

The Selfless Great Love of Body and Organ Donors

Written by Master Cheng Yen
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In life, the body is something we use to accomplish many things, but we ultimately do not possess it, for it is not permanent. Birth, aging, illness, and eventually death—this is the natural course of life, and there's only so much that medicine can do when life has reached its end. At that time, we will leave this world. But what should we do with our body after our death? If we can understand that the body is not ours to possess, we can do something meaningful with it, such as donate it to medicine. But many, not understanding this, simply let their body be buried beneath the ground or in the ocean.

Over 20 years ago, when we were building the first Tzu Chi Hospital, I learned that organ transplants were already being done in other countries, and it saved lives. When I learned of this, I started promoting the idea of organ donation in Taiwan. I felt it was a very meaningful thing to do—it enables us to benefit others after we die, as our organs can prolong the lives of others.

On life's path, everyone encounters joys and sorrows, good fortune and misfortune. In one's time of need, sometimes the right person will show up to help. But this depends on one's karmic affinities. It is the same when we wish to help others. Though we wish to help, we might not always have the opportunity. We also need to have karmic affinities with people to have the chance to help them.

As life is unpredictable, no one knows how long he or she will live. But, though we cannot decide the length of our life, we can make meaning and value out of our life. Donating one's organs is one way to do this. Everyone can do this, as long as they have the heart to help others.

The sutras tell the story of how the Buddha in a past life had sacrificed himself to save lives. One time, the Buddha saw a starving mother tiger who had several cubs to feed. To get enough nutrition to nurse her cubs, the only option she had left was to eat one of her cubs. But how could she bear to do that? Understanding her terrible dilemma and predicament, the Buddha offered himself to the mother tiger. As a Buddhist, we should emulate the Buddha's spirit of selfless compassion. Let us aspire to help others by donating our organs or donating our body to medicine after our death.

The year after the establishment of the Tzu Chi College of Medicine in 1994, I started telling Tzu Chi volunteers about the concept of body donation. I shared the idea that while healthy and alive, we should utilize our body to do good and help others; when we pass away, we can likewise do good by donating our body for medical education. A year later, in 1996, with the donation of bodies, the school opened its anatomy laboratory and established the Great Giving Hall to honor the body donors. We call these body donors the "silent mentors," because they willingly donate their body to our medical school for dissection and "teach" our medical students about the human body.

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These donated bodies may be used in one of several ways. Firstly, they can be used for third-year medical students' anatomy class. They help students relate their book knowledge to a real human body. By working directly on a real human body, the students can gain a better understanding of the anatomical structure of the body. This is the first step in nurturing good doctors.



Secondly, if a person had died from illness, his or her body can also be used for surgical pathology dissection. In so doing, such body donors serve as teachers for our doctors. They help doctors learn more about a particular disease and provide more information on the illness. With more knowledge and understanding of the illness, doctors will be better able to diagnose and give treatment when they encounter patients with the same illness in the future. In addition, during the surgical dissection, students can get a firsthand lesson from experienced doctors by observing the procedure and listening to the doctor's explanations. By doing this, the students are able to acquire a lot of valuable knowledge about these illnesses before they encounter them in real medical practice. To be a good doctor, however, one must never stop learning. Therefore, besides providing our medical students ample resources for their training while they are in school, they will still need to continue doing research to learn more about the body's mysteries after they've become doctors.

In 2002, another way donated bodies could be used was introduced-simulation surgery for medical students in their clerkship. Tzu Chi Medical School is the first school in Taiwan to create such a program. The course provides an opportunity for students to get actual experience in surgical procedures as they operate on the bodies. This enables them to accumulate surgical experience before they graduate and begin performing operations on real patients.

On September 10, 2008, thirteen years after Tzu Chi first started promoting body donation, Tzu Chi established a Medical Simulation Center. Tzu Chi Medical School is perhaps the first medical school in the world to have a simulation surgery program that uses whole human bodies as part of its medical curriculum.



When a patient is ill and in pain, if the doctor can correctly diagnose the illness and provide the proper treatment, the patient can be cured quickly and become healthy again. If, however, medical students do not receive sufficient training while in school, when they start practicing medicine, the lives of the patients will be put in danger. Therefore, to truly save patients' lives, proper training and education of medical students is very important. This is why I promoted the idea of body donation when I established our medical school.

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If we truly understand what good can be done with our body, we can use it to do many things for our fellow human beings. When we're healthy, we can use our body to help people in suffering. When we pass away, we can still benefit others by donating our body or organs. By donating our organs, we'll be able to give patients a second chance in life. By donating our body, we can help educate future doctors by enabling them to learn more about the human anatomy or specific illnesses. Doing this, we also leave a legacy of love. Isn't that very meaningful?

For the body donors, it was not easy to make the decision to donate their body. They must be able to see past traditional Chinese beliefs about keeping one's body whole and intact after death. They also need to have the spirit of Great Love, the aspiration to help nurture good doctors. To decide to donate their body, they must truly understand the meaning and purpose behind the body donation and have no fear or regret. They truly have wisdom and know how to create blessings for our society. As for the donors' relatives, they are truly admirable for helping to fulfill their loved one's last wish and allowing his or her body to be operated on despite their own pain and grief.

The contribution of these body donors—silent mentors—is truly a tremendous one. They add to medical knowledge as well as help nurture doctors with humanity. These body donors show us what wisdom is and have given their own lives everlasting meaning and value.

Dharma Master Cheng Yen
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