

PERSPECTIVE: Remember the Face of the Poorest Person
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One of the defining traits of a bodhisattva is to have immense compassion for others. Here's my story about injustice that I witnessed when I was 10 years old, and how my Buddhist practice in later years helped me to create value.

Growing up in Hong Kong, both of my parents worked. We weren't rich by any stretch of the imagination, but were quite comfortable, nonetheless. Still, my father told me stories of privation from his World War II childhood and took pains to teach me consideration for those less fortunate. He had seen great suffering and wanted very much for me to learn kindness.

He also taught me that everyone is equal. Even though we had a housekeeper, it was my job to take out the garbage every night. The housekeeper has probably died by now, but the image of seeing her off at night with the trash can in my own hands will most likely stay with me for the rest of my days.

One afternoon, I went with my friend to do homework at his house. I stayed there until almost sundown, at which time I started my 20-minute walk home from his place.

Back then, kids didn't have lockers in school. The rationale was that if we left our books at school, we were probably not doing our homework. (After coming to America, I discovered that the assumption had at least partial merit.)

So there I was, trudging along in my private-school shorts and blazer, with this huge book bag (a small suitcase, really) banging against my thigh and threatening to rip my shoulder off. It was getting dark and the encroaching twilight seemed to make lighted store signs almost fluorescent in appearance. I was getting hungry and just a bit chilled. My pace quickened.

Just then, I spotted a rather large grocery store off in the distance with a huge fruit stand out front. It was so well-lit that the fruit seemed to yell in all directions: "Buy! Buy! Get your fresh fruit here!" I couldn't resist the sight and immediately veered off course. I was about to get one of the major lessons of my life.

As I got closer, I noticed a beggar sitting in the shadows, leaning against a dark corner of that boisterous fruit stand. He had long, matted hair and I couldn't tell how old he was because he was filthy. It would have been easy to miss him except that his hands were peeling what appeared to be an overripe mango. Actually, it could have been any of a variety of fruit available at that store, but the opportunity to discern which kind had long passed because the skin had gone completely black.

The image was captivating: There in the midst of plenty was this poor, wretched man, trying to content himself with a piece of discarded fruit. Even as a child, the injustice did not escape me. I became tremendously angry. How could a storekeeper as prosperous as that one be so heartless at the same time? Could he not part with even one piece of edible fruit for the sake of a starving human being? How could he possibly enjoy his prosperity, being so miserly and mean? My heart ached for that beggar and in a single moment, I was transformed forever.

Fifteen years later, having experienced painful misadventures myself, I began my Buddhist training. By then, I was 25 and angry at the world. I found the world cruel and unjust to a great extent, and it wasn't getting any better. Then one day, out of the blue, the image of that beggar came to me during gongyo. This time, I saw the entire scene from the perspective of Nam-myoho-renge-kyo.

I recalled Soka Gakkai President Toda's strict challenge to young Daisaku Ikeda, telling

him that if he didn't like the Gakkai the way it was, then he should make it better. As I pondered Mr. Toda's guidance, I realized that his directions could be applied to the world as well. It gave me strength.

I realized that as long as I cared about others' welfare, my prayers will reveal ways to improve society without fail.

After testing that theory for more than a decade, I cannot deny the power of prayer. I know that whatever hardships I have yet to endure in the future, I can face them without fear. I have Nam-myoho-renge-kyo in my life, and that is a powerful ally indeed.

Caring too much will never be a problem in our society. Our problem is that we care far too little. I will end with a quote from Gandhi:

I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj [self-rule] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away. (M. K. Gandhi, in *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, V. K. Jhaveri and D. G. Tendular, Bombay: 1951-54, vol. 8, p. 89, GE, p. 418).

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