circumstances where organ donation may be seen as an act of generosity. Where it is truly the wish of the dying person, it would be seen in that light.

If there is doubt as to the teachings within the particular tradition to which a person belongs, expert guidance should be sought from a senior teacher within the tradition concerned. When he discovered a monk sick and uncared for, the Buddha said to the other monks:

“If you don’t tend to one another, who then will tend to you? Whoever would tend to me, should tend to the sick.”

*Mahavagga VIII.26.1-8,
Kucchivikaravatthu: The Monk with
Dysentery. Translated from the Pali by
Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

There are many different Buddhist traditions, and organ donation is an individual choice, but:

“Giving is the greatest of Buddhist virtues. The Buddha in a previous life gave his body to a starving tigress who could not feed her cubs. There are many such Jataka tales, some in which he even gave his eyes to someone who wanted them.

“What loss do I suffer to give an unwanted organ after my death to give another person life?”

Dr Desmond Biddulph, Chairman of The Buddhist Society

“I would be happy if I was able to help someone else live after my own death.”

Dhammarati, Western Buddhist Order

“Buddhist liberation is liberation from selfishness. Liberation from selfishness manifests as gratitude and generosity. Gratitude and generosity are not just feelings, they motivate action — action to bring beauty and truth into the world, to relieve suffering and create harmony in communities.”

Dharmavidya David Brazier, The Amida Trust

“Organ donation is acceptable in Theravada Buddhism. It is a Buddhist virtue to generously extend help to other sentient beings and this covers the case of organ donation.”

Phramaha Laow Panyasiri, Abbot, The Buddhavihara Temple

Making your choice

How do I become a donor?

If you want to donate some or all of your organs or tissue after your death, the best way to ensure your family know what you want and honour your decision is to register as a donor on the NHS Organ Donor Register and to tell your family what you have decided. You can also record on the register whether your faith/belief is important and should be considered as part of the donation discussion.

What if I don't want to donate?

If you don't want to donate, it is important to register this decision on the NHS Organ Donor Register and to tell your family.

Don't 'opt out' of donation if you are happy to donate some organs or tissue but not others. Instead, register as an organ donor and select the organs or tissue you would like to donate.

What if I want to nominate someone to make the donation decision?

There is a form available to download from organdonation.nhs.uk which enables you to nominate someone else to make the donation decision for you. You will need to complete the form and send it back. Please note that whether or not you can legally nominate a representative to make the decision for you depends on where you live in the UK.

To find out more and to register your decision, whatever it is, visit organdonation.nhs.uk or call **0300 123 23 23**.



To find out more about organ
and tissue donation, visit
organdonation.nhs.uk