

# Buddhist Views of Social Concerns in the United States

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In the teachings of Buddhism, all beings are equal and each life is noble and deserving of respect. In the United States, much if not all the social problems stem from prevailing attitudes that justify inequality and deny the dignity of each human being. Religious communities can play a significant part in pointing out discriminatory views and behavior—bringing conscience to those in power, and standing up for those who are treated unjustly. There is only so much each of us as individuals can do. But as Buddhists, we cannot turn a blind eye to the forces in our communities that make a few people wealthier and make increasing numbers of people less able to pay for basic needs. We find that these unfortunate

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persons in our community are less and less able to participate in cultural and religious activities.

In Shin Buddhism, each and every being is embraced in the Great Compassion of Amida Buddha, referred to as the Unbounded Light and Life (*Amitābha/Amitāyus*), or as “Other Power” or “Power Beyond Self.” From this perspective, there is a hidden Oneness in which we all live our lives. The problem is that this Amida Buddha is often talked about as some far-off divine power, when actually the great Pure Land Masters teach us that “Amida” is the Light (wisdom) and Life (compassion) that is all around us and deep within us and all living beings. It is easy to feel embraced by the love of our family and friends and those who seem very similar to us, in terms of their mental and physical abilities and socioeconomic status. But we really cannot talk about Oneness unless we are open to the Light and Life of those outside of our comfortable circle. Oneness includes all the “others.”

I interpret the Dharma as teaching us to open up the temple more to our immediate neighborhood, especially where there is so much brokenness: people struggling on low or no incomes, dealing with disabilities and substance abuse, suffering criminal and domestic violence, racism, or mistreatment by the police and other authorities. Primarily our temple seeks to offer the Dharma to those want to hear it. We are also trying to be more welcoming and accessible to those in the surrounding neighborhood. Take as an example an African-American man who lives in nearby subsidized housing. He looks disheveled and has trouble speaking clearly due to a head injury. But he feels at home at our Sunday services and study group meetings. In this way, we can learn about his needs and respond accordingly.

Another way we can offer our community to our neighborhood is by sharing our space. We let our neighbors know it is okay to come inside and see our temple rather than treating it as a fortress for our members alone. For example, our community forum on mental health services provided a wonderful opportunity to bring people into our temple and to learn about their concerns. During the summer our temple hosts English classes as part of the Chinese Mutual Aid Association's citizenship program. This is a chance for immigrants from all over the world to feel welcomed. This year, our temple will be hosting the Treasures of Uptown Interfaith Coalition's public forum on homelessness.

We see every day the social ills in our city and we are concerned. As we express these concerns in action, we try to bring out the Light and Life that is hidden in each person. We need to work together with others like our Catholic brothers and sisters to expand this outreach in the city of Chicago.

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