

Organ Donation Offers a “Karmic Advantage” to Buddhists

An interview with **ROBERT A. F. THURMAN**



Prof. Thurman is chair of religious studies and Jey Tsong Khapa professor of Buddhist studies at Columbia University, New York City; president of Tibet House; and a former Tibetan Buddhist monk. This interview originally appeared in ON THE BEAT, Spring/Summer 2005, a publication of the New York Organ Donor Network.

The interview was conducted by Martin Woolf, Communications Manager at the New York Organ Donor Network.

Q: What is the overall viewpoint that Buddhism holds in relation to organ donation?

Thurman: Ordinary people have a continuity of life that is their consciousness continuum. They don't like to talk about a self and they're a little nervous talking about a soul because it can be taken for a self. [Their consciousness] leaves the body behind completely. The body is not sacred in that sense. ... So there is really no bar to organ donation. In fact it is considered, especially in Mahayana Buddhism, nothing but an extremely virtuous thing.

Q: Is there any aspect about organ donation that some Buddhists may regard as being somewhat problematic?

Thurman: Surgery, although it wouldn't cause pain to the donor, could disrupt the process of the departure of the consciousness continuum from being embedded in the body. ... Even if that is so, the giving up of the body, if they are prepared to donate, could still be a great virtue and could help them for their rebirth.

Q: I have read about the importance of compassion in Buddhism.

Thurman: Yes, but Buddhists are pragmatic in not trying to pressure people to go beyond what they're actually capable of, for what they really want to do. ... If they develop and prepare, they can do more than they thought they could. Not everyone is at the same level of attachment. ... The gift of the body is a very great benefit and a boon, like what you'd call a karmic boon, a karmic advantage to a person. It's considered a really marvelous thing and so long as they can do it without too much anxiety, so long as they are prepared about it, and the family is ok about it, I think that it's a positive from a Buddhist point of view. There is nothing at all in Buddhism where there is a veneration of the corpse.

Q: There's a story about the Buddha in one of his earlier lives when Prince Mahasattva rescues a starving tigress and her cubs by taking his own life. Mahasattva slits his throat, making it easy for the tigress to feed on his blood and flesh. What is the lesson to be derived from this story?

Thurman: At the end of that story, the young prince consoles his grieving parents by appearing in the sky as a vision to them saying that he is a deity of a certain realm. He tells them to stop their moaning because he wanted to do that, it was a great opportunity to make a gift of his body. He got terrific karmic merit and advantage out of it. The caveat is don't rush off and feed the first tiger. As a human being, you may not be at the level where you can do that with pleasure.

Q: Question: How do people who practice Buddhism in the modern world come to have that kind of self-knowledge?

Thurman: In the case of organ donation, you are not talking about being a living person in front of a tigress to be eaten, which is a level of heroism. You are going to be dead, in the sense of your consciousness having at least withdrawn from the five senses. You are not going to feel any pain. So it's a painless way of gaining terrific merit by making a gift out of your death. ... The point about Buddhism is that they genuinely feel that life is a continuum of incarnation from body to body to body. ... A real Buddhist, who sees the body as being a landing place for that particular life—one step in between many lives—should be fairly able to donate.

Q: If the next of kin don't know their loved one's wishes, they could say no to donation.

Thurman: That is something you should rethink in your process, if there is a high rate of family members refusing. This is so, especially among what we call "Euro-Buddhists," in a sense that they may individually be Buddhists but their family might be Jewish or Christian. So their religious views might be, "Oh no, the person's got to have his body for when he meets God." They don't get it that he [the Buddhist] doesn't believe in that.

Q: You have a very close relationship with His Holiness, the Dalai Lama. Have you ever discussed issues relating to organ donation with him?

Thurman: No, we have actually not discussed that but we have discussed parallel things about medicine and so on. He wouldn't probably do it himself because he knows that the Tibetan people would want to mummify him. But he'd like nothing better than to give his organs, I'm sure. And he would encourage people to do so, I have no doubt.

In addition to his prestigious academic standing at Columbia University and Tibet House, Prof. Thurman is president of the American Institute for Buddhist Studies; the translator of 'The Tibetan Book of the Dead'; a widely-read author about Buddhism; and a foremost authority about his close acquaintance, the Dalai Lama. Prof. Thurman is the father of five children, including the actress Uma Thurman.

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