



buddhist global relief



helping hands newsletter

Vol 4 No 1: Spring 2012

Mindful Steps to the End of Hunger



By Charles W. Elliot - The simplest act of eating a piece of fruit is inevitably embedded in a complex web of systems: economic, agricultural, financial, and environmental. In attending mindfully to this act, we can discern myriad interdependent phenomena: the beginningless origins of its seeds, the earth from which the fruit grew, the laboring hands that brought the food to our table. The same mindfulness will show how our own lives depend upon the efforts of others, the essential kindness of countless strangers. And in recalling this kindness, we should be ready to take steps to repay it. One such way is to carefully consider the needs of others, and where we find that basic human needs remain unmet because of injustice, we should be motivated to act.

The Universal Declaration on the Eradication of Hunger and Malnutrition states that “society today already possesses sufficient resources, organisational ability and technology and hence the competence to [eradicate hunger].” While food supplies are abundant, access to that food is not. In 2010, 925 million people suffered from chronic hunger, representing one in seven of a global population approaching 7 billion.

Access to adequate food, as indispensable to basic human survival, is a matter of social justice. One of the earliest pronouncements of global governance on fundamental human rights was the U.N. General Assembly’s simple declaration: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food[.]” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 25, paragraph 1, 1948.) If food has been recognized as a human right since the end of World War II, and if society has the resources and competence to end hunger, we should ask ourselves: why are so many millions still hungry?

Of course, there is no single answer to that question. Like all other phenomena, the persistence and spread of human hunger is a complex dependent-arising involving many interwoven causes. Two disturbing factors are financial speculation, which drove commodity prices sky-high in 2007-2008, and the increasing diversion of crops from food production to biofuel production. Thus, the portion of U.S. corn grown to produce corn-based ethanol rose from 15% in 2006 to an estimated 40% in 2011. Other factors include catastrophic weather conditions such as droughts and floods, and global climate change, which has an adverse impact on water supplies and land, especially in the developing world. At the same time, urban sprawl reduces available farmland, while the urban middle class consumes more meat and processed food, which in turn demands more land, water, and energy.

While resources for food dwindle, governmental policies, particularly in the West, have become increasingly hostile to the poor. The shredding of social safety nets puts at risk an ever-larger number of people who need help in the face of poor economic conditions. Last year, about 25% of the House of

Representatives voted to eliminate foreign food aid. Such policies appeal to the notion that the world is a zero-sum game, that any help we offer another family will mean that we get less and that we cannot afford fairness. Here in the U.S. help for the poor is in jeopardy. In my home state of Pennsylvania, food stamp use has risen 50% from 1.2 million people in 2008 to 1.8 million today. Despite the increasing need driven by the Great Recession, the current governor proposes to disqualify anyone with assets of more than \$5,500—for example, a bank account or a second car—from food stamp eligibility. As a result, it is estimated that 4,023 Pennsylvania households will lose their food stamp benefits on May 1 of this year.

Battling institutional and entrenched social injustice helps alleviate hunger because poverty is at the root of hunger, and the root cause of poverty is powerlessness: the “powerlessness of those who lack resources such as land and water to grow food, jobs to earn money to buy food, an adequate food safety net and food reserves, and adequate nutrition.” (The Downward Spiral of Hunger: Causes & Solutions: <http://www.whyhunger.org/getinfo/showArticle/articleId/2513>.)

There are many small steps we can take to end hunger, but we must be prepared to respond to the call of conscience to help others and to restore social justice. A key step is to rebuild and enhance small-scale local food systems and turn away from globally concentrated control of food production and distribution. Ultimately, we should reject the domination of agriculture by large corporate agribusiness, and confront corporate attempts to control the very seeds of life with their patented genetically-modified “single generation” seeds.

At the neighborhood scale here in the U.S., community food gardens are springing up even in major cities like New York City and Detroit. Food waste and post-harvest losses could be remedied to make more food available to those in need. Greater investment in small-scale agriculture in rural areas and urban agriculture in the cities would empower the poor and hungry.

At Buddhist Global Relief, we are taking our own small steps. For example, we provide village-scale training in intensified rice cultivation to rural farmers in Cambodia and Vietnam, helping to build their capacity and confidence in applying sustainable agriculture techniques. These techniques dramatically boost yields without expensive external inputs. BGR funds tools and seeds to impoverished families in Cambodia to grow cash crops and home vegetable gardens. Following each harvest, each family then gives the same amount of seed they received to another local family, thus establishing a community of mutual support. BGR helps train villagers in Kenya and Malawi in small-scale agricultural techniques that nurture healthy soil fertility, produce high yields, conserve resources, and meet the basic need of people to independently feed themselves.

Such small steps, taken collectively by Buddhist Global Relief and countless others, are helping to empower the poor, reduce poverty, and alleviate the suffering of hunger. Neither the complexity of the manifold causes of hunger nor the daunting statistics of global poverty should deter us from acting out of compassion and generosity. In the Buddhist tradition, the embodiment of compassion, Avalokiteshvara – Guanyin – Kwannon, is often depicted not just with a thousand eyes to gaze upon the suffering in the world, but with a thousand hands to aid those who suffer. Of course, not even a thousand arms are enough to help the billion people who suffer from hunger. But if we recognize each motivated human heart as the eyes and hands of Avalokiteshvara, each of us acting in our own way, in our own communities, might yet help to end hunger in our generation.

Charles W. Elliott, a member of the Board of Directors of Buddhist Global Relief, is a lawyer practicing environmental, land use, and human rights law.

Aid for Sex Workers in Cambodia



By Sherry Horowitz - The life of a sex worker in Cambodia is one of crushing shame and exploitation. For women trapped in the commercial sex trade, education offers the only hope for escape and a better life. A grant from Buddhist Global Relief is helping Lotus Outreach International to expand its Non-Formal Education (NFE) program in Phnom Penh. As a result of this expansion, approximately thirty additional sex workers are attending daily classes. The NFE program teaches basic literacy skills, health education, and vocational training so that sex workers can leave the red light district and pursue a brighter future.

Som Keo Morakath recently became a student in a NFE program. The youngest of six children, Som Keo's story illustrates how difficult it is for an underprivileged woman to sustain safe and

secure employment in Phnom Penh. Som Keo was only able to complete grade 9 before the financial burden grew too great for her widowed mother. When the need for additional income became acute, Som Keo turned to a karaoke bar, little more than a front for prostitution, to earn extra money. Most of the more than twenty women and girls working at this bar are only doing so to make ends meet; they are either looking after a parent's health, sending siblings to school, or caring for their own children. Whether they are sex workers, karaoke girls, beer promotion girls, or massage girls, they are extremely vulnerable, regularly subjected to sexual advances, degrading treatment, and personal compromises. For Morakath, enrollment in a NFE program allows her to advance her education, learn animal husbandry, and acquire cooking, sewing and hairdressing skills. One day, she hopes to open her own beauty salon. The NFE program that you support through BGR is helping her to live the simple family life she craves.



Not all students who attend NFE classes are sex workers. One of thirteen children, You Sok Khea never had the chance to attend school in her native Kampong Cham province. As a married mother of four children, Sok Khea assumed that reading and writing were two things she would live without for the rest of her life. That changed when Lotus Outreach International opened a NFE class in

Tuol Song Kae, not far from where she lives. She enrolled at the first opportunity and has thrived, ranking fifth out of twenty-one students. Sok Khea has set her sights well beyond the basic skills of primary education. After hearing a lecture in class, she was inspired to start a business. With the help and guidance of her teachers, she is now operating a small grocery out of her house. She continues to attend NFE, and is grateful for all it has to offer. She says, "I'm different now! I can not only read, write, and do math, but I can think, analyze, and even run a business. I owe a great deal to the program-I don't know how to thank you enough."

Spring 2012 Current Projects

BGR is always involved with a multitude of projects worldwide. As we settle into the new year three more are added to that list, in Cambodia, Malawi, and South Africa.

Cambodia



Task: Provide cash crop seeds and farming tools to help poor families achieve food security

Partner: Lotus Outreach International

This project, undertaken in partnership with Lotus Outreach, establishes a revolving loan fund for community micro-lending or “self-help” groups (SHG) in twenty villages. The fund will be used for non-animal agricultural Working Capital Assistance loans in its first year, impacting as many as 500 families. Poor villagers will be able to use loan funds for cash crop seeds, tools, machinery, and other agricultural materials. These loans will be repaid to the SHGs with interest; these returns will be designated for community development projects. The project goal is to build the capacity of the SHGs to empower the target families (approximately 2,100 people) to establish their own stable source of income and food security. This in turn will improve their life options, earning capacity, health, and education. Surplus seeds from the cash crops will be “paid forward” to other families, creating a multiplier effect from a one-time investment and increasing community cohesion, thus achieving one of the project’s key goals.



Malawi



Task: Increase food production and income for widows and orphans

Partner: Ecology Action Mid-Peninsula

Malawi is a low-income, food-deficit country in East Africa, ranked 153 out of 169 on the 2010 Human Development Index. An estimated 3.9 million (28%) of the Malawian people are undernourished. A third of its children are underweight and 45% suffer from stunted growth. The project will establish training centers in Malawi for Grow Biointensive®, organic, high-yielding sustainable farming practices. These practices enable farmers to double or triple crop yields while using 67% to 88% less water and 50% to 100% less fertilizer than standard organic or conventional methods. These practices will not only yield high quality crops, but will improve food security and soil health that will benefit the communities far into the future. Within three years, the program will train (directly and indirectly) people who in turn will train others



in their own villages. At least two centers for teaching the Biointensive® practices will be established, each equipped with five sets of tools for training and maintenance of the mini-farms. The funds will be used to create two primary seed banks, where seeds can be selected, processed, and stored as a community resource. The work will be conducted in partnership with Women of Grace, an organization dedicated to alleviating the extreme poverty of Malawi widows.

South Africa



Task: Transition from emergency food parcels to sustainable food security in the Mqatsheni community

Partner: Dharmagiri, Khuphuka Project

The Khuphuka Project is an initiative of Dharmagiri Outreach, a Buddhist hermitage offering non-denominational aid to underprivileged communities in South Africa. The project will create a large-scale organic permaculture garden in the Mqatsheni community, an area severely impacted by the HIV/AIDS pandemic and food insecurity. More than 80% of the program beneficiaries are women, and 92% are unemployed. The community garden will follow sound agro-ecological farming practices and provide nutritious organic produce for people living with HIV and AIDS. This will ensure adequate nutrition and sustained adherence to antiretroviral medication regimens. The project will provide this community with seedlings and plants now available only from remote nurseries.

The garden will also be used as a training center to facilitate the transfer of sustainable gardening and farming skills into the surrounding communities. The goal is to increase local food production in this community, transforming present food shortages into long-term sustainable food security within a few years.



International Women's Day - March 8th!



BGR was happy to join with Oxfam America in recognizing women's achievements on March 8th! This annual holiday celebrates women and highlights persisting problems in the way resources like education and food are distributed to women and girls. Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi delivers a video message on International Women's Day [here](#). Oxfam America made a [toolkit](#) available to help honor special individuals for their contributions to the fight against hunger and poverty. You'll find inspiration for next year on the International Women's Day [website](#), which posts a list of events held all around the world.

New Posts on the BGR Blog!

Check out the BGR [blog](#). In the January 31st post, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi explains how BGR was founded and why we focus on global hunger, of all the possible issues and problems in the world. The next two posts, on February 6th and 13th, provide a fascinating account of his early days at a monastery in Sri Lanka and how his personal experience of hunger shaped his sense of mission. The most recent post deals with hunger in America, and what we can do about it. Subsequent posts will deal with Buddhist teachings that inspire our work; issues pertaining to social and economic justice; the hidden dynamics of the world food system; highlights of BGR projects; personal cameos of those who benefit from our projects, and more. Subscribe to the blog and be sure you get regular updates!

How You Can Help

Interested in volunteering for BGR? Joining our team offers an amazing opportunity to put compassion into action and help create a better world. Being an all-volunteer organization, we need qualified help. You'll find a list of [volunteer opportunities](#) on our website. Positions are open for people who can responsibly and consistently manage routine tasks like picking up and distributing printed materials, as well as skilled graphic design specialists, writers, and others. Some volunteers need to be located in a particular place, but most can work from home, wherever that may be.

We'll also need help with the 2012 Walks to Feed the Hungry, which will be held in October at different locations around the country. Please contact us at info@buddhistglobalrelief.org for information about walks already being planned or to organize a fundraising event in your area.

As always, donations to BGR are welcome. You can donate by PayPal or credit card on the [website](#), on Facebook, or by check to:

Buddhist Global Relief
PO Box 1611
Sparta, New Jersey 07871 USA

Thank you for your help!