

Buddhist Thoughts on Collaboration in Addressing Social Ills in the United States

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To review the social ills in the United States is truly overwhelming. Buddhism teaches that suffering exists and that there is a cause of suffering. The evident suffering of poverty, hunger, and homelessness could have many causes. The disparity between the rich and the poor is immense. Here, the absence of a living wage contributes to the poverty in which so many people live. The issues of violence, crime, drugs, and sexually transmitted diseases may reflect the desire of individuals to seek the false comforts of wealth, pleasure, power, and relief from pain. Other social ills, such as the high rates of infant mortality

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and of chronic disease and the lack of access to quality health care, are attributed to a lack of education, to ignorance, to fear, and so on. Many causes of these social ills can be identified. But how does Buddhism work together with another spiritual belief system to address and help relieve the suffering? How can our Buddhist teaching address moral apathy, immigration problems, corporate corruption, low wages, pollution, voter apathy, global warming, global conflict, or the cost of energy?

Working with other religions and agencies to alleviate social ills is the goal of our gathering in Rome. It comes at the formal invitation of the head of the Catholic Church, His Holiness Pope Francis, to meet with others of like mind and collaborate to meet the gargantuan task of taking care of our communities. Our society is large and diverse, and the needs are unimaginably vast. We look different, we come from different backgrounds, and we speak different languages, but we all need shelter, food, love, and support.

Since all things are interconnected in this life, to a Buddhist working together to alleviate the causes of suffering seems a good way to work on social ills. At this time in the history of the United States, “reinventing the wheel” does not appear to be a good plan. There are numerous organizations in place to work on alleviating suffering. In the practice of Buddhism, there are the Rissho Kosei-Kai, the Tsu Chi, Soka Gakkai International, Shambhala International, Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Sakyadhita International, and every Buddhist center in the United States: all are working to help the poor, feed the hungry, end killing, create understanding, and more.

Combining these initiatives with those of the Catholic Church and perhaps of other religions is an exciting new step. In my case,

working with like-minded individuals has been most rewarding. Working for the past fifty years as a nurse has helped me understand that one person can help another who is in pain or needs nourishment or just a helping hand. Being in interfaith dialogue with Muslims, Christians, Native Americans, Zoroastrians, Jews, Hindus, and those with other spiritual practices has shown me the strength that our unity in this life gives us in addressing problems. If one person can help, seeing organizations with spiritual roots grow and join each other to make a greater difference is inspiring.

Buddhism is a very personal practice. Yet, it also teaches us that we are connected to a world in need, a community in need, a family in need, a person in need. We must work with others to be responsible and do what needs to be done. We must respond with gratitude and the courage to the pope's invitation to take steps on this path to care for our brothers and sisters in the United States who need our help.

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