

A Buddhist Perspective on Homelessness

“Your suffering is my suffering. Your happiness is my happiness.”

The words above, attributed to the Buddha, are an expression of a central tenet of Buddhist teachings: interdependence. Interdependence means that everything occurs as the result of causes and conditions, and, just as importantly, that anything can change or disappear as causes and conditions change or pass away.

A beautiful metaphor for interdependence is Indra's Net, an image from Hindu mythology used in Buddhist teaching. Indra's Net is a vast web of connections in which each knot in the net is a multifaceted jewel reflecting all other jewels. We are like those jewels: we are who we are only because of everyone and everything else in the web of life. This metaphor helps us understand how we are all connected in both direct and unseen ways, and how, through our own thoughts and actions, we can change the world.

If we have a home, the Buddha's teachings help us realize that, given a different set of causes and conditions, we could easily be homeless. Similarly, we recognize that comforts in our lives are not produced by our effort alone. "What comes to a person comes to him because of a combination of causes and conditions; it can be kept by him only temporarily and, therefore, he must not use it selfishly or for unworthy purposes" (*The Teaching of Buddha*). In the Buddhist teachings, offering shelter is among the seven kinds of offering that may be practiced even by those who are not wealthy. The seven offerings also include a warm glance, a smile, and kind words — so very applicable to encountering the houseless.

Another central concept in Buddhism is all-embracing compassion. The true compassion of the Buddha asks neither who you are, nor how rich, poor, wise, or ignorant you are. All lives are perfectly accepted as they are, each one precious and irreplaceable.

The value of all lives is illustrated by the story of King Sibi, a Jataka tale about a previous life of the Buddha. One day, King Sibi was walking in the countryside. A pigeon came down to him and pleaded, "A hawk is after me! Please, save my life!" Just then, a hawk flew down and said, "Please, give me the pigeon! Without it I will starve!" The king pondered what to do. To allow the hawk its prey would mean the death of the pigeon; to save the pigeon would mean the death of the hawk. In order to save both lives, the king decided to give his own flesh to the hawk, an amount equal in weight to the pigeon. And so, the king's attendants brought a scale and a knife and the king began to put pieces of his flesh on the scale. But no matter how much he added, the scale would not balance. Only when he climbed on the scale himself did the scale balance. The king realized the truth of life: that all life is precious and of equal value. He became a Buddha and committed himself to saving lives.

A Buddhist perspective on homelessness begins with deepening our understanding of interdependence and interconnectedness, the nondiscriminating and unconditional nature of the Buddha's compassion, and the preciousness of each individual and all life. Whether we picture ourselves as jewels in Indra's Net or links in Buddha's golden chain of love, we understand that our thoughts and actions affect not only our own happiness or unhappiness, but also that of others (*The Golden Chain*).

We do not walk the Buddhist path alone. We are guided and supported by our fellow travelers on the path. We become the Sangha, the community that follows the Buddha and the Buddha's teachings, or Dharma. By coming together as the Sangha, we are able to manifest the Dharma and embody Buddha's love and kindness in our lives and in our community, including those experiencing homelessness.

As Buddhists, we strive to see things the way they really are: as the Buddha sees them. To the Buddha, all beings are enlightened, shining and brilliant like diamonds. Through the Buddha's compassionate working, we are awakened to our own self-centered and judgmental view of others. We begin to understand that our vision of life is filtered through ignorance, indifference, hatred, disharmony, discrimination, inequality, and ego. Seeing as we do through this selfish filter, our eyes turn away from homelessness as if it were somebody else's problem. But, guided by Buddha's eyes of loving-kindness, our eyes can be opened and transformed into kind and gentle ones, eyes that see the suffering of others, because we know we are part of the cause of that suffering. The actions that naturally flow from this transformation create new causes and conditions that will inevitably change our society and our world.

This statement was prepared on behalf of the Social Concerns Committee, Honpa Hongwanji Mission of Hawaii, by committee members Reverend Satoshi Tomioka (Hawaii Betsuin) and David Atcheson (Hawaii Betsuin).

References

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