

## HINDUISM AND ORGAN AND TISSUE DONATION

The Hindu sacred literature, consisting of many ancient Sanskrit texts such as the Vedas, the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita, provide no specific guidance or direction to the Hindus on the modern medical practice of human organ and tissue transplantation. In a sense, lack of specific direction in the literature in the form of outright rejection can be largely viewed as helpful to the practice of organ donation in modern times for it does not create any moral or ethical dilemma to those Hindus who wish to donate their organs after their death.

In this context, it is important to keep in mind that in actual observed practice among the Hindus not only in the West but also in India there appears to be no serious moral or ethical issues raised in the Hindu community as a whole if a Hindu wishes to donate his or her organ to a close relative or a friend while the person is alive and has healthy organ to donate as certified by the expert medical advice. However, it is a separate issue as to whether there is any moral issues involved in organ donation (and also acceptance of organ donation) of a deceased person's organs. Here again, there is no widely known Hindu religious, moral and ethical impediments against organ donation or acceptance from an anonymous deceased person.

In the wider context of organ donation as a value and also as a practice in Hindu traditions, one can find significant amount of inferential support from ancient Hindu philosophy and theology. This support is embedded in many of the fundamental beliefs and practices of Hindus in relation to the nature and meaning of life itself. For instance, in all Hindu traditions human body, when there is life in it, is considered as a 'house' of individual soul (*jeeva*) and in that state it is inseparably connected to the universal soul (*Brahman*). However, when a Hindu dies, this individual soul is believed to leave the present physical body and, depending on one's actions (*karma*) either permanently attain liberation (*moksha*) – totally merge with universal soul - or take re-birth in a different body.

The *Bhagavad Gita* describes the mortal body and the immortal soul in a simple way like the relationship of clothes to a body:

*"Vasamsi jirnani yatha vihaya  
navani grhnati naro parani  
tatha sharirani vihaya jirnan  
nyanyani samyati navani dehi."*

"As a person discarding worn-out clothes, takes other new ones, likewise the embodied soul, casting off worn-out bodies, enters into others which are new"

(Bhagavad Gita chapter 2:22)

Thus a great care of the physical body should be taken while one is alive because it is a house of god. At death also it must be shown all the necessary respect for the ritual of cremation.

In Hindu mythology there are traditions which support the use of body parts to benefit others. *Sage Charaka* deals with internal medicine while *Sage Sushruta* includes features of organ and limb transplants.

Thus tissue and organ donation from Hindu point of view is a spiritually advantageous deed for the donor, provided that the decision is made with the knowledge and agreement of those close to the donor.