



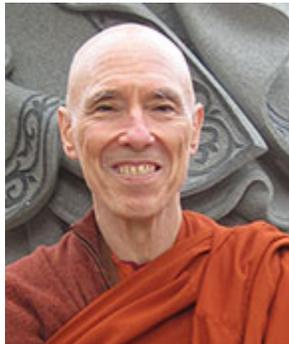
buddhist global relief



# helpinghands

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## Getting Our Priorities Right



**By Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi** - Over the past few weeks the crusade to reduce the federal budget deficit has brought to national prominence a word that had previously been largely confined to dictionaries. The word is “sequestration,” which in the context of deficit reduction means the application of automatic, across-the-board spending cuts to a wide swath of federal programs. Because Congress could not agree on an alternative approach, sequestration went into effect on March 1st as part of a strategy to reduce the federal deficit by \$1.2 trillion over the next ten years. It started with \$85 billion in cuts for the remainder of fiscal year 2013.

The sequester applies almost equally to defense spending and spending on non-defense items. Although SNAP—better known as “food stamps”—is exempt from the sequester, other social programs have not escaped the axe. The cuts will be especially severe for programs that benefit poor people both in the U.S. and abroad.<sup>1</sup> For millions whose health, security, and livelihood depend on a helping hand from government, these cuts will have traumatic effects. In many cases they may literally mark the difference between life and death.

On the domestic front, the sequester will require that between 600,000 and 775,000 women and children be dropped from WIC, the “Women, Infants, and Children” initiative that provides supplemental food aid and nutritional guidance to low-income mothers and children below the age of five. This move is particularly irrational because WIC is considered one of the most successful nutritional aid programs in the country.<sup>2</sup> Also on account of the sequester:

- Meals on Wheels will have to cut four million meals provided to senior citizens
- 3.8 million unemployed workers will face an 11% cut in weekly unemployment benefits
- 70,000 children will be denied admission to Head Start
- 30,000 families will be denied affordable child care
- 100,000 people living in homeless shelters will be forced to leave.

U.S. foreign aid will also shrink. Programs administered under Poverty-Focused Development Assistance will take a cut of a billion dollars, which will remove critical food aid for over two million people, including 600,000 children. Support for small farmers will be withdrawn and five million people will be left without prevention and treatment programs for HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria.

<sup>1</sup> For a bullet-point summary of sequestration impacts, see the article by Sharon Parrott on the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities blog “Off the Charts” at: <http://tinyurl.com/bfcgkb8>.

<sup>2</sup> See the website of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food & Nutrition Service: <http://tinyurl.com/bhrzvm9>.

Apart from its direct effects, the sequester will inevitably slow domestic economic growth, pushing approximately 700,000 more people into the ranks of the jobless. This could hamper the recovery and lead to recession. Less employment will mean less spending, which will translate into fewer revenues. Thus, rather than boosting the economy, the sequester generates a downward spiral toward increasing austerity.

Liberal economists have deplored the sequester as a bad policy move, pointing out that our core problem is not federal debt but lack of jobs. Paul Krugman, in an op-ed titled "[Sequester of Fools](#)," writes that "we should be spending more, not less, until we're close to full employment; the sequester is exactly what the doctor didn't order." Apart from its economic drawbacks, the sequester can also be evaluated from a moral point of view. From this angle it exhibits not only muddled thinking but a wrong moral choice, an inversion of proper moral priorities.

To see what lies behind the sequester, we might ask why Congress has been so insistent on reducing the deficit—a theme seldom heard until two years ago. A deficit results when spending significantly outstrips revenues; in such a case the spending may be facilitated by borrowing, which entails debt—hence all the ruckus in Congress about "our federal debt crisis." The deficit can be rectified either by cutting spending or by raising revenues (or by some combination of the two). Granted that in the long run the deficit has to be reduced and wasteful spending must be eliminated, there is no cogent reason, either pragmatic or ethical, for preferring cuts in spending to increases in revenues. To the contrary, increasing revenues wins on both counts. It is more pragmatic because it would promote job creation and thus conduce to prosperity rather than austerity. And it is morally preferable because it would open the doors of opportunity to the poor, who under the sequester will be left to fend for themselves without the public assistance that has pulled them through hard times. The real reason Congress has been beating the drum so loudly for deficit reduction is left unspoken but is tacitly understood: it exonerates the affluent from the duty of helping those less fortunate than themselves.

Beneath the choice of approach to balancing the budget lie two rival philosophies of government, each reflecting a distinctive moral standpoint. One philosophy holds that each person ultimately exists as an autonomous individual. Though we may live in the company of our family, neighbors, and friends, essentially we each stand alone. At birth we're thrown into a harsh, competitive world, and if we come out ahead, we're entitled to fully enjoy the wealth we obtain through our hard work or privileged status. Community is a means to self-advancement; society serves mainly to negotiate between conflicting claims. Government is useful when needed to keep the economy running; otherwise it should stick to its basic function, the maintenance of law and order. On this philosophy what is right is to pursue one's own interests. What is good is the success of the enterprising individual who can use his or her skills and ingenuity to prevail in the struggle to get ahead. Generosity and compassion may be praiseworthy as private virtues, but they entail no obligation from society at large.

The other philosophy assigns primacy to the social order and sees the individual as flourishing best in connection with others. Society is an organic whole, and persons exist as cells in this larger organism—each inherently valuable but able to thrive only by functioning in a totality that transcends the sum of its parts. The moral standpoint consistent with this philosophy gives priority to the common good. What is right is what brings maximum benefit to the whole and via the whole to its members; what is wrong is what benefits the egotistic individual at the expense of the whole. The social ideal is to establish the optimal conditions for everyone to freely develop their full human capacities as they choose.

Compassion and justice, from this standpoint, have implications for social and political policy. They are not merely private virtues but qualities to be enacted by programs, laws, and regulations. Government is ideally the guardian and advocate of the common good, and as such it should provide opportunities for all

to flourish in accordance with their ideals. From the perspective of ultimate principle, people are essentially equal—equally entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Since people have different skills, perfect equality is unattainable, and some folks will inevitably squander their assets, but no one should be condemned to a life of misery just because they lack the talents and resources needed to thrive on their own. Certain goods are inalienable, among them food, housing, medical care, education, and a clean environment. It's the duty of government to see that everyone gets them.

It is this standpoint rather than the individualistic one that best squares [with](#) the social philosophy of the Buddhadharmā. The Buddhist scriptures ask us to cherish all people as a mother cherishes her only child. They assign to government the responsibility of providing for the welfare of its subjects. Such texts as the Kutadanta Sutta (DN 5) and the Discourse on the Wheel-Turning Monarch (DN 26), as well as the Jataka stories, show that the ruler is obliged to protect and provide for all in his realm. Above all, he must eliminate poverty, which is best done by giving the citizens the chance to work so they can support their families and earn a surplus to do deeds of merit.

As applied to deficit reduction, this would require making different choices than the one Congress has made. In the words of Sharon Parrott [it would entail](#) “a balanced package of tax and spending measures that do not increase poverty or inequality or exert such a sharp, immediate drag on the recovery.” While pragmatically more effective than sequestration, such an approach would also better meet the moral imperative. To reduce spending, even deeper cuts could be made in military expenditures without jeopardizing our security—despite the panic cries on the Right. Giant corporations should not be exempt from paying taxes, as is presently the case with many, and loopholes should be closed that allow corporations to deposit their profits offshore, thus [shielding billions from taxation](#). Subsidies to Big Oil and Big Agriculture should be terminated. Revenues could be boosted by raising taxes on the rich and increasing the tax rates on dividends, capital gains, and carried interest.<sup>3</sup> Levying a small tax on speculative financial transactions would easily raise billions, and a tax on carbon would simultaneously boost revenues and counteract climate change. The proceeds raised could fund existing social programs and help launch new ones. This would enable us to expedite the transition to renewable energy systems, reduce poverty and inequality at home, and contribute to the battle against global poverty. Adopting this latter approach would also advance national security concerns far better than deploying deadly weapons that only incite fear, resentment, and vengefulness in targeted populations.

Choosing an alternative approach to ending hunger in America is not a matter that we need passively leave in the hands of Congress. We can actively contribute to this goal—and not only by making donations to organizations that help the hungry. Donations are an expression of generosity and compassion, but we also need social justice, which means protecting and expanding government programs that assist the needy. The website for “A Place at the Table,” a new documentary about hunger in America, offers us [a platform for contacting our members of Congress](#) and letting them know we need to put a circle of protection around the most vulnerable in our midst. The website provides a call-in number, talking points, and a chance to learn more about campaigns to end hunger. To take action, you need only go [here](#) to find everything conveniently prepared for you.

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<sup>3</sup> See Ellen Brown, “Beyond Deficit Scare-Mongering,” at the “Dollars and Sense” website at: <http://tinyurl.com/b6lb7rk>.

## Complementary Feeding Practices in Côte d'Ivoire

**By Jennifer Russ** – When a mother holds her newborn baby for the first time, she might wonder what challenges and joys her child will encounter on his or her journey to adulthood.

When a mother in Côte d'Ivoire holds her newborn baby for the first time, she might wonder what hunger and disease her child will encounter along the journey to his or her fifth birthday.

The under-five mortality rate in Côte d'Ivoire is 195 per 1,000 live births—almost 20%. Chronic malnutrition affects an estimated 33% of children under five years of age. Approximately 16% of children under five are vitamin A deficient, which compromises the immune system and thereby increases the risk of death from diseases such as malaria, measles, and diarrhea.



Informed feeding practices can prevent much of this malnutrition. Children under six months of age require exclusive breastfeeding; after this, they need additional sources of energy and nutrients. Complementary foods — nutritious, easily-digested foods — can help prevent malnutrition at this critical stage. However, the cereal most commonly used for complementary feeding in Côte d'Ivoire does not provide the necessary nutrients to meet the elevated nutritional needs of children ages 6 to 24 months.

Helen Keller International (HKI), an organization that specializes in preventing blindness and reducing malnutrition, has been using behavior change communication programs since 2000 to promote improved feeding practices in Côte d'Ivoire. They have worked closely with the local food processing company, PKL, as well as the Ministry of Health to implement a program to reduce malnutrition and micronutrient deficiency for 30,000 children. HKI has provided training for mothers on breastfeeding and complementary feeding practices using an affordable, nutrition-rich cereal — an alternative to the more common, less effective cereal currently in use.

A period of political unrest in 2010–11, however, undermined efforts in Côte d'Ivoire. With a grant from Buddhist Global Relief, HKI is renewing their work in the country.

Central to the program is the production of an enriched, nutritionally balanced cereal that is available in small and affordable package sizes to support improved complementary feeding. Additionally, HKI will continue raising awareness among the population about infant and young child feeding practices through the education and training of volunteer care groups. Each care group will consist of 10 to 15 women who will meet regularly with project staff for training, supervision, and support. Each care group volunteer will visit and teach health lessons to mothers in the 10–15 households closest to her. Every household with a child under two or a woman of child-bearing age will receive a volunteer visit at least twice a month. Partners for this project will include the selected communities, village health committees, local health facilities, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Family, Woman and Child.



A child's successes or struggles as an infant will affect her growth and development for the rest of her life. When a mother in Côte d'Ivoire has the education and resources she needs to provide a healthful beginning for her newborn, she is one step closer to giving her child the life that all children deserve.

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## From Karaoke Girl to Brilliant Businesswoman



**By Jennifer Russ** - You know what they say: give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day; teach a Cambodian woman to sew and she'll employ her whole village.

In Cambodia, where the educational system is still rebounding from the brutal anti-intellectual regime of the Khmer Rouge, Khorn Vanna is one of the 45% of the country's women who never received an education. Like many single women in Phnom Penh, Vanna, a 30-year-old single mother, turned to the red light district for employment. It was while working at a karaoke bar in 2011 that she sought an education at Lotus Outreach's Non-Formal Education (NFE) program, one of BGR's best appreciated projects in Cambodia.

Since 2005, the NFE program has offered women job and life skills training in the red light district of Phnom Penh. Over the course of a year, students learn a set of marketable skills such as cooking and sewing that can help them find safer, more dignified jobs. In addition, they learn practical skills like literacy, mathematics, conflict resolution, nutrition, financial management, and HIV awareness and protection.

Vanna enrolled in basic courses at NFE and immediately shot to the top of the class. She also enrolled in sewing and tailoring classes. "When I started NFE," she says, "I couldn't sew a straight line."

If only Vanna knew that, in a few short years, she'd own thirty weaving looms and four sewing machines and be employing a hundred local villagers – many of whom are members of her extended family – in her weaving, tailoring, and silk-making workshop outside of the city. She's even looking into starting a small retail operation, having recently purchased \$250 worth of second-hand blue jeans, which she plans to re-sell for a \$125 profit. "I just don't know where she gets all these ideas," Vanna's mother says. "It scares me!"



"Every day we used to worry how we would survive," Vanna says. "Now I feel very happy knowing we will be okay." Vanna is more than okay – she earns around \$200 a month, which is three times the average income in Cambodia. She is looking to purchase her first home soon.

Glenn Fawcett, Lotus Outreach's Director of Field Operations, says that "Vanna is a warm-hearted and generous boss that pays her employees well and inspires those around her to find the best in themselves. We are so happy to see such a kind and talented person in the midst of great success."

The goal of the Non-Formal Education program is to arm women with an education they can pass on to their families and communities, which will, in turn, empower future generations. Its success is manifest in a workshop just outside of Phnom Penh. Just one year of education helped Vanna escape a dangerous

occupation, unleash her enormous potential, and employ a village. The sky's the limit for her daughter.

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## **Buddhist Global Relief Makes Emergency Donation To Feed Syrian Refugees**



**By Charles W. Elliott** - Moved by the plight of the hundreds of thousands of refugees who have fled the ongoing conflict in Syria, Buddhist Global Relief has made an emergency donation of \$10,000 to the [World Food Programme \("WFP"\)](#) to help feed families forced from their homes.

According to the WFP, over 1.2 million people are displaced inside Syria and some 250,000 people have fled the country and become refugees in neighboring countries. Many fled the conflict zones with their families under shelling and gunfire from both government and rebel forces, often able to bring along only the clothes that they were wearing. Harsh conditions in refugee camps—including plummeting temperatures and flooding—are making for a life of intense suffering. Many families living in tents lack heaters and winter clothing.

Food for these families is the most critical need. It takes only \$72 to provide a month's worth of food for a Syrian refugee family. BGR's donation will feed 138 families for an entire month during the difficult winter season.

The WFP is the food assistance branch of the United Nations, and it is the world's largest humanitarian organization addressing global hunger. It is funded entirely by voluntary donations. To read more about the humanitarian crisis in Syria, and to make a personal donation, go [here](#).



We are thankful to BGR's generous donors who are making this emergency food donation possible.

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## **BGR Wins Prestigious Award**

**By Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi** - We are pleased to inform our readers that Buddhist Global Relief was selected by the [Foundation Beyond Belief](#) as an encore beneficiary of its "Challenge the Gap" program for the first quarter of 2013. In the email telling us about this award, A.J. Chalom, the Foundation's Humanist Giving Program Coordinator, writes:

Your commitment to adding programs for people in need and our positive response from our members when you were last featured helped with our selection. It's often assumed that an unbridgeable gap exists between the religious and non-religious. *Challenge the Gap—Different*

*Beliefs, Common Goals* is an innovative humanist program that challenges this idea by finding and working the common ground between theists and non-theists. In April of this year, 100% of the funds collected in the *Challenge the Gap* beneficiary category will be distributed to BGR. Though we cannot guarantee any specific amount, the average raised for our recent beneficiaries has been approximately \$7,000. We hope this contribution will assist you in the success of your programs.

Foundation Beyond Belief is a charitable foundation created to focus, encourage, and demonstrate generosity in the secular humanist community. The Foundation highlights five charitable organizations per quarter. Its members (over 1,100) join by signing up for a monthly automatic donation in the amount of their choice, and then set up personal profiles to indicate how they would like their contribution distributed among the featured causes. At the end of each quarter, 100% of the donations are forwarded to the beneficiaries and a new slate is selected. More information about the Challenge the Gap program can be found on their website [here](#).

In its recent blogpost (01/28/13) about BGR, the full text of which can be found [here](#), the Foundation writes:

Buddhist Global Relief's mission is simple to put into words—to combat chronic hunger and malnutrition—but the work they do is anything but simple. Their vision is a complex image of a future without poverty, with equal access to education, where we live in harmony with our natural world, and where all people have the shelter, clothing, and health care they need. To work toward their vision of an improved world, Buddhist Global Relief works to sponsor programs around the globe run by local organizations with track records of success in those communities. These programs support the BGR mission by providing direct food aid, developing sustainable approaches to food production, educating young women and girls, and giving girls opportunities to start projects to support their families.

Naturally, we are deeply grateful to the Foundation Beyond Belief for their cordial words and for selecting BGR as their beneficiary. We are also grateful to all our donors, supporters, and volunteers, whose contributions of whatever sort have enabled BGR to win the respect of the wider humanitarian community.

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## **BGR Blog Roundup**

### **GMOs: Food, Money & Control: Part II**

*Charles W. Elliott, December 21, 2012*

The seed industry is now dominated by several giant seed and biotech firms, which leads to corporate control of our food supply and threatens its integrity and diversity. [Read](#).

### **A Pray-In for the Climate**

*Bhikkhu Bodhi, January 18, 2013*

In January, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi went to Washington to join an interfaith "Pray-In for the Climate" outside the White House. The high point of the gathering was the recitation of a document requesting President Obama to call a national conference on the climate crisis. [Read](#).

### **Ending Poverty in America**

*Bhikkhu Bodhi, January 24, 2013*

On January 17th, talk show host Tavis Smiley hosted a panel discussion on “A Future Without Poverty,” which explored the problems of homelessness, hunger, political corruption, and the type of moral vision that should be guiding our nation. [Read](#).

### **Time to Draw a Line in the Tar Sands**

*Bhikkhu Bodhi, March 6, 2013*

On February 17th, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi traveled to Washington to participate in the demonstration against the Keystone XL pipeline. What is the Keystone pipeline issue all about, and why has it become the rallying point for those concerned with preserving the planet? [Read](#).

### **GMOs: Food, Money & Control: Part III**

*Charles W. Elliott, March 11, 2013*

Since we are still in the dark about the long-term effects of genetically modified foods, reliance on GM seeds is a huge bet on the future of our food system—a bet that everyone may lose. The safe alternative is natural and sustainable agriculture. [Read](#).

See more on the BGR blog: <http://buddhistglobalrelief.wordpress.com/>

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## **How You Can Help**

Interested in volunteering for BGR? By joining our team you will meet others who share your values and are working to put compassion into action and help create a better world. You'll find a list of [volunteer opportunities](#) on our website. Open positions will be listed, together with the skills needed and any particular requirements for each position. Some volunteers need to be located in a particular place, but most can work from home, wherever that may be. Please contact us at <mailto:info@buddhistglobalrelief.org> for further information.

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!