

## APPRECIATION FOR SULAK SIVARAKSA

HIS HOLINESS THE DALAI LAMA

Although material advances have contributed enormously to human welfare, they cannot create lasting happiness by themselves. I believe Sulak and I share a conviction that if we are to solve human problems, economic and technological development must be accompanied by an inner spiritual growth. And if we succeed in fulfilling both these goals, we will surely create a happier and more peaceful world.

AUNG SAN SUU KYI

Sulak, one of Asia's leading social thinkers, describes the "spirit of Buddhist development: as one where inner strength must be cultivated along with compassion and loving kindness." He sees the goals of Buddhist development as "equality, love, freedom, and liberation."

MAIREAD MAGUIRE

By the pivotal nature of his work, which bridges the artificial divides of North and South, Buddhist and non-Buddhist, self and other, bringing a healthy mix of universalism, and concern for local culture, and by the exemplary courage he has manifested in "speaking truth to power," Sulak Sivaraksa has made, and continues to make, a major contribution to peace and justice in his native Thailand, as well as in the world as a whole.

THICH NHAT HANH

Sulak offers a clear picture of what is going on, and he does so as a participant, not just as an observer. He is a teacher and an organizer, a *bodhisattva* who devotes all his energies to helping others.

JOANNA MACY

Sulak is one of the heroes of our time, offering us deep wisdom and refreshingly sane alternatives to the earth-destroying religions of consumerism, greed, and exploitation.

JACK KORNFIELD

Like Gandhi, Sulak offers great inspiration to a civilization that has lost its way.

STEPHEN BATCHELOR

An irrepressible campaigner for a sane and just society, Sulak unites the strengths of a traditional Dharmic sensibility with the critical rigor of a Western-educated intellectual. His life offers an heroic example of engaged Buddhism in practice.

JOHN B. COBB, JR.

In the entire world I know of no one who understands the situation more clearly and acts more effectively and consistently to bring the resources of a great religious tradition to bear on the critical issues of our time than Sulak Sivaraksa. I wish I could point to equally effective Christian leaders. I cannot. But perhaps we Christians can be inspired by him and learn from him, and can find the strength to act creatively.

WALDEN BELLO

With the crash of the economy, the question of alternatives to the current economic model has become extremely urgent. . . . Sulak Sivaraksa has been in the forefront of developing a thoroughgoing critique of consumerism.

JOHN RALSTON SAUL

Whenever I ask myself a basic question of public ethics and public action, I end up wondering what Sulak would think. He has that great virtue of being true to himself and to the standards which somehow link all great moral philosophies. . . . Sulak is an unstoppable force working on justice from a Buddhist point of view.

# THE WISDOM OF SUSTAINABILITY

Buddhist Economics for the 21st Century

SULAK SIVARAKSA

Edited by Arnold Kotler and Nicholas Bennett



Kihei, Hawai'i

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## FOREWORD

All living creatures on earth are being threatened today by violence, terrorism, economic disparity, environmental degradation, and so-called religious intolerance or civilizational conflicts. All these problems are being created by human beings through the exploitation of negative emotions such as greed and hatred. Industrialization has enabled humanity to produce more commodities than people really need, which has necessitated the creation of markets and the exploitation of greed through indoctrination and brainwashing.

People are taught to compare and compete, so that ignorance and greed escalate endlessly, reducing individuals to consuming machines. We have lost the power of discernment and cannot differentiate between need and greed. Economic imperialists occupy the human mind, and human misery has been globalized. The disparity between unlimited desires and limited resources has not only made the economic infrastructure unsustainable but has also damaged our environment and ecosystems almost beyond repair. Gandhi's statement that "mother earth can well satisfy every living creature on it, but it can never satisfy even

one person's greed," has proven true. As wealth has become the only value for far too many human beings, the principle of might makes right has become the order of the day—even more so than in primitive times. Human destiny seems almost hopeless.

In spite of this, Ajarn Sulak, a distinguished practitioner and engaged Buddhist, remains optimistic, continuing to make every effort to save the world based on the teachings of the Buddha. A sustainable economy based on right livelihood, peaceful societies through moral governance, and development from the bottom up (*Sarvodaya*) are some of the fundamental remedies and alternatives he proposes to reverse the present situation.

I greatly appreciate his right effort for putting his right view in this wonderful book, so that fellow human beings will come to share his right understanding. I trust this book will immensely benefit all its readers. *Sarvamangalam*.



Samdhong Rinpoche  
*Kalon Tripa* (Prime Minister)  
Tibetan Government-in-Exile  
Dharamsala, India  
February 20, 2009

DEDICATED TO

Maurice Anthony Ash (October 31, 1919 – January 27, 2003), an English buddhist philanthropist with a clear vision of truth, goodness, and beauty.

Lillian Willoughby (January 29, 1915 – January 15, 2009), an American Quaker who dedicated her life to fighting nonviolently for peace and justice, with a wonderful sense of humor.

## THE WISDOM OF SUSTAINABILITY

## INTRODUCTION

In the Thai language, *Ajarn* is an honorific term for someone you respect and have learned a great deal from. Ajarn Sulak and I have been friends and protagonists for more than thirty-five years. We met in 1972 when I was working in Bangkok and had invited Ivan Illich to meet with Thai intellectuals and student leaders. Already Sulak was editing the *Social Science Review* and mentoring a group of student leaders in nonviolent social action. We then became involved together in the tumultuous events in Thailand in 1973, 1976, and beyond.

After the bloody military coup of October 1976, when thousands of students fled the cities to join the Communist Party of Thailand in the jungles in the north and south of the country, and thousands of others were arrested, together we created the first human rights organization in Thailand out of the Coordinating Group for Religion in Society. Over a three-year period, we managed to get more than 11,000 people out of prison. During part of this time, Sulak had to retreat in the first of his several exiles; in fact, he spent his first night of exile in my parents' house in London. On his return some months later and during

much of the 1980s, he did more than anyone else to heal the huge rifts in Thai society and arrange for returning student leaders to be reintegrated into society.

He was already, at that time, an activist Buddhist practitioner and a Siamese nationalist and royalist, positions he has maintained ever since. He established a publishing house and bookshop that became the main meeting place for Bangkok intellectuals, and arranged for Thich Nhat Hanh to visit and participate in a training program in nonviolent action for young activists.

Ajarn Sulak has always been surrounded by young men and women who want to play a role in a more human-centered development process. When he realized that many of them were getting burned out in their struggles, he managed to secure donations of money and land and built an ashram outside of Bangkok where activists can retreat and recharge their batteries in peace and tranquility, following basic Buddhist wisdom and meditation practices.

I left Bangkok in 1979 and spent the next twenty-five years working for the United Nations and the World Bank throughout the world. During this period Sulak and my paths crossed in Bangkok and elsewhere. In Japan in 1992, for example, we continued our discussions of the role that Buddhism might play in the future development of his country. I was therefore not surprised when he asked me to help edit his talks and articles into this book on Buddhist economics and sustainability.

Sulak's understanding of the message of the Buddha—starting with the simple practices of breathing and meditation—permeates every page of this book, as does his belief that nonviolence (*ahimsa*) is the central

tenet of Buddhism. It is clear to Sulak that the world is sick and that action needs to be taken to heal it now, before it is too late. Peace needs to replace war, nonviolence to replace violence, generosity to replace greed, love to replace hatred, and understanding to replace ignorance. We must learn to love our environment and stop trying to conquer it.

Today in much of Asia, Buddhism has to compete with the new religion of consumerism. According to Sulak, there are now more prostitutes than monks in his country, and shopping malls have replaced temples as centers of community activity. Only in places where consumerism and globalization have not spread their tentacles, such as Bhutan and amongst Tibetan exiles, are traditional Buddhist practices still thriving at the grassroots level. The challenge that Sulak and other engaged Buddhists face is how to show that Buddhism can be a force to soften the damage caused to the human spirit by the onward march of globalization.

Sulak quite rightly attacks the neoliberal agenda of the World Bank (where I used to work) and the unproven hypothesis that if the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) increases in a particular society, the citizens will automatically be better off. Man cannot live by bread alone. Once our basic needs for food, shelter, clothing, and health are met, our needs for security, peace, and spirituality must also be addressed. These are harder to identify and much harder to operationalize. In *The Wisdom of Sustainability*, Sulak explores replacing GDP with the still imprecise but important concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH). According to Western development specialists, we can increase happiness and satisfaction by increasing our consumption of goods and services; whilst



according to Buddhists, our happiness and satisfaction can only be increased by reducing our desire for things.

In this important new book, Ajarn Sulak shines light on globalization, development, violence, and governance from a Buddhist perspective. Known as a gadfly throughout Asia, Sulak challenges the status quo on a daily basis, and, even as I write, he has once again been accused of *lèse majesté* (treason against a member of the Thai royal family), a serious offense. Still, he continues without fear criticizing members of the royal family, prime ministers, army generals, and other powers that be, and this fearlessness allows his writings to be so fresh and pointed.

Sulak has always been surrounded by good friends, which, according to the Buddha, is essential if we want to achieve anything in this life. He has helped many young people take their first steps toward a spiritually based social activism, and continues to provide them with moral support as they branch off in their own directions. There is hardly a non-governmental organization that does not have someone on its staff whom Sulak has helped. Although many of his friends are in Thailand, more aptly called Siam, others can be found throughout the world, on virtually every continent. Now in his mid-seventies, Sulak still travels the world to teach and visit his wide network of friends.

Our world is being ripped apart by conflict, as the rich get richer and the poor live off their crumbs, hundreds are killed and maimed every day in Africa and the Middle East, and many thousands more starve to death. Our world needs to be healed—everywhere, at every level. We know what to do, but as flawed individuals, it is sometimes difficult to succeed. According to Ajarn Sulak, we need to start the healing at the

individual level, and only then can we make our planet a more habitable place. The wisdom of sustainability Sulak talks about is on both individual and global levels. This book provides a map of where we could be going. It is our hope and our challenge.

Nicholas Bennett, Coeditor  
Phuket, Thailand  
February 2009

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## HEAVENLY MESSENGERS

When Prince Siddhartha—the future Buddha—left his palace at the age of twenty-nine, he encountered for the first time a sick man, an elderly man, a corpse, and a wandering monk. Despairing, he left the comforts of home and entered the holy life, determined to overcome suffering and death. Some time later, he realized that these four sights had been heavenly messengers.

I met James Wolfensohn, president of the World Bank, in 1998, and he asked about Asia's recent economic collapse that had begun in my country.\* I told him I thought it had been a heavenly messenger to encourage us to seek alternatives to economic globalization.

In the years following World War II, governments and individuals around the world worked enthusiastically together to try to build a better world. They established the United Nations as the first truly universal forum where small, poor countries could rub shoulders with powerful,

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\*My country was known as Siam until 1939, when its name was changed to Thailand, a hybrid Anglicized word emblematic of the crisis of traditional Siamese Buddhist values. I generally refer to the country as Siam, not Thailand.

rich ones on matters of common concern, on the basis of equality. They created the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund—the Bretton Woods institutions—to generate prosperity for all. The World Bank’s mission, engraved on the walls of its Washington, D.C., headquarters, is to eradicate poverty.

The Bank’s strategy for creating wealth has been to impose deregulation, privatization, and structural adjustment on the economies of nations. Deregulation is the removal of government restrictions on business. Privatization is the transfer of ownership from the public to the private sector. Structural adjustments are requirements imposed, usually on third-world countries, in order to receive loans from the World Bank or similar lenders. These adjustments—often deregulation and privatization—are intended to generate wealth. Although the Bretton Woods’ founders were sincere in their efforts to bring an end to poverty, in fact the institutions and instruments they created have brought about increased inequality in wealth, as well as environmental degradation and cultural deterioration. Using the World Bank’s own definition of poverty, the number of poor people has increased.

Mr. Wolfensohn asked me to say more, and I told him that globalization—which really should be called free-market fundamentalism—is a demonic religion imposing materialistic values on developing as well as industrialized nations, driving individuals to try to earn more to acquire more in a never-ending cycle of greed and insecurity. The World Bank and other Bretton Woods institutions presume the superiority of industrialization, the monetary economy, and modernity over agrarian

lifestyles, subsistence economies, and indigeneity, making globalization a new form of colonialism. The term *modernization* is, in fact, racially coded; its precursor was *Europeanization*.

Capitalism’s promise to bring about emancipation through perpetual economic growth is, to use Jerry Mander’s word, insane. Nothing can grow forever. There are limits. Before we irretrievably erode the matter of our mother earth, we need to change direction and build a future based on wisdom and compassion. There are simply not enough resources for everyone to live a first-world lifestyle.



Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, my spiritual teacher, emphasized the importance of staying close to nature. He would look at the banyan tree in front of his hut and point to the plants and animals living peacefully in its shade. The first law of the natural world, he said, is interdependence.

When we are in harmony with nature, we feel nurtured and profoundly content. The Buddha called this *Dharma*, the natural order of things. Dharma emphasizes sentience—the alive-nature of phenomena, including our mind. As we come to understand natural Dharma, we also discover our own potential and responsibilities. At the core of Dharma is the spirit of free inquiry. After six years of intense effort, Prince Siddhartha overcame his attachment to greed, hatred, and ignorance, and became a Buddha, “an awakened one.” He shared his insight with fellow yogis, and this event is known as “turning the Wheel of the Dharma.”



*Globalization* sounds value-neutral. It preaches the interdependence of nations, the mutuality of their interests, and the shared benefits of their exchanges. But during the half-century of globalization's ascendance on the world stage, inequities between haves and have-nots—North and South, investors and workers, agribusiness and peasants—have increased exponentially, triggering the near-total dependence of so-called developing countries on developed ones. As a result of this free-market fundamentalism, environments have been destroyed and economies have collapsed.

Even in the midst of a global economic meltdown, neoliberal ideologues continue to push to remove trade barriers and restructure economies. Their faith in the emancipatory power of the free market must be based on unmitigated greed. These are intelligent individuals; they cannot be this blind or naïve. Neoliberals regard modernity as its own justification, and permit it to devour all other social and cultural beliefs and aspirations. We need to intensify our criticism and redefine globalization's contours and content.

In Siam, consumer culture, through the mass media, has replaced Buddhist virtues. To overcome these false values promoted in the name of economic development, we need to return to our spiritual roots.



A monk asked the Buddha, "I have been meditating for many years to be able to walk on water."

The Buddha replied, "It would be better to hire a boatman."

Another religious leader asked the Buddha, "What practices do your monks follow?"

The Buddha answered, "They walk, stand, lie down, sit, eat, and drink."

"What is special about that?" the man asked.

The Buddha explained, "While walking, they know that they are walking. When standing, they know that they are standing. When lying down, they know that they are lying down. ..."

As Thich Nhat Hanh says, the miracle is to walk on the earth mindfully, to touch the depth and sacred presence of each moment. Meditation helps us see the traits that dominate our consciousness—hatred *and* love, ignorance *and* wisdom, fear *and* courage. When we acknowledge the full range of qualities within us, our ignorance begins to fade, and wisdom and compassion arise naturally. The practice of mindful breathing restructures our consciousness and helps us develop critical self-awareness. We become more able to see the structural violence in ourselves and the world.



*Structural violence* is a term coined in the 1960s by Johan Galtung, the founder of peace studies as an academic discipline. It refers to systematic ways a society's resources are distributed unequally and unfairly, preventing people from meeting their basic needs. Structural violence includes elitism, ethnocentrism, classism, racism, sexism, nationalism, heterosexism, and ageism.

Structural violence may be political, repressive, economic, or exploitative. Unequal access to resources, power, education, health care, or legal standing are forms of structural violence. When inner-city children attend inadequate schools while others do not, when laborers work in inhumane conditions, structural violence exists.

Social structures are not permanent or natural phenomena. They evolve—through political and historical developments—and usually refer to organizations, institutions, laws, and ideologies. Social structures influence action by creating frameworks of propriety that govern those within the structures.

Social structures pressure us to adopt desired dogma, establishing what is then regarded as normative. Each structure creates boundaries to what is acceptable, speakable, and thinkable. These boundaries define “the truth.” They describe our worldview, and we accept it without question. We become spectators, even cheerleaders. When our mind gives rise to an idea that is “outside the box,” we feel too afraid to seek the truth.

The power of social structures is enormous. They influence our thoughts, actions, attitudes, desires, and even our bodies. When we accept this canon, we enjoy a privileged status. When we challenge or reject it, we become marginalized. We have to see the relationships between social structures, self-surveillance, and self-censorship. To enforce social constructions, institutions intimidate us. Modern medicine fills us with the fear of illness, aging, and even ugliness. Religions might deceive us; Buddhist temples in my country have become terribly rich from donations people make in order to gain merit and thus ensure for themselves an auspicious rebirth. Governments control us through fear: fear of jail or even execution.

“National security,” “private property,” and “free-market capitalism” are social structures. By showcasing these and other structures, our education system teaches students to be subservient to power and accept the status quo rather than work to overturn injustice. The central operating concept of the global economy is “private property.” The West invented this, and we Asians dutifully have followed their lead. Recently the government in India declared that (literally) every drop of rain in Rajasthan belongs to them, and they will, in turn, provide concessions to private companies to buy and sell this rainwater.

The media—almost all are for-profit corporations—are expert in legitimizing the actions of those in power. It is essential that we learn to analyze structural violence and social structures. In this age of extreme modernism, a time of terror, we need to understand how our systems of thought have been crafted, so when a heavenly messenger awakens us, we will know what is true.