



buddhist global relief



helping hands newsletter

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The Greatest Spiritual Explosion



By Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi - The great Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca once said: "The day that hunger is eradicated from the earth, there will be the greatest spiritual explosion the world has ever known. Humanity cannot imagine the joy that will burst into the world on the day of that great revolution."

As a Buddhist, I consider the Buddha's enlightenment (and his "turning the wheel of the Dhamma") to be the greatest spiritual event in human history. But I still find it striking that Lorca says the eradication of hunger will launch a "spiritual explosion." To my mind, this suggests two things.

First, it suggests that the biggest barrier to the eradication of hunger is not, as we often assume, lack of technological expertise or a shortage of funds and resources. Rather, it is moral and spiritual paralysis. It's a well-established fact that we have the technologies needed to eradicate hunger. We have the funds and sufficient resources to produce enough food to feed everyone. Hunger persists for a different reason. It persists because we lack the will, the heart, and the collective imagination to end it.

The numbers of those who suffer from hunger are staggering. Close to a billion people are condemned to chronic hunger and malnutrition every day; another two billion subsist on inadequate diets; each year ten million people—60% of them children—die from hunger and hunger-related illnesses. These figures boggle the mind and leave us grappling with questions that challenge our culture's claim to decency. With our immense resources and powerful technologies, how can we let so many children go to bed hungry every night? How can we spend \$500 billion on weapons of war yet tighten our purses when it comes to combating hunger? Should we be sending rockets to explore outer space at the same time that children are dying from lack of food?

While the statistics on hunger are mind-blowing, I'm reluctant to use them to argue the case for more effective action. I'm apprehensive that the use of statistics may be symptomatic of the very attitude that allows hunger to flourish, an attitude I characterize as "spiritual numbness." Statistics actually contribute to this condition by reducing people to numbers, to lines on paper or blips on a screen that cannot know the pangs of hunger or feel relief when food arrives. When the numbers are so immense, we can only deal with them by closing our hearts to others' pain and convincing ourselves that we're helpless to change our collective destiny.

By replacing real people with numbers, we let ourselves off the hook. We file away disturbing facts in the cabinets of our minds and spare ourselves the trouble of comprehending what those numbers stand for. But the figures relating to global hunger are not abstract quantities in a mathematical formula. They represent real human beings; they quantify real human suffering. Behind them are people calling for help.

It's often said that hatred is the most pernicious root of human suffering. There's no doubt that acts of violence, driven by savage hate, can trigger tragedy and unleash massive floods of misery. However, in my view the more reprehensible root of suffering in today's world is spiritual numbness, indifference to the fate of our fellow beings. Spiritual numbness stifles understanding and love. It begets inertia and stymies the effort to reach out to those who need a hand.

Spiritual numbness is all the more egregious because it does not immediately strike us as evil. To the contrary, we take it to be perfectly normal, standard operating procedure, square one in the scramble to get ahead. Indifference flourishes best under the cover of normalcy, under the guise of decency. Under that cover we can tolerate the violation of the most basic human rights, among them the right to food, which is nothing short of the right to life.

The stance of indifference serves a protective function. It lets us go about our daily business without feeling disturbed by events that should tug at the strings of our hearts. We can surf the TV for football games, crime dramas, and sitcoms while kids in Haiti eat mud pies and drink polluted water. We can flash bright smiles and crack clever jokes while financial vultures grab up land in Africa and South America. We can dream sweet dreams while hunger drives nameless millions into the arms of illness and death.

However, the same indifference that protects us also impoverishes us. We carve out a comfort zone to conduct our daily affairs, but in doing so we close doors to a greater freedom. We lock ourselves into a constricting cell: the narrow confines of ego, accompanied by its ever-present wards, grasping, worry, and anxiety.

This brings me to the second implication of Lorca's statement. His words imply that what we need most to eradicate global hunger is a moral and spiritual transformation. Feats of technology and infusions of cash to boost sagging economies won't do the trick on their own. Nothing less is demanded of us than a transformation of values and a commitment to transformative action.

The transformation starts when we see each person—whether man or woman, adult or child—as a subjective center of experience, someone separated from us by only the thinnest psychic membrane. This calls for an imaginative effort to extend the sense of identity from the tight boundaries of the self to all our fellow beings, to all who share our yearning for freedom, happiness, and security. By identifying with others, we expose ourselves to their suffering, but at the same time we give rise to an inconceivable joy, "a joy that will burst into the world." We throw open a door that leads from the bottom of the heart to the great compassion connecting us to all humanity and all sentient beings in the limitless web of life. We open ourselves to the deepest, holiest, and most sacred wells of our own being, in which flow the waters of boundless love, hope, and generosity of spirit. What then takes place is nothing short of a revolution—an inner revolution that turns our normal relationship with the world on its head.

This inner revolution is the precondition for the outer revolution—Lorca's "great revolution"—needed to abolish global hunger. The struggle to eradicate global hunger is driven by two major vectors. One is compassion, the other a commitment to social justice. When unified, the two constitute what I call "conscientious compassion." This is compassion inspired not merely by a feeling of empathy with those who suffer but by the insight that much of this suffering is structural—produced, not by natural events, but by institutions, policies, and laws that favor the rich and powerful at the expense of the weak, voiceless, and vulnerable.

We put compassion into action by deeds of generosity, by giving to causes and organizations dedicated to the struggle against world hunger. Each time our efforts help a child shift from the fields or factories to

the schoolhouse, we can experience a moment of joy. Each time we help a farmer grow more food to feed her family and sell her surplus in an equitable market, we can chalk up a victory for humanity.

But generosity is not enough. We must also heed the chimes of social justice. This entails learning about the issues vital to overcoming hunger and demanding equity and mercy for the poor. We can't just sit on the sidelines. We must be ready to stand up for peasants left helpless when food prices spike beyond their meager incomes; for low-income families whose sustenance is threatened by cuts to social spending; for small-scale farmers whose land is being grabbed by giant agro-industrial firms to grow crops for biofuels. We must become the voice of the voiceless, the defenders of those who can't defend themselves.

As Lorca foresaw, the effort to eradicate world hunger calls for nothing less than a spiritual revolution—the emergence of a new moral consciousness, an expansion of the imagination, a radical transformation of policies and priorities. The question whether hunger can ever be eradicated does not so much demand an answer as an effort to rise to our best potentials, rooted in the conviction—the courageous faith—that we can make a difference in the here and now. Our individual limitations are not insurmountable barriers. In our own small ways we can each become revolutionaries. We can each start paving the road toward the great revolution that will bring world hunger to an end.

BGR Partners With Ecology Action to Provide Relief in Africa



trained at a GROW BIOINTENSIVE Mini-Farm in Ohio. They will then proceed to train 1,650 women in Kenya in this method of farming. For forty years, our partner, Ecology Action, has been



By Tom Green - In Kenya, BGR is partnering with Ecology Action in a long-term strategy for increased food production and income. The focus of this partnership is a Special 3.5 Month Course to Place African Women Trainers on the GROW BIOINTENSIVE® Certified Teacher Track. Since most farming in Africa is done by women, having women as certified teachers is vital to enable greater food productivity at the local level. The complete training takes roughly two years and teachers certified at the Intermediate-Level can train teachers at the Basic-Level of Certification. Three Kenyan women are being



perfecting a small-scale agricultural program. This program, GROW BIOINTENSIVE, promotes soil fertility, high yield production and resource conservation. It is focused on the basic need of people to feed themselves. For more information, please see: <http://www.growbiointensive.org/>.

BGR's partnership with Ecology Action in Africa is especially critical due to the massive numbers of undernourished women and children, widows and orphans. The high rates of HIV and AIDS, plus frequent droughts, only exacerbate intolerable living conditions. Building on the success that Ecology Action has already demonstrated in Kenya, BGR recently

approved a similar project for Malawi where, according to Jake Blehm , Assistant Executive Director of Ecology Action, “a rapid ramp up of skills training and access to additional resources can be accomplished.”



BGR is pleased to support the work of Ecology Action. We are deeply grateful to all our donors who enable our agricultural projects to grow.

BGR Provides Emergency Grant to CARE



By Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi - As a small organization with a limited budget, BGR primarily focuses on projects aimed at promoting better long-term methods of sustainable food production rather than emergency aid, which to be effective normally requires multi-million dollar resources. Thus initially, when our supporters inquired whether we were providing relief to the victims of the famine in the Horn of Africa, we directed them to respected aid organizations involved in this effort, such as the World Food Programme, Oxfam, and CARE. Recently, however, Kim Behan, our executive director, received a personal plea from Helene Gayle, president of CARE, appealing for help in providing emergency aid to the victims of the famine. She asked Kim, as a member of CARE's President's Circle, to send a gift of \$5,000, \$7,500, or more to enable CARE to achieve its “critical, life-saving fundraising goal.”

BGR's board considered this request and decided to provide CARE with a donation of \$10,000 toward its relief operations in the Horn of Africa. Since millions of lives in this region hang in the balance, threatened by hunger and poverty, we felt this request called for a positive response. As Dr. Gayle wrote: “I can't overstate the urgency. For children and families in need there is no time to waste. Lives are at risk and you can help by making a gift today ... and save more lives.” CARE is one of the most effective relief organizations in the world and we are grateful for this opportunity to contribute toward its mission in addressing one of the world's most devastating famines in recent times.

BGR Project Aids Farm Families in Rural Vietnam



By Tom Green - A primary goal of BGR's agricultural projects is "to promote greater food productivity at the grassroots level." To achieve this goal BGR is supporting the growth of a sustainable farming technique, SRI, "System of Rice Cultivation" in Vietnam. In May 2011, BGR awarded a six-month grant to the International Cooperation Center (ICC) of Thai Nguyen University, an organization dedicated to carrying out international cooperation activities, including research in poverty reduction, and crop/animal production biotechnology. This grant has introduced a new approach of intensified rice cultivation to rural farmers in Vietnam.

Partnering with ICC, BGR is supporting the training of sustainable farming and developing field practice and work group skills in the Vo Nhai district, one of the poorest districts in the Midland and Northern mountainous region. This project aims to improve living conditions by building on these farmers' capacity to apply sustainable SRI agriculture techniques that adapt to climate variability, thereby increasing rice productivity and profitability. Emphasis is placed on training, workshops and meetings with local authorities. The System of Rice Intensification (SRI) is a new, more ecologically sustainable approach emphasizing sound



management practices that promote organic inputs and reduce cultivation density, irrigation, and use of chemical fertilizers. By building their capacity and confidence to apply sustainable SRI agriculture techniques that adapt to climate variability, farmers are able to increase their rice productivity and profitability. This improves food security and overall living conditions. SRI allows farmers to dramatically increase their yields by eliminating unnecessary expenses. Oxfam America reports: "Over a million small-scale farmers in Vietnam have embraced a technique that grows more rice with less seed, fertilizer, water, and pesticides. It's

helping farmers reduce their costs and earn more, while adding about \$23.5 million to the value of Vietnamese rice in just one crop season." Vuong Hoang Kim, a cooperative member who volunteers to teach other women SRI farming techniques, further states, "We all are very happy to see our rice plants grow very quickly and we gain a lot of benefits from these simple techniques." Please see the [Oxfam America website](#).



BGR is pleased to support the work of Thai Nguyen University's SRI project. We are deeply grateful to all our donors who funded this innovative project.

Three New BGR Board Members

By Carla Prater - The workload of the very dedicated BGR Board of Directors has increased with the success of our efforts and it recently became apparent that the Board had to be expanded. We are happy to announce that we have found three dedicated people to add to our strength:



Sister Santussika, who lives in Los Altos Hills, California, had a successful career as a software designer and engineer in Silicon Valley. During this time she raised two children. Her son is now a senior Buddhist monk and her daughter a clinical social worker. Her spiritual quest eventually led her to Buddhism. She received ordination as an anagarika (a “homeless one”) in 2005 and as a samaneri (novice nun) in 2010. She teaches Dharma with a focus on activism. Her dedication and wide variety of skills will be of great assistance to BGR in our efforts to reduce poverty and hunger around the world.

Allen Fu, who lives in New York City, is a senior trader and vice president in structured credit trading at Citigroup. Allen has long been active in philanthropy and has been a generous supporter of BGR since its origins. He is fluent in Mandarin and Taiwanese as well as English. His experience living abroad will also be of great assistance to BGR.



Michael Roehm lived as a monk in Sri Lanka and Korea during the 1980s. After returning to the U.S., he was long active in International Student Services and the English Language Institute at The American University in Washington D.C. He was also the teacher of the Dharma Study Group in Washington. He retired early this year and now lives in Williamsport, Maryland. Michael will serve as BGR’s Volunteer Coordinator, integrating and managing our volunteers.

BGR's Second Annual Report

By Kim Behan - BGR's [annual report](#) for our second year of service is now available on our website. The report covers the fiscal year running from July 1, 2009 through June 30, 2010. The year was marked by a continuing economic recession, and the number of marginal communities around the world needing our help grew exponentially, but we could provide help and hope through a host of projects to thousands around the world: in Cambodia and India; in Niger, Mali, and South Africa; and here in the U.S. This was all made possible through the generosity of our donors.

From the report, you will see that approximately 95% of our total expenditures went to direct program costs, with 1% to administration and 4% to fundraising. This reflects our commitment to our donors to be careful stewards of their donations.

The needs of the poor are real and very urgent, and we therefore hope to accomplish even more next year. All our work—feeding the hungry, helping poor farmers improve their yields, and providing education to children—depends on your generous support. With your continued help, let us walk together hand in hand on this path of service to poor communities around the world, putting the compassion of the Buddha into action.

How You Can Help

We have had such an inspiring series of fundraising events recently! This experience has showed us once again that generosity is a practice that can fill the heart with joy. The Buddha said that generosity is the basis of the spiritual life, as it helps us learn to let go of our attachments to things that are of no ultimate value to us.

This period of the year is a traditional time for bringing in the harvest and sharing what we have with those less fortunate. We who live in a country of such relative abundance can often afford to share some of our possessions with others who lack the basics necessary to support life. Please take this opportunity to reflect on your own circumstances, your life's goals and what you can offer as a gift from your heart.

BGR has funded a new set of [projects](#) that will provide food, water, and educational opportunities to many people, both in the U.S. and abroad. If you wish to share with us the joy of giving, you can contribute via PayPal or FirstGiving through links on our [website](#), and checks or money orders can be sent to Buddhist Global Relief, P.O. Box 1611, Sparta, New Jersey 07871 U.S.A.

Remember to ask if your company is listed in Buddhist Global Relief's Corporate Matching Gift Program. Gifts to BGR are tax deductible and will be used to further our mission of providing food and, more importantly, improving livelihoods for those in need. We are an all-volunteer organization, so we are able to keep our administrative expenses low and pass on most of the gifts we receive to the poorest of the poor, in many locations around the world.
