

# Cadaver – The Great Teacher

*Dr. Anjali C. Dhamangaonkar*

Anatomical dissection is a time-tested method of medical education. Dissection of cadavers lays down a strong foundation for sound medical knowledge and good clinical practice. Cadavers are teachers who reveal the secrets of the human body by allowing themselves to be laid open by the dissecting knife. No imaging technique can teach a medical student the complex relationships of anatomical structures nor give the 'feel' of the tissues that a cadaver can. The saying "Dead men tell no tale" does not hold true in the dissection hall.

It is very interesting to know that the medical students of Thailand speak of the cadavers as "Ajarn Yai" which means 'Great Teacher.' The very first Thai body donor, a professor of literature donated his body in 1930 with the idea of remaining a teacher even after death. Customarily teachers in Thailand are venerated by the students in an annual ceremony called 'Waikhru' just as we celebrate 'Teachers' day' here in India. The status of 'Ajarn Yai' is conferred on the cadavers by two ceremonies called 'The Dedication Ceremony' and 'The Cremation Ceremony.' In the dedication ceremony, some days before the session, the faculty members, students, relatives of the deceased and the Buddhist monks assemble in the dissection room to pray and chant and offer floral tribute to the cadavers. The names of the cadaveric individuals are read aloud and the title of 'Ajarn Yai' conferred on them. Then the monks are given a meal and gifts in a symbolic manner as though giving them to the deceased. It is also seen as a way to honour the spirit of the dead and help the 'winyan' (spirit or soul) to go to heaven. This ceremony makes a good beginning of the course in Anatomy and helps to develop a new relationship between the students and their 'ajarn yai' and promotes a philosophical approach to the study of Anatomy.

During the course, the cadavers are always referred to as 'Ajarn Yai' and never as 'sop' (cadaver). In the dissection room, the name, age, cause of death of donors are indicated on each table so that the students will remember their 'teachers' forever. The cremation of the dissected bodies is even a bigger ceremony in which there is a large procession led by the monks, in which students carry their 'Ajarn Yai' to the cremation building. Booklets showing the donors' pictures, their addresses, words of condolence and gratitude from students and teachers are published and distributed. This provides an atmosphere of reverence and respect towards the cadavers. This feeling of gratitude helps to inculcate humility, caring attitude, sympathy and love in the budding doctors so that they can bloom into noble persons who do not show any indifference towards ailing mankind.

It is a bit of unnerving sight for students when they visit the dissection hall for the first time. Some do not eat well; some do not sleep for a few days and a few even faint in the dissection hall. But if the students approach the cadaver as a teacher (Ajarn Yai) this may not happen. Just to allay the fear and a sense of repulsion, we have tried to decorate our dissection hall with floral pots and flowing music.

Cadavers can be compared to a complex road map in which there is no active traffic. Hence the students learn the routes to various destinations without hurting anyone. Stalwarts in various fields such as Orthopedics, ENT, Gastroenterology, Gynaecology and Neurosurgery come back to the 'true teacher' to practice various surgical procedures. Getting bodies for dissection has become difficult in many medical schools. In some medical schools abroad, anatomical dissection has been given up. Students of our college need have no such problems as they are given adequate number of bodies to dissect. Dissection also helps to instill a spirit of team-work, patience, technical skills and the art to visualize structures correctly, as this is very important for future medical practice. So, go ahead and enjoy the dissection!