

## **CELEBRATING LABOR DAY**

**Buddhism on Worker Justice Issues**

### **Living Wage**

#### **Sigālovāda Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 31)**

In five ways should an employer respect workers and servants . . . : 1) by allocating work according to their aptitude, 2) by providing them with wages and food, 3) by looking after them when they are sick, 4) by sharing special treats with them, and 5) by giving them reasonable time off work. So respected, workers and servants reciprocate with compassion in five ways: 1) by being willing to start early and finish late when necessary, 2) by taking only what their employer gives them, 3) by doing their work well, and 4) by promoting their employer's good reputation.

More on:

<http://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.31.0.nara.html>

*Narada Thera, translator, "Sigalovada Sutta: The Discourse to Sigala" (DN 31), at Access to Insight (8 June 2010), [quote edited by Joshua A. Eaton]*

#### **Thirteenth Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso**

People who make religious images and print spiritual books should do so out of a pure motivations. As professionals they should make a reasonable living from their time and efforts, but their attitude should be to bring benefit to people and not merely to make a large profit. From our side we should take care that the artifacts we acquire are purchased from sincere people.

Thub-bstan-rgya-mtsho, Dalai Lama XIII, *Path of the Bodhisattva Warrior: The Life and Teachings of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama*, compiled and translated by Glenn H. Mullin (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion, 1988), 144

***Special thanks to Joshua A Eaton, who conducted original research to locate Buddhist statements on worker justice related issues.***

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## ***A Buddhist View of Wage Theft***

**By Ven. Sevan Ross**

When I was a boy and asked my coal miner father one time too many for money, he got me a job as a "myrtle plugger." I sat all day in a field of ground cover with a special tool and "plugged" one plant at a time from the ground into a "flat" - a large wooden box. Each plant took up a four-square-inch space. I saw immediately that I could fit between 50 and 60 plants into the box. Upon filling a flat I was to take it to the Yard Boss who was to "count" it and give me a fresh one to fill. I was to be paid five cents per flat. This was child labor, and it was in the early 1960s in Pennsylvania.

When I took up my first flat, the Yard Boss reached into the box and used his hand to squeeze my plants together to one side. They now filled 40 percent of the flat. He smiled, winked, grunted, and handed it back to me.

This was wage theft, and although I was only 10 years old, I knew it. I quit that "job" at the end of my first week. My father simply said, "Now you know what a union is for."

I was too young to understand what my father meant, but I was developed enough to see that the yard boss did not see me as human in some important way. He regarded me as the "other" - as a tool like any other tool, to be used as needed for as long I held up to his purpose.

Many years later I heard a talk given during my priest training in which Yasutani Roshi, a well-known Japanese Zen Master, said these words: "The fundamental problem for all humanity is that you believe that you are there and I am here." This sums up how Buddhism casts a critical eye on the behavior of people - especially in commercial enterprises.

As long as we regard each other not as humans but as the "other," we will suffer profound abuses in the workplace. Employers will steal their workers' wages, either overtly or covertly. And all the while they will deny both to themselves and others that this is the case. After all, they are only employees. I -- or we -- happen to be management, and as such am responsible for the survival and the thriving of the organization. Except that the workers *are* the organization and a theft against them is one against the group - and me too.

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I'm sure that the Yard Boss was being stolen from in some way by his betters back in that myrtle field. He could not have invented the workplace abuse of a child all on his own. I'll bet it went all the way to the top. After all, what happens at the top flows directly to the bottom in organizations. If "the other" is how we see individuals, we will guarantee they will see us this way also.

So from a Buddhist perspective it is not quite enough to say that we each are our brother's keeper. We need to feel instead that we actually *are* our brother. And from this, fair treatment flows naturally. There is then what we Buddhists call Right Livelihood - mutually productive work, with everyone being treated fairly, everyone being treated Right.

*[Ven. Sevan Ross](#) was ordained in 1992 as a Zen Buddhist priest by Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede, director of the Rochester Zen Center. Sevan has been training in Zen since 1976 and has served on the resident staff of the Rochester Zen Center for eight years where he served as both administrator of the Center and as Head of Zendo (head priest in charge of training under the Roshi).*

*In 1996 he became Director of the Chicago Zen Center. Sensei Ross was then sanctioned as a Zen teacher (Sensei) by Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede, who is the Director of the Rochester Zen Center and a disciple of Roshi Kapleau. Sensei Ross has trained with four Zen teachers: Roshi Kjolhede, Roshi Kapleau, Toni Packer, and most recently with Roshi James Ford, a Robert-Aitkin lineage teacher. Working with Roshi Ford, Sensei Ross completed the Harada-Yasutani koan curriculum, and in May of 2007 was given Dharma Transmission by Ford Roshi, who himself holds Dharma Transmission in both the Aitkin lineage and Jiyu Kennett (Soto Line) lineage. Sevan Sensei thus offers the practices and koan curricula embodied in these lineages. Sensei would like to express his deep gratitude to all four of his teachers for their efforts in training him with compassion and patience.*

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