3 Editorial Notes

4 Announcement and Congratulation
   4 Jamnalal Bajaj Awards - 2014 Citation In Honour Of Mr. Sulak Sivaraksa

6 Country Reports
   6 Burma: The People vs. The Monks Min Zin
   7 Cambodia: Reign of the quiet king
   Poppy McPherson
   9 Siam: Lese majeste claims over Naresuan elephant duel
   Post Reporters,
   10 Siam: Protecting monks from themselves
   Nattaya Chetchotiros
   11 Tibet: Here’s why demonstrators are trolling the Dalai Lama’s US tour
   Matteo Pistono
   12 Tibet/USA: The Real Mover Is Love: A Conversation About Community Service With the Dalai Lama
   Matthew Weiner

14 INEB
   14 Myanmar’s Unsettling Buddhist - Muslim Violence
   Jacquelyn Chagnon
   17 Social Harmony in Buddhist Perspectives
   Harsha Navaratne
   18 Buddhist Perspectives on Social Harmony, Disharmony, and Plural Society: A View from the United States
   Hozan Alan Senauke
   21 Dhamma Sanghakeet: ASEAN Cultural Exchange - fostering greater religious harmony
   Siroj Angsuvat
   22 Buddhism and the Climate Crisis: Ethical understanding, engagement and liberation from suffering
   Nigel Crawhall
   24 Climate, Faith and Hope: Faith traditions together for a common future
   25 Interfaith summit on climate change
   28 A Statement to Support Establishing the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Siam (Thailand)
I have now served the INEB network for almost 5 years. I hope that my contributions to the network, and to meeting the needs on the ground, have made for positive results in at least some areas. This issue of Seeds of Peace marks the second year that I have performed another role within INEB, that of editor of the newsletter. I hope that my contributions as editor too have been useful to you, the readers. Editing is very new to me and I try to do my best. At the same time I acknowledge that there are still a lot of things that can be improved. Toward that end, may I ask for your suggestions, critiques, and comments on how we can improve the newsletter? Please send feedback to secretariat@inebnetwork.org.

We are now focusing the work of the network office more on fostering interfaith peace and harmony. This coming March, on the 3rd and 4th, we will be holding an International Forum on Buddhist-Muslim Relations, which we refer to for short as the Buddhist-Muslim Forum (BMF). This will be a high-level summit of Buddhist and Muslim Leaders, organized by Muhammadiyah, Religions for Peace, International Network of Engaged Buddhists, and International Movement for a Just World, at Borobudur Temple, Megalang, Central Java, Indonesia. This is a continuation of the activity that we recently completed in November during the INEB AC/EC Meeting in Myanmar, where we held a Public Forum on Social Harmony in Mandalay.

INEB has also initiated the ICE Network (Interreligious Climate and Ecology Network), as a pan-Asian, local-to-local, collaborative network of diverse spiritual communities seeking to share experiences, spread, and wisdom that will help build resilience and empowerment in the face of climate change. Our purpose is to wisely influence national public policy within Asia and to stimulate and strengthen diplomatic discussions around climate change at the international level. We aim to do this in cooperation with various stakeholders, such as faith-based and civil society organizations, gender and age-based groups, and business networks. We seek to encourage healing in a world struggling with equality and vulnerability, both intensified by climate change. The most important ICE Network project at this moment is the 2nd ICE Conference on Climate Change, Sustainability and Resilience to be held on the 24-30 of April 2015, in Seoul, South Korea.

Finally, in response to recent events in Siam (Thailand), we are publishing, in this issue, a Statement to Support Establishing the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Siam. If you would like to support this initiative, please do so by signing our petition at www.inebnetwork.org.
Mr. Sulak Sivaraksa is the initiator of a number of social, humanitarian, ecological and spiritual movements.

Mr. Sulak Sivaraksa was educated in Bangkok and at the University of Wales, Lampeter, where he is now an honorary fellow in Buddhism. Soon after his return to Thailand, he directed his energy towards the development of sustainable models for rapidly changing economic and social environments. In 1963, Mr. Sulak Sivaraksa founded and edited the Social Science Review – a journal that was instrumental in developing student awareness that eventually led to the overthrow of the military regime in 1973.

Mr. Sivaraksa’s commitment to peace was strengthened during the military coup in 1976 when he was forced into exile for two years. Since then he has been championing non-violence in war-torn and repressed countries. His devotion to peace and non-violence is demonstrated by his leadership and membership in international peace organization like Buddhist Peace Fellowship, Peace Brigade International, and Gandhi Peace Foundation.

As one of the founders of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), which was established in 1989, an important aspect of Mr. Sivaraksa’s work as an engaged Buddhist is his focus on and commitment to inter-religious dialogue. Spending some of his early years in Great Britian enabled him to present Buddhism in a way that is congruent with Western logic.

Mr. Sivaraksa promotes religion and politics as two inter-related spheres. He proposes that each of the world’s religions consists of two main aspects, i.e.

universal love, which is altruistic and selfless on the one hand; and a tribal, institutionalized or egocentric factor on the other.

Mr. Sivaraksa has also combined intellectual work with continual grass-roots organizing. He has founded rural development projects as well as many non-governmental organizations dedicated to exploring alternative models of sustainable, traditionally rooted, ethically and spiritually based development. He visited rural villages, temples, and terraced rice fields to understand the actual conditions of the people – the farmers and workers.

In 1986, Mr. Sulak Sivaraksa founded the Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute (SPD), a non-government affiliated organization with an objective to achieve genuine participatory democracy, social justice, and to promote non-violent social actions for change. SPD organized activities locally, nationally, and internationally, fulfilling its objectives to work towards raising awareness of civil rights and democracy, and to provide empowerment training programs on non-violent social actions for democratization. SPD targeted student activities, grassroots organization, and NGO workers, and in 1992, SPD joined the anti-military government campaign and demonstrations. SPD not only worked on activities in the home country but also supported grassroots organizations in neighboring countries such as Laos, Cambodia, Burma, and Sri Lanka.

Mr. Sivaraksa launched numerous foundations, charities, non-governmental organizations, and activist groups throughout the 1970-80s, which
formed the basis of Thailand’s robust network of non-governmental organizations existing today. Mr. Srivaraksa generated tangible results through his work on rural and urban community development, provided political voice to the poor and the displaced, and he effectively challenged environmentally destructive pipelines and dams in northern Thailand.

Series of panel discussions, seminars, training programs on women’s rights, political rights, civil and community rights awareness, non-violence social actions, social and political analysis and skills for social activism; developing materials in Thai, English, and Burmese languages for training programs on alternatives to consumerism, sustainable village economics, and appropriate technology are some of the major activities of SPD.

Mr. Sivaraksa aims to bring forth and utilize women’s wisdom and leadership to help participate in the natural resources management at all levels. In the areas of capacity building and eradication of poverty, SPD aims to use action research techniques to enable villagers to understand problems, to systematize and organize the local wisdom on natural resource management, and to seek ecologically and culturally appropriate alternative economic activities based on the community’s natural resources for poverty eradication. The organization is also empowering the small scale Thai farmers to implement their constitutional rights for food sovereignty.

Mr. Sivaraksa also opened the first alternative bookstore in Thailand called Suksit Siam (suksit means intellectual), which has become a hub for cultural, Buddhist, and educational activities that has promoted social reform and democracy in Bangkok.

For the last 35 years, Mr. Sivaraksa has travelled all over the world lecturing, writing, mentoring, participating in inter-religious dialogues. He has authored and published more than one hundred books in both Thai and English.

Mr. Sivaraksa is convinced that the strategy to bring long-term peace to the world is through peace making, peace keeping, and peace building. Similarly to fight terrorism, he believes that one has to overcome fear to attribute to peaceful, non-violent action. Mr. Sivaraksa constantly strives to work towards peaceful co-existence and cooperation.

The Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation feels honored to present this Citation and the Jamnalal Bajaj Award for the outstanding contribution in the field of Promoting Gandhian Values Outside India to Mr. Sulak Sivaraksa.

Chandrashekhar Dharmadhikari       M. S. Swaminathan       Rahul Bajaj
Chairman, Council of Advisors    Chairman, Award Selection Committee    Chairman, Board of Trustees
Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation          Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation      Jamnalal Bajaj Foundation

November 28, 2014
Mumbai
One of the darkest aspects of Myanmar’s political transition is the surge in religious intolerance, especially toward Muslims. Liberalization has lifted the lid on many pent-up grievances, old-timers in the government, and the monkhood are stoking these sentiments.

Last week the government proposed a law that would require anyone who wants to change religion to first seek permission from local authorities; it would also penalize proselytizing through “improper influence and persuasion.” This is one of four bills the government has drafted at the instigation of a powerful group of radical Buddhist monks called Mabatha, backed by a petition with 1.3 million signatures. The other three bills contemplate restricting interfaith marriage, birth rates and polygamy.

A coalition of almost 100 civil society groups, led by well-known women activists and ethnic minority leaders, immediately protested the president’s endorsement of the discriminatory laws. The Mabatha denounced them as “traitors,” but that only prompted more civil society groups to oppose the bills. Facebook lit up with posts and comments like, “Count me in; I am a traitor, too.” The publication The Voice criticized “crony monks” for trying to advance the government’s authoritarian agenda.

This reaction is unprecedented. Myanmar’s Buddhist order is arguably one of the clergies in the world that commands most deference from its followers, and never before have so many lay Buddhists pushed back against the monks for political reasons.

Buddhist sects have sometimes criticized monks, but typically it was for falling short of their own rules, not for political reasons. We were taught to think of any corrupt monks as deviant, keeping intact our faith in the virtue of the robe and the wisdom of the Buddha.

But now a gap is growing between a significant segment of the monkhood and a significant segment of society over the issue of religious radicalism.

Buddhist nationalism took a turn for the extreme in mid-2012, when riots broke out between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims in the western state of Rakhine, killing 300 people and displacing about 140,000, mostly Muslims. (The government refuses to acknowledge the Rohingyas as a distinct ethnic group, and many people in Myanmar consider them to be intruders from neighboring Bangladesh.) When the violence spread to other parts of the country and to non-Rohingya Muslims, who were thought to be better integrated, it seemed that natural bigotry was being manipulated.

Two radical religious groups, Mabatha and the 969 Movement, have emerged since the political transition in 2011. Like Mabatha, the 969 Movement — named after the nine qualities of Buddha, the six qualities of his teaching and the nine qualities of monastic community — wants to ensure that Myanmar remains a majority-Burman and majority-Buddhist state. It is led by the firebrand ultranationalist Ashin Wirathu.

Mabatha and the 969 Movement have run a broad anti-Muslim campaign, from organizing economic boycotts against Muslim businesses to, some charge, inciting pogroms.

During a visit by a delegation from the Organization of Islamic Cooperation last year, monks marched through Yangon with banners calling Islam “a faith of animals with uncontrollable birthrates.” Other monks have even been accused of instigating killings early last year in the town of Meiktila, in central Myanmar, where Buddhist mobs destroyed Muslim neighborhoods, killing at least 44 people, including 20 students and several teachers at an Islamic school.
The King eats alone. After he wakes in his en-suite bedroom in the Royal Palace, he either skips breakfast or has a small snack before launching into the obligations of the day. He has a light lunch and, for dinner, when he isn’t playing host, just fruit. Ten years ago today, King Norodom Sihamoni was crowned after his father, the charismatic Norodom Sihanouk, abdicated for the second and final time. The new king was bathed by his parents in water from Phnom Kulen and carried through the palace gardens on a palanquin. A conch was blown and fireworks lit up the sky. It was a splashy start to what has been a quiet decade.

Little is known about Sihamoni, but interviews with advisers and close associates paint a picture of a reflective, deliberate and cultured man who never wanted to be king, but took on the role graciously, keeping his old friends close and appeasing traditional enemies.

He is an abstemious king, a religious king, but far from an almighty one, as his father and the god-kings before him had been. He shares his lifelong passion for the arts with his countrymen.

Country Reports

Reign of the quiet king

By Poppy McPherson, 29 October 2014

Cambodia’s King Norodom Sihamoni sits on his throne beside his crown and sword during his coronation ceremony at the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh. Today marks the 10th anniversary since the King was formally sworn in as monarch. AFP

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Ten years ago today, King Norodom Sihamoni was crowned after his father, the charismatic Norodom Sihanouk, abdicated for the second and final time. The new king was bathed by his parents in water from Phnom Kulen and carried through the palace gardens on a palanquin. A conch was blown and fireworks lit up the sky. It was a splashy start to what has been a quiet decade.

Little is known about Sihamoni, but interviews with advisers and close associates paint a picture of a reflective, deliberate and cultured man who never wanted to be king, but took on the role graciously, keeping his old friends close and appeasing traditional enemies.

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He shares his lifelong passion for the arts with his...
father, a prolific filmmaker. But unlike Sihanouk, who delighted in French wines and gourmet cuisine, Sihamoni is a man of simple tastes.

"Sometimes he has chocolate – when he breaks his rules – especially chocolates from Europe," said a source close to the palace, who asked not to be named.

Oum Daravuth, an adviser to the secretariat of the Queen Mother Norodom Monineath, said lunch is "rice with fish and vegetables", and that Sihamoni is "always eating alone".

As head of state, the King has a tight schedule, explained Julio Jeldres, the former personal secretary and official biographer of Sihanouk, in an email.

He receives official delegations and letters from ambassadors. He meets visitors who come to the country as guests of the government. He reads and signs decrees and laws. Twice a week, he meets with Prime Minister Hun Sen for an official government briefing.

"Then there are the official openings of major infrastructure projects that His Majesty may be required to officiate and, last but not least, His Majesty must officiate at all Buddhist ceremonies in the Cambodian calendar which, I should say, there are many," Jeldres wrote.

On Buddhist holidays, Sihamoni gets up before dawn and makes offerings to all the religious statues in the grounds of the Royal Palace.

"He usually does it alone – with, of course, the royal bodyguards," said a source close to the palace.

State dinners are held, but there is no sign of Sihanouk's famous soirees dancers, when the King Father and his band of princes played 1930s swing as guests quaffed vintage champagne and danced until dawn.

Sihamoni's pleasures are less earthly.

"He does a lot of reading, a lot of meditation – that's his main thing," said a source close to the palace. "He's quiet – a simple king, to me."

Friends from his school days in Prague visit regularly, and he still speaks fluent Czech, as well as French, English, Khmer and a few words of Mandarin. He flies twice a year to Beijing for medical checkups with his mother, and the palace also has a Chinese chef.

"The King does exercise normally, like riding a bicycle and walking around the palace," Daravuth said.

Teacher and student
Born in 1953 to Sihanouk and the Queen Mother, Sihamoni was a young boy when his father sent him to Prague to study music and classical dance. He spent most of his life abroad; though for two years he was imprisoned by the Khmer Rouge with his parents in the Royal Palace.

After the regime fell in 1979, he moved to France, where he eventually became a ballet teacher. In 1993, he was appointed Cambodia's delegate to UNESCO.

Great Supreme Patriarch Bour Kry, leader of the Dhammayuttika Buddhist sect, has known Sihamoni since his childhood. The two grew close during the year Sihamoni spent as a monk in France in the 1980s.

In Wat Botum, surrounded by golden Buddhas and fanned by a prostrating monk, Kry chewed menthol eucalyptus sweets and described his student.

"Of course, the King had a very simple life, as other monks who lived in the pagoda. He never announced that he was King Sihanouk's son, but other people knew he was the son of a king."

After leaving the monkhood, Sihamoni carried on an ordinary life. He rode the subway in Paris while working as a ballet instructor. But when he assumed the throne, he gave up dancing altogether, according to Kry.

"In Asian culture, a king cannot do whatever he wants. He needs to work and respect the royal rules – such as working to help people in the country because he, the king, has a responsibility to them."

After the coronation, Sihamoni continued to pay frequent visits to his teacher at Wat Botum, Kry said, inclining his head towards the palace, a five-minute walk away.

"It was normal that when King Sihanouk became the king of the country [he kept in touch], because he always kept relationships with people like me – other people who he knew before.

"This shows that he is kind, and he is a good model who has a polite way with people."

Kry is not alone in his favourable view of Sihamoni.

"I cannot make any other judgment than that Sihamoni is a dedicated servant of his people," wrote Sihanouk biographer and Cambodia historian Milton Osborne in an email, "He is cultured and disciplined."

"Stacked with CPP members' Nonetheless, under Sihamoni's rule, the monarchy as a political institution has effectively ceased to exist.

After last year's disputed elections, in what would turn out to be one of his biggest political tests, Sihamoni opened parliament despite the opposition Cambodia National Rescue Party – which was boycotting the swearing-in – begging him not to do so.

But the process of de-politicising the monarchy began years earlier.

The power-sharing agreement between the royalist Funcipec party, led by Sihanouk's second-born son, Prince Norodom Rannariddh, and the Cambodian People's Party after the 1993 election set the stage for years of political wrangling.

By 2004, Prime Minister Hun Sen had made several threats to abolish the monarchy entirely.
"Anointing Sihamoni made the best of a bad situation," said journalist Sebastian Strangio, author of the newly released Hun Sen's Cambodia. "It secured the monarchy's survival into an uncertain future, but it also involved giving the CPP what it had always wanted – a figurehead king who would stay within the limits of the constitution.

"It's unfair and unrealistic to expect Sihamoni – a sensitive soul who has dedicated his life to the arts – to grapple with a political tiger like Hun Sen."

A former diplomat who asked not to be named said that the ruling party has stacked the Ministry of the Royal Palace with CPP loyalists. "It completely controls it, and nothing happens without the approval of the minister of the Palace, who also has the title of deputy prime minister and the customary royal title of Samdech Chaufea Veang."

Government spokesman Phay Siphan called those comments "baseless", adding that Royal Palace Minister Kong Sam Ol had "no power to decide anything, just administration and providing services from the government to the Royal Palace."

Unlike the royals in Thailand or the Netherlands, the royal family does not boast a private fortune and is dependent on the ruling party for its annual budget.

Daravuth, the royal adviser, said it was pointless to criticise Sihamoni for his neutrality – the King simply obeys the constitution.

"Without the King, would the CNRP sit in the National Assembly?" he asked. "The King has played an important role to ensure national unity and facilitate the nation."

Sihamoni makes frequent trips to the provinces to inaugurate buildings and projects and to talk with citizens. He also takes a diplomatic interest in the news.

"Once a month, the King comes to me or other royal [family members] in the palace to find out outside information from the people. For example, during a crackdown on demonstrations, the King asked me to find out the victims and provide a donation," Daravuth said.

At the end of each day, Sihamoni retires to his residence, which is a few metres from his mother's. Once again, he prays and meditates.

Sometimes he listens to classical music, especially Beethoven. American films – comedies and romances – keep him amused.

His dancing days are over, a source close to the palace confirmed. "Unless he does it in his room."

Social critic Sulak Sivaraksa may face a lese majeste charge for comments he made about King Naresuan's 16th-century elephant duel.

Two retired soldiers, Lt Col Padung Niwetwan and Lt Col Pittaya Wimalin, filed a complaint against Mr Sulak at Chan Songkhram Police Station on Thursday. They said he dishonoured King Naresuan at a seminar at Thammasat University on Oct 5.

Pol Lt Col Somyot Udomraksasap, investigation inspector from Chan Songkhram Police Station, confirmed the complaint was filed.

The two retired officials who filed the complaint told police that Mr Sulak may have violated the lese majeste law for encouraging people to question if the duel, recorded in the history of the monarch, actually happened, considering nobody witnessed it.

Mr Sulak, 82, has twice been charged with lese majeste after speaking at a seminar at Silpakorn University in 2004 and at another at Khon Kaen University in 2007. He has never been convicted.

Army spokesman Winthai Suwaree states that the two retired officers did not represent the army or the National Council for Peace and Order, Suwaree also states that they filed the complaint in a personal capacity.

Under the law, anyone can file a lese majeste complaint against someone.

Human rights lawyer Somchai Homlaor said a person would be charged with lese majeste only if he or she defames, insults or threatens the king, queen, heir apparent or the regent.

The law is unlikely to apply to a historical monarch such as King Naresuan.

Mr Somchai said police are required to record the complaints, but Mr Sulak probably will not see jail time.
Scandal after scandal has come to light involving rich temples and the misconduct of monks, spurring the military government into action by initiating a law that seeks to bring order to the clergy.

Buddhism preaches frugality but that fundamental principle has been challenged with some temples and monks amassing massive wealth.

Recently, Phra Phromsuthi, abbot of the prestigious Wat Saket and a member of the Supreme Sangha Council, came under fire for allegedly abusing billions of baht of temple donations. Authorities cleared him of the allegation but the public’s scepticism has not gone away.

Experts say grey areas remain in the way temples, particularly some of the prestigious ones, have spent their public donations.

Research by the National Institute of Development Administration (Nida) showed temple donations nationwide are worth 100-120 billion baht a year.

Temple donations are sometimes spent as personal money by the monks and the transactions of temples have gone unaudited.

Some temples have been accused of running a propaganda machine that attracts huge donations from the faithful through a sophisticated marketing network.

Other temples own vast tracts of land which are turned into lucrative markets or are put up for commercial developments.

There are almost 300,000 monks in 35,000 temples and 5,000 monasteries nationwide, which hold over 40 billion baht worth of land between them. Temples are regarded by the law as non-profit establishments. However, abbots have legal control over the management of the temples’ assets, which proceeds unchecked.

Certain senior monks have owned or been driven in luxury cars and seen around flaunting brand-name personal effects.

Other monks have been caught breaking cardinal rules by engaging in sexual misconduct. Many are defrocked but faced no criminal prosecution owing to the absence of a relevant criminal law.

The issues undermining Buddhism as an institution sprang to the attention of the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO) which listed them as among its priority problems to tackle. The NCPO has sponsored the so-called Patronage and Protection of Buddhism Bill, now being vetted by the Council of the State, the government’s legal arm.

The council would establish a central body, the Patronage and Protection of Buddhism Committee, to keep tabs on temple spending. The law, if passed, would set new precedents — meting out legal punishments against monks who commit cardinal sins including breaking the vow of celibacy and also against those complicit in the monks’ misconduct.

The existing law governing temples and monks is the Sangha Act, which has been amended twice since its enactment in 1941. The most recent change in 1992 put temples nationwide under the administration of the Sangha Supreme Council (SSC) headed by His Holiness the Supreme Patriarch and with members being 12 of the country’s most senior monks.

The SSC oversees the Sangha Act which sets punishments or disciplinary actions for monks and novices whose conduct damages the reputation of Buddhism. The punishments include defrocking.

The key force behind the drafting of the Patronage and Protection of Buddhism Bill is Nopparat Benjawatthananan, former director of the National Office of Buddhism (NOB). He said the bill will
Country Reports

streamline the work of the juristic entities formed to run individual temples for the benefit of communities.

It will also regulate the behaviour of monks through strict enforcement of the religious code of conduct. “The monks who are the keepers of the rules must have the courage to see to swift enforcement of the law [against rogue monks],” Benjawatthanananant said. His biggest concern is cronyism within the clergy where senior monks with the authority to act against unruly monks look the other way to protect one of their own.

The Patronage and Protection of Buddhism Committee will have wide powers, from investigation to prosecution, to bring monks who break the law to justice. Mr Nopparat said the bill would enable law enforcement officers and the public to file complaints against monks and their accomplices.

The bill will also compel temples — which teach disciples to pay large sums of money to “buy merit” — to reform themselves, Mr Nopparat said.

Activist monk Phra Buddha Isara, the abbot of Wat Om Noi in Nakhon Pathom, has urged the National Legislative Assembly to rush the passage of the bill to allow for monks who amassed riches and those defrocked on the grounds of criminal wrongs to face the justice system.

However, he said he held little hope in the NOB’s efforts to push the bill through the NLA. “It’s not easy to convince the bigwigs in the SSC to sit back and let the axe fall on the monks,” he said.

The bill looks certain to run into stiff opposition, especially from the movers and shakers in the SSC, he said. He suggested the anti-graft agency and the Auditor-General join the civil sector to run checks on wealthy temples and senior monks who are unusually rich.

By Matteo Pistono, Global Post, 30 Oct 2014

WASHINGTON, DC — The Dalai Lama is currently on tour in the US, delivering Buddhist teachings and talks on secular ethics to adoring crowds. Yet from Birmingham to Boston and Princeton to New York City, he has been hounded by boisterous and media-savvy protesters, a couple hundred people strong. Mainly Americans, some don crimson monk robes. A small number of Tibetans have also joined their ranks.

Outside of concert halls and arenas, they carry signs and chant “Dalai Lama Stop Lying.” Inside, they regularly interrupt the teachings to shout their disagreement, before being escorted away by security.

What exactly is their grievance with the 79-year-old Nobel Peace laureate, icon of compassion and symbol of Tibet’s 60-year nonviolent struggle against China?

No, they have not been sent by the Dalai Lama’s opponents in the Chinese government — at least, there’s no conclusive evidence of that — although the Communist Party does play a role in this story.

It’s mainly a religious matter, and one that has frayed the fabric of Tibet’s Buddhist community for some time. The protesters belong to a group called the International Shugden Community, or ISC. They contend that the Dalai Lama has banned their religious practice, resulting in intolerance against them. “We are asking the Dalai Lama to put into writing that he wants to end the discrimination of Shugden Buddhist and distribute it throughout the Tibetan Buddhist community,” said Nicholas Pitts, the leader of ISC protests in Boston.

“Dalai Lama supporters in the foreground, critics across the street. (Nicholas Kamm/AFP/Getty Images)
Shugden is powerful, but there is disagreement over whether he is an enlightened deity or a kind of spirit. The Dalai Lama has said worshipping Shugden results in divisions within the Tibetan community — and is actually harmful to his own health. He has advised Buddhists not to associate with this spirit.

Prominent Columbia University professor of Buddhism Robert Thurman calls ISC “a cult,” and contends that the Dalai Lama has not banned anyone from any religious practice.

The demonstrations are so common that law enforcement officials across North America and Europe set up protest zones to separate the ISC from the enthusiastic crowds attending the Dalai Lama’s event. ISC protestors are often met at the venues by Tibetans and Westerners who yell their support for the Dalai Lama.

The Dorje Shugden controversy — which has led to violence in modern times — is esoteric, and dates back to the 17th century. Shugden devotees contend that the spirit is full of compassion and wisdom, and is where they place their ultimate refuge.

The Dalai Lama says Shugden is a kind of worldly spirit, not unlike a ghost in a Western sense, with a propensity to incite sectarianism and violence. The Dalai Lama prayed to the spirit in the 1960s, but ceased the practice in the 1970s after researching its tumultuous history.

More from Global-Post: This Irish cottage may really be haunted by violent fairies

In the 1990s, the Dalai Lama became outspoken against Shugden worship, and by the middle of the same decade the conflict erupted into bloodshed. An anti-Shugden abbot who was a personal friend of the Dalai Lama was ritually murdered in 1997, along with two assistants, just a stone’s throw from the Tibetan leader’s residence in Dharamsala, India.

Indian police have identified Tibetan Shugden followers as the culprits of the murders but the culprits were said to have escaped to China. In India, where many Tibetans refugees who have fled China live, claim brawls between pro- and anti-Shugden groups are not uncommon.

Shugden followers say they experience discrimination in exile communities, having been denied entrance to shops and public institutions, especially after the Tibetan government-in-exile instituted a prohibition on government employees associating with the Shugden.

In Tibet and China, Tibetan Buddhist teachers who promote Shugden gain financial and political support by Chinese Communist Party officials — China clearly benefits from division within Tibetan Buddhist ranks.

The conflict about Dorje Shugden is no longer mysterious but rather brings to the surface fractures in Tibetans’ solidarity in their struggle for freedom, as well as in the long-standing Western support for the exiled Tibetan political cause.

Last week His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama came to Princeton University and met with a select group of students to discuss part of the University’s informal motto, “In the service of all nations.” The motto was coined by Woodrow Wilson, and is the aspirational tag line, for the University.

Service has become a regular part of high school and college life in the past decades. Almost every student commits to some type of service: out of their own initiative, urged to do so, or required. The role of His Holiness was to draw attention to participating service beyond those already interested, and to allow for a sincere conversation about its meaning— something the Dalai Lama seemed naturally to elicit.

In preparation, students met in small groups to learn from each other and to formulate a question. The students asked themselves what counted as community service, why engage in it, and what did The students learn along the way?

The questions, initiated by a panel of scholars, were provocative, self-reflective and honest in nature: recognizing Princeton’s place of privilege, understanding about the relationship between service and scholarship, acknowledging the USA’s less than perfect past, and asking if we really walked the talk on our high aims.

Might the Dalai Lama agree with the implicit self-critiques? He often cautions
against the pursuit of prestige, for example. Yet this was not the direction he chose. Instead, the Dalai Lama consistently reflected on the value of compassion. How to integrate service and scholarship? Compassion must be at the root. How to choose the kind of service to commit to? Develop compassion. Was a big salary against the rules of compassion? Not if you approached the results with compassion.

By some accounts the Dalai Lama did not always address what was asked, but the compass directing his answers was clear: your intentions matter, develop your heart, be honest with yourself, work hard at these things, and let them direct your efforts. Such action, and this is indeed activity, must precede any external action of service in order for one’s intent to be genuine and sustainable. The real mover, the Dalai Lama says, is love.

When pushed on how such compassion is feasible even in the face of hatred and prejudice, His Holiness acknowledged that his moral strategy was hard work. From a Buddhist perspective this work of compassion will take lifetimes to get it right. Through all of his laughter and visible ease, the Dalai Lama is a serious man playing the long game. He has spent a lifetime studying texts on this very topic. The Dalai Lama seemingly puts forth an impossible goal of saving all beings from suffering. But is it really possible, Prof. Eddie Glaude asked urgently. Professors were not born as professors, the Dalai Lama responded with a laugh. First they had to learn the alphabet, then to read and write. Now look at them!

And how to convince the uninterested to engage in service? Some say it should be a requirement. The Dalai Lama suggested that motivating others is best done not through argument, law, or command, but through the trigger of one’s affection for others. Affection, after all, can only be learned from one another. Affection is full in younger people, he surmised, but by the age of college, it can fade.

It was like this that he implicitly challenged us, be it his implications that we haven’t yet learned the alphabet when it comes to developing our hearts, or that if we want to live differently we may sacrifice superficial things we hold dear. The Dalai Lama is a known master of upaya, skillful means, and while he can go toe to toe with world-class philosophers and neuroscientists, and has informed opinions on economic restructuring, his agenda was quietly calculated. As a scholar-monk he has often noted that American universities were adept at developing the mind, but not the heart. Even in service work, how often do we think seriously about developing our capacity for love? And unless we draw a correlation between academic excellence and kindheartedness, we can assume that the students, faculty, and staff at top tier schools are no more skilled at compassionate action than anyone else.

The Dalai Lama talked about service in ways different from our leaders who highlight examples of exemplary action and quantifiable results. He drew attention instead to our intentions because he knows they need work. He was not satisfied with our engagement, and instead told us to redouble our efforts. Is there really a place for selfless work and internal development in the academy and our wider public? There must be if this aging monk, and the unprecedented positive response he receives wherever he goes, is any indication. For someone who has suffered the loss of his country yet remains serious about compassion, the Dalai Lama is downright likeable, happy, and goofy. He makes everyone around him smile. If we care about service but dismiss this as unimportant, then we misunderstand the quiet enterprise of compassion, the humility it brings, its most serious challenge, and its value for all of us.
Myanmar’s Unsettling Buddhist - Muslim Violence

Hidden Inter-Religious Tensions or Political - Economic Provocations?

by Jacquelyn Chagnon

In November 2014, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) organized an interfaith round table meeting and public forum on interfaith relations in Mandalay, Myanmar, attended by engaged Buddhists from throughout Asia and the world. In this article, Jacqui Chagnon reflects on this forum and the rising inter-religious tensions in Myanmar.

In early 2012, a Yangon taxi driver questioned why I wanted to go to a street where Muslims largely resided. “It is dangerous, madame.” This unsolicited “warning” has haunted me. During occasional encounters with peace builders from Myanmar, I sensed an almost invisible, negative undercurrent existed between the Myanmar’s Buddhist and Islamic followers.

In mid-2012, Rakhine State erupted into severe crisis between Buddhists and Rohingya Muslims. Several Burmese friends told me how their lives had been put into danger for seeking a peaceful resolution of the Rakhine conflict. Worldwide, negative international headlines confused many watchers of Myanmar’s march to peaceful political transition. Five years earlier, the world media had bestowed high praise for the courageous, peaceful Safron Robe demonstrations and now certain Burmese Buddhist monks were calling for the expulsion of the rather poor Rohingya minority.

In 2013 violence erupted again between Buddhist and Muslim followers in the central Myanmar town of Meiktila and again in Mandalay in June 2014. In total 240 persons, mostly Muslims, have been killed and over 100,000 Rohingya Muslims remain homeless and cordoned into IDP camps which they are not allowed to leave. Over 800,000 Rohingya Muslims continue to live in stress, deprived of citizenship and basic rights, while thousands have fled as refugees to other Asian countries.

How and why is such violence erupting between Buddhists and
Muslims? Why has the violence spread beyond Rakhine? What could interfaith leaders do to prevent further violence and promote peaceful solutions? These questions were placed before the morning sessions of an interfaith gathering organized by INEB in Myanmar on the 29 November.

To start off the discussion and dialogue, a Burmese lawyer and member of the interfaith Mandalay Peace Keeping Committee provided us with background on the Myanmar Buddhist - Muslim conflicts. As a Buddhist, he became very disturbed by the gruesome photos from Meiktila of 28 brutally killed Muslim children and decided to do some personal research and analysis on what was generating these conflicts. His analysis suggests that the incidents of violence in Rakhine, Meiktila and Mandalay between 2012 - 2014 have been purposefully instigated by nationalistic Buddhists and sectors of the military. Each incident was well-organized beforehand to create disunity and hate between Buddhists and Muslims. The lawyer theorized that the prime purpose was to distract the attention of Myanmar’s citizenry from critical contemporary issues of politics and economics. Consider what happened in each case:

The 2012 Rakhine incident erupts between the majority Buddhist population and the marginalized minority of Muslim Rohingya. The violence is provoked by hate speeches, some from a young nationalistic Buddhist monk who publishes them on the internet. The monk alleges that a Buddhist girl has been raped and killed by three Rohingya Muslim males. Within hours, almost the entire Rohingya population of the area comes under attack from a well-organized siege, forcing them to evacuate homes, property and livelihoods. Until now, only a few of the 140,000 displaced Rohingya have been able to return to their homes.

The 2013 Meiktila outburst of violence starts as a purchasing dispute in a jewelry shop. It ignites quickly into full scale violence between Buddhists and Muslims, with security forces standing on the sidelines. Again, internet hate speech goes viral. Gangs on each side burn and attack innocent people. In the end, twenty-eight Muslim boys and girls are brutally killed. In defiance of the violence, one local Buddhist monk bravely gives refuge and protection to 850 Muslim families inside his temple.

In 2014 in Mandalay, Muslim-Buddhist tensions flare suddenly as another incident of “rape rumors” circulate. In this case, the rumors were traced to the Facebook page of U Wiruthu, a famous extremist Buddhist monk. Subsequently, Muslim businesses, shops and a temple came under attack for days.

A pattern begins to emerge. Each incident generates days of “hate speech,” especially through the internet. In each case a few nationalistic religious leaders spur on the violence, instead of following their religious teachings to seek peace. In each incident, the police and military respond inadequately to the violence, and sometimes even assist the agitators.

The lawyer went on to suggest that the violence is being instigated to distract public attention away from critical, controversial national issues, such as the gas and oil pipeline from Rakhine State into China, the Letpadaung Copper Mine in Sagaing Division, and the massive Thai-Myanmar Dawei Port and cross-border transport system. Since 2010, citizens of all faiths and ethnic groups have shown deep concern about such investments. People want to know more about the environmental and socio-economic impacts, to have the right to give their opinions, and to stop the excessive land-grabbing which often generates long-term, deep poverty.

The lawyer noted that spurring on violence has become a common tactic of public distraction and diversion. It was used by the military during the 1988 student uprisings. Muslims were labeled as “the enemy” then and now. Today some former students and monks involved in those events feel ashamed about how the military used them to attack Muslims, the lawyer explained. In political terms, such provocation of allegiances — be it religion, cultural background or party alliances— leads to “divide and rule.”

“Beware,” the lawyer warned. “Some people may need an ‘enemy’ to distract us, just like in 1988.”

The lawyer’s comments remind me of a conversation with an Indonesian religious leader who was active in the 1998 peaceful change from military to civilian government. After three decades of a repressive dictatorial system, he explained, they finally had freedom again to write and speak. Unfortunately, some religious and political leaders took advantage of these freedoms to unleash hidden sectarian hatreds and feuds, which spread into violent eruptions in many places, especially against the Chinese, Christians and various minorities.
Other Perspectives from Myanmar Civil Society Leaders

Well-known civil society leader, Kyaw Thu, urged Myanmar citizens and everyone to be self-aware about primordial hate tendencies. “Violence is spreading way beyond Rakhine. There is now evidence that outside provocateurs are stirring up local gangs and even collecting money without accountable systems. Local security forces are sometimes directly involved or allow violence while watching from the sidelines.”

Myo Win, a Muslim leader in Myanmar’s interfaith movement, highlighted the dangers of a proposed interfaith marriage law which would effectively prevent non-Buddhist persons marrying Buddhists without converting. The law is supported by a group of nationalist Buddhist monks on the pretext that it is needed to prevent an erosion of Buddhist culture and to prevent Muslims from dominating the country. Considering the Buddhist population in Myanmar is around 80%, with Muslims, Hindus and Christians in the minority, such a claim is highly spurious. The proposed law would violate the rights of both Buddhists and people of other faiths.

One participant told how young Buddhist adults in Shan State defied the attacks against Muslims by demonstrating openly their tolerance of diversity. The group took some creative artistic steps. They asked permission from local authorities to make a public exhibition and festival for unity and peace. When the permit was denied, the young singers simply went around the capital city singing songs about peace and unity. Upon reaching some Muslim-owned shops, the young singers defied the “unofficial boycott” called by conservative Buddhist monks by singing songs about love for one another. The Muslim shopkeepers greeted them warmly and some even cried with joy.

Alan Senauke, an American Buddhist, noted the easy co-existence in the U.S. of all types of Buddhism, where Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana branches co-exist. He pointed out how in a pluralistic society such as the U.S., multiethnic groups mix but often do not combine. They live side by side, meet in the market places, but rarely inter-marry.

During the discussion, some thought-provoking questions were raised. Is it better to welcome diversity inside families of various ethnic, cultural and religious traditions? Does this bring more awareness, tolerance, appreciation and ultimately happiness?

From participants’ questions and answers I have found several lessons.

First, the formation of interfaith action groups, be they local or global, can become paramount forces for damping down anger and fear in societies. Spiritual people must learn creative ways to prevent and stop diatribes and hate speech quickly. Such interfaith teams can remove the tinder of conflict among different religions and ethnic peoples by creating awareness and appreciation of each other’s lives, cultures and talents.

Second, unified civil actions are often viewed as threats to the current powers and wealth holders. Such negative forces lurk ominously in the background as “dark shadows” hovering over those trying to bring forth peace and harmony. No matter how open and productive a government may appear, “dark shadows” can easily destabilize unity.

Third, long-standing, sub-surface tensions among religious and ethnic groups can be used as the tinder to start destructive and distracting fires within civil society. These destabilizing forces can be led by anyone — even respected religious leaders. Such tensions can quickly rip apart community unity and bring out unjust acts.
Social Harmony in Buddhist Perspectives

Harsha Navaratne

Today we have many things that we never imagined in my childhood.

In those days, information traveled more slowly; Whereas now, no matter where we are, we receive breaking news. It comes at home, at work, or when we're traveling. It comes by radio, television computer, or mobile phone. Most of the time this breaking news brings stories of tragedies, disasters and calamities. It brings stories of violence. It brings feelings of frustration, sadness and sorrow.

On the day of the arrival at my second grandchild, my family received breaking news that Boko Haram had kidnapped 200 schoolgirls and taken them away to clarify which camps. My wife and daughters' faces changed. With tears in their eyes, no one spoke. Everyone was in silence.

More recently, we heard that an armed gunman walked into a school in Washington state in the US and killed innocent students. On the television, we watched mothers falling on the ground, begging and crying to god, asking for their childrens' lives back. This breaking news reminded us that violence does not have boundaries. Where you live does not matter. Regardless of whether you are rich or poor there is no safety. When there is a situation with hatred, confusion, and mistrust - violence emerges.

I have come from Sri Lanka. Like many of you in Myanmar, I am the student of a great teacher. We try to follow the messages and the values given by the great Buddha. One of the most important principles of Lord Buddha's teaching is metta, which gets translated in English as loving kindness. Loving kindness starts in our mind and emerges in our thoughts, our words, and our actions to help overcome suffering and release positive energy for the good of others.

Metta is based on the understanding that my suffering is the same as my neighbor's suffering. There is no difference. Joy doesn't come from bad thoughts or bad actions; it comes from metta and the constructive action that I do. If someone is in pain, sadness or difficulty, it is my duty to go and serve those people in need.

This is what our elders passed from generation to generation as traditions and cultural practices. Even though our modern society is complex and in crisis, we are not going to abandon these values. We are not going to pass the burden of this crisis to the next generation.

I speak of Buddhism because many of us in INEB are a part of this shared tradition but the issue not about Buddhists only. It's not about Hindus or Muslims or Christians. It is an issue involving all human beings.

In Pakistan, a gun man shot a young schoolgirl. They threatened her and told her not to go to school. They told her that by shooting her, they were sending a message to others. What happened? The girl survived the bullet, and it was her message that went to the gun man and to the world. Malala said, “Be peaceful and love everyone.” The answer to violence is not violence. She is Muslim, but she said the same words that our teacher said: “Nahi Verena Verani.” Hatred never ceases through hatred. When she said this, world leaders got up and cheered.

In the Gaza strip, there was a doctor who focused his time on serving his people. One evening he came home and saw that his three lovely daughters were all killed by an airstrike from the Israeli army. He attended the funerals, and then walked back to the hospital to serve his patients. The CNN news anchor asked him his thoughts, and he said, “please forgive the people who did this to my daughters. In my sweet daughters’ names, please stop fighting. Bring peace both to us and to them.”

Breaking news can bring us bad news, but the world is not only bad. Within each of us there is a positive force for good. This is the force that can bring peace and reconciliation to all of our brothers and sisters…whatever their tradition.
Both of our countries, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, experienced centuries of colonial rule and suppression that attempted to break our lineage of traditions, cultures, and values. This suppression gave us insecurity. We see whole groups of people as outsiders, and we are scared of anything that comes from outside. We are afraid that if we don’t react to outside threats, we will lose everything we now have.

Our forefathers fought for independence and freedom, but the freedom we were expecting still has not come our way. In my country, we have lost three generations of young people that gave their lives trying to change authoritarian regimes and systems. Each of these uprisings has failed. Violence was met with violence. Those that have resources and fire power are able to suppress others. People who enjoy power do not give it up easily. It takes a huge mobilization of people with awareness and a commitment to non-violent means.

If we’ve learned anything from past social movements, it’s that social change does not happen overnight. It takes time and continuous effort. It is a long haul journey. We are all here together to learn from each other, but also to gain strength and energy to continue the journey.

It’s easy to get caught up in breaking news. It’s easy to become frustrated and discouraged but we need to keep our thoughts focused on those working for change. We need to bring the good experiences from this gathering back home to share with our colleagues. We need to work together to bring peace and harmony to the people in our own countries and in the world.

As an American Buddhist speaking about Buddhism in the West I begin by offering my deep gratitude and respect to our Asian teachers. Whatever practice we have in the West was brought to us by Asian teachers over the last hundred years, through their great effort and generosity. Without them we would have nothing but elegant and empty words and images.

My purpose here is to reflect on social harmony in the West, considering the weaknesses and strengths of Buddhism in the U.S. In that reflection there may be something of value to Buddhist friends around the world.

Where I live, in California, any evening I can choose from among Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, Korean, Burmese, Cambodian, Filipino, India, Tibetan, Afghan, Persian, Israeli, Turkish, Ethiopian, Moroccan, French, Spanish, German, Italian, Greek, Mexican, Salvadoran, Brazilian, Argentinian, Jamaican cuisines. A cultural feast is laid out before us. As a Western Buddhist I experience similar riches. Among our living Buddhist communities—from Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana root—are practices carried over from China, Japan, India, Sri Lanka, Tibet, Nepal, Korea, Vietnam, Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, along with hybrid approaches to the Dharma that are emerging uniquely in the West. My guess is that California is home to more living traditions of Buddhism than anywhere else in the world at any time.

These communities exist side-by-side. Generally we get along. So one could say there is social harmony. But let’s look more closely at these communities. The myth of America is that it is a “melting pot” in which different nationalities, cultures, and communities merge into a common identity, an illusory utopia. The reality is different. Yes, we can patronize all the various restaurants and all the distinct dharma practices. But do we truly understanding either our social differences or our common humanity?

In the United States Buddhism exists within a predominantly Christian religious culture that identifies with the nation itself. If anything, this Christian culture is increasingly conservative and narrow. And our nation grows increasingly warlike and violent. Buddhism is very much a minority religion that is not aligned with the government or state. So Buddhism in the West is fortunate to preserve independence and a kind of moral integrity.

Buddhist communities in
the West fall into several categories, but roughly:

Immigrant communities from Asia have each brought their distinct Buddhist cultures to the West. While the principles of Buddhadharma are common to all, each community has its own language and cultural forms. And for many Asian communities, specific religious traditions provide the binding energy of social and cultural preservation.

Western Buddhists like myself tend either to practice in a Westernized form of traditional Asian practice. I practice Soto Zen Buddhism, but one can find westernized expressions of Tibetan, Korean, Vietnamese, and other schools. I call these groups “Import” Buddhists, having imported or inherited traditions from Asia and adapted them to American circumstances. Many westerners are practicing what I consider “decultured” or hybrid forms of Buddhism — “insight” or “mindfulness” — in which traditional teachings have been stripped away, and the dharma itself can look like a self-improvement project.

There are other ways to look at Buddhism in the West. It is less monastic, more lay-oriented, more gender equal, emphasizing meditation rather than devotional practices. Among the Western or Import Buddhists, practitioners tend to be older and relatively prosperous. Some call this the “Upper-Middle Way.” Meditation retreats are often expensive and even luxurious; it is difficult for working people with families to find time and money for such retreats.

If we are looking at social harmony, it is necessary to speak about realities of race and discrimination in the U.S. The shame and the violence of these incomplete relations have been clear to all. But our history is complex and often unspoken. Like many nations in the world, the U.S. began as a British colony, winning its independence in the late 18th Century. But the Anglo-American colonists themselves became colonizers as they expanded westward, displacing the indigenous peoples — referred to as Indians! — in what can be called ethnic cleansing or genocide. If we look later and elsewhere among the former colonial countries we see similar patterns. Those indigenous cultures survive, some even thrive, but many of them carry the wounds of a shameful and murderous victimization.

America’s economic prosperity was built by the labor of African slaves, chained and stolen from their homelands and carried across the Atlantic to create the wealth of a new nation that considered them as less than human. Despite the fact that there has always been a resistance to this dehumanization, that African-Americans have achieved significant advances in civil rights and politics in the last 100 years, that we have an African-American president — Barack Obama — the traumas of racism are very much alive in my country.

Discrimination and racism also affect Hispanic-American communities in America’s Southwest. A tide of Latino immigrants from Mexico and Central America seek employment and safety in the U.S. And discrimination affects Asian and Asian-American communities from China and Southeast Asia.

Many of our Western or Import Buddhist centers are predominantly White or Anglo-American. Where are the African-Americans, Latino, and Asian-Americans? Too often these “communities of color” do not feel welcome in a White, middle or upper-middle class setting. So they are creating their own independent Buddhist centers, where they can practice in social safety.

Although the U.S. tries to project a bright image of inclusiveness, as I said, the historical and present-day facts of racism still divide us from each other. Our jails and prisons are disproportionately inhabited by Black and Brown men. Since World War II, our wars and foreign adventures have been inflicted on peoples of the Third World. And our meditation halls are often homogeneously White.

Not long ago I became acquainted with the scholar-activist John Furnivall’s idea of a “Plural Society.” A Fabian socialist in the early 20th Century, Furnivall’s thinking was influenced by his increasingly critical experience as a colonial administrator in colonial Burma. Different from the idealized notion of multicultural or “pluralistic” society, his Plural Society is

…in the strictest sense a medley, for they [ethnic groups] mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the marketplace, … [and] … with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit.

Furnivall was writing about colonial and post-colonial countries like Sri Lanka, Burma, Malaysia, and Indonesia. But this also might be a way of describing aspects of race in the U.S. Where African-American communities certainly seem to fit Furnivall’s description—living side by...
side and yet separate, often ruled by an occupying army of police.

Western Buddhist communities also fit the Plural Society model. Side-by-side but separate, and often culturally singular despite the commonality of dharma. Social Harmony is just skin-deep. My personal experience speaks to this reality. Berkeley Zen Center, where I have lived for twenty-eight years, is located on the same block as Wat Mongkolratanaram, a Thai temple. We function as a place for meditation and Zen practice, while the wat serves as a religious and cultural center for the Thai community. Over the years I have had good and mutually respectful relations with the monks and temple officers, but there is virtually no interaction between others in our two communities.

I don't have a remedy or even a compelling conclusion to offer. Our Engaged Buddhist circles use the Four Noble Truths as a tool for social analysis. The Truth of Social Suffering in the U.S. is clearly expressed by racism, militarism, environmental destruction, and the ever-widening gulf between ultra rich and working poor. The images dance before our eyes: the lure of luxury, the promise of eternal youth, and unsteady videotape of police choking an African-American man to death while he gasps, “I can't breathe.”

The Causes are many. Centrally, we are afraid. We fear losing our self-appointed status as a super-power. We use our vast military and economic power to steal the labor and natural resources of other nations. The U.S. government and multinational corporations believe the delusion that our nation is somehow exceptional, a shining city on the hill. Buddhist communities are not particularly the agents of this suffering, but like many in the U.S. we are knowingly or unknowingly privileged by American power.

One can imagine the End of Social Suffering, living in a country where social harmony is the reality. Where we are awake. People of different races, backgrounds, religions, ethnicities, and classes might be in equity and fraternity with each other, and in harmony with the planet itself. Martin Luther King Jr. often spoke of his vision of social harmony, the Beloved Community. To Dr. King this was not a fantasyland devoid of difference or conflict. But in the Beloved Community, as in the Buddha's vision of sangha, differences would be resolved with trust and reason and without violence.

There are many Paths to the End of Social Suffering. Shakyamuni's Eightfold Path points the way for Buddhist practice. According to our needs we can add Right Education, Right Environment, Right Justice, Right Community, and other practices. These are paths for people of all nations and all faiths.

But my Buddhist brothers and sisters in the U.S. have our responsibilities. If we are concerned about social harmony in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, we must work for social harmony in our own Buddhist communities and in our nation. This not about being nice to each other. American Buddhists and American citizens have to find ways to restrain our military, stop the voracious advance of multinational corporations, cease poisoning the world’s environment, and deconstruct the prison-industrial complex.

But, first of all, we have to respect, care for, and defend each other, because each of us is Buddha. The privileged and powerful — and I include myself even though our family is far from wealthy by American standards — must act with our neighbors who are disenfranchised and oppressed. Not side-by-side and separate. But with in the sense of the Pali word samanatatta — which implies sameness, cooperation, impartiality, and consistency.

Buddhists around the world, in our various lands, have much the same responsibility to heal the divisions and stand against all kinds of overt and structural violence. Before we preach to others we must show that true practice begins at home, respecting each person as the embodiment of Buddha. Only then can we peacefully transcend borders, religions, and identities. We can sit down together to a dazzling feast and sing the harmonious song of one and many.

* For more perspective, see “The Plural Society and Its Enemies” in the Aug 2, 2014 issue of The Economist.

An earlier version of this essay was presented in Mandalay on 29 November 2014 at INEB’s public forum on “Social Harmony in Buddhist Perspective.”

Hozan Alan Senauke is a Soto Zen Buddhist priest, living on the western edge of the United States. He is founder of Clear View Project and a member of INEB’s Advisory Committee.
With the approach of the ASEAN Economic Community by the end of 2015, it was propitious to hold Dhamma Sanghakeet of cultural events during the INEB Conference on Religious Tolerance held recently in Mandalay, Myanmar.

Without the generous supports provided by the Ministry of Culture of Thailand and Bangkok Airways, a troupe of 25 musicians and dancers from the College of Thai Dramatic Arts, including other personnel, would not be able to take a direct flight from Bangkok to Mandalay, where we were graciously hosted at the Buddhist Monastery among the rolling hills on the outskirts of the city of Mandalay.

Cultural activities, whether music, song, and dance or other forms of artistic presentation, transcend beyond mental and physical barriers such as religious beliefs, political ideologies, languages, and national boundaries. Love, friendships, and mutual understandings precede economic cooperation. The ‘heart’, in truth, is more important than the ‘head’. Only through sincerity, kindness, and compassion for those less fortunate than oneself, would ASEAN overcome its many bigotries and obstacles — as a result, becoming a united and unified community, each nation reaching out to share its resources and prosperity among the members. All art forms cultivate an awareness and appreciation of goodness, beauty, and truth of this world of ours. They too help heal the wounds and the sufferings inflicted upon ourselves and others whether consciously or unconsciously.

In the long run, use of force and wars cannot resolve human conflicts. Love of one another alone cultivates a life long peaceful coexistence. In the Ramayana Mask Dance performed at the INEB Conference, the context of the epic battle between Tosakan and Rama of old was purposefully transformed into a declaration of peace accord, rather than the portrayal of a death struggle between the two opposing forces, to create an harmonious world where everyone can live in peace and happiness. Also too, at the temple ground in the evening, the villagers and guests joined together in the festivities, where music and dances were performed by both Myanmarese and Thai musical troupes.

Cultural exchanges, in many ways, helps lay the groundwork for the advancement; first, for greater spiritual well beings, and secondly, for sustainable economic prosperity in the years to come. INEB Conference’s aims were to promote greater religious harmony among the ethnic and racial groups in ASEAN and Asia, particularly those residing in Myanmar.

Throughout its long history, ASEAN region as a whole was and still is comprised of multitudes of ethnic and religious groups, each with its own set of languages and beliefs. For example, in the old days, the Thais acknowledged such diversity within its boundaries and the region as a whole, as comprising of ‘sipsong bhahas’ while in Malaysia and Indonesia it would be called ‘sipsong bhahas’. Nation state with fixed boundaries as we know it today is a modern creation derived from western influences.

ASEAN nations share many similarities in their cultures and beliefs, which extend to their songs and dances. Even their musical instruments and musics are not far apart in appearances and sounds, or melodies. Much of our traditions were derived undoubtedly from both India or China, the two great nations of Asia. Of late, in the last few centuries, influxes of western influences were and are being felt with greater intensity.

In a way, ASEAN and its proximate neighbors are ‘international’ among themselves, because they share many similarities in how they live their lives - the way they cook, eat, dress, dance, speak, etc. Although at the national levels they often may argue, quarrel, and have gone through several political confrontations, in their hearts, at the local or people levels, they are no different. They inherit the same heritage - they are of the same people.

The Music and Dance Troupe of the College of Dramatic Arts would like to take this opportunity to thank Sathirakoses - Nagapradepa Foundation for giving the opportunity to take part in the INEB Conference in Mandalay.
Buddhism is a belief system of some 400 million people on Earth. It is not always considered as a religion as there is no central theistic focus. Buddhism is treated as a religion, a practice and a philosophy of living in the world. Buddhism is founded on the teachings of Siddhatha Gotama, known as “the Buddha”, meaning “The Awakened One”.

The Buddhist philosophy is complex with many components. It can be summed up briefly as: Purify the mind; cease to do harm. This presentation is based on Theravada Buddhism, the Teachings of the Elders. It is a denomination practiced in South and South East Asia which focuses on the original teachings of the Buddha. The scriptural language is Pali which is related to Sanskrit.

Buddhists commit to five foundational precepts for living a mindful and ethical life. Precept 1 is to practice not causing harm or causing the death of sentient beings. Precept 2 is to practice not taking what is not ours, what is not freely given. These two precepts are fundamental to engaging with climate change. By attaching to a fossil fuel economy, we are causing the death of many sentient beings, extinction of species, suffering and death of other human beings now and in the generations to come. It is a profound violation of the Buddhist ethics. By using up the carbon budget of future generations (emitting greenhouse gases so that future generations must suffer) we are stealing from the next generation and stealing from the poor. This is a second and profound violation of Buddhist precepts.

Buddhism teaches that the universe has an ethical wiring to it. There is a law of cause and effect, known as the law of karma (karma in Sanskrit). Our mental habits, intentions and actions have an impact on the world. If we act with the intention to harm, it harms both the world as well as traps us in its practical, mental and spiritual consequences. If we strive to do good, our conscience will be more clear and the results of our lives more positive. In the end, we seek to end the cycle of kamma completely.

Within the law of kamma, we need to understand the issue of intentionality versus ignorance. If we act in a manner that we think will be good, but it is based on ignorance, the results may be bad, but because we wanted to do good, the impacts are mitigated. If we act out of knowledge and we choose to do things that are selfish, greedy or harmful, the kammic consequences will be worse for us. Our goal is not only to act with good will and pure intentions, but to do so without the veil of ignorance. We need to develop wisdom, mindfulness and
concentration to guide our daily actions, from moment to moment. Within this framework, causing climate change is a violent and negative kammic destiny which will plague us and our world. Stopping climate change will soothe us and soothe the wellness of the world.

Another key concept in Buddhism is ‘dependent origination’ (paticca samupadda). This teaches us that nothing happens spontaneously. Everything has a cause and an origin. Climate change has a cause. That cause is found in the human mind, in human desires, in ignorance, ill-will and greed. These last three concepts are considered poisons or the three unwholesome roots (akusala-mūla).

These conditions of ignorance, greed and attachment, hatred and ill-will are always present in the human mind. They are the dark side of our character which we often want to hide away but which inform many of our decisions. The negotiations at the UN often express this undercurrent and ignorance. No one wants to do harm deliberately, but due to our mental habits and how the negotiations are designed, negotiators end up not adhering to what is wholesome or right, generous and selfless. They emphasise national self-interest. They become locked into the fear they will lose out or that they are giving up power to another. Greed and pride lead us to deeper ignorance and suffering, eventually destroying the very foundations of human society and life on Earth.

The Buddhist understanding of human psychology seems quite negative. It is tied also to the Buddha’s first sermon on the Four Noble Truths. The first truth is that there is suffering. The Buddha elaborated in great detail the causes of suffering and its expression in life. As you can already see, much of the cause of suffering comes from the nature of our own minds and our lack of skill in learning to purify and steer the mind to do good, in alignment with the nature of the universe. The second noble truth is that suffering has causes which are recognizable if we concentrate.

The Buddha’s teachings are a philosophy of goodness, of liberation, of salvation. The third Noble Truth teaches that there is an antidote to the suffering, a path of liberation. The fourth Noble Truth is the Eightfold path of ethical conduct, strengthening the concentration powers of the mind, and developing our innate wisdom to guide all of our actions and conduct.

The way to liberation is inherently available to all human beings. Just as we have shadows in our mind and negative mental habits, so we also have generosity, wisdom, altruism and loving kindness in great abundance. We are able to change our minds in a moment, when we let go of fear, of ignorance, or the illusions attached to the ego and the material world.

Buddhists are invited by the Buddha to practice ten virtues (dasa paramitta). All of these are key to a good and happy life. The ones we may wish to reflect on here today include: metta – loving kindness has to be at our core. We must love all beings fully and thoroughly. We must feel a love so strong for all sentient beings that we would not harm one of them, we would defend their lives with our own. Within metta we see the spiritual bonds of the universe and we act generously and compassionately. Viriya – energy, effort, diligence. We have a great struggle on our hands. We have to transform the global use of energy, stop multinationals from unethical conduct, force politicians to act in the global interest of the planets not their short term political interests. We must awaken the human mind. We must work across religions, cultures, class lines, globally organize to live as one united human family. Nekkhamma – I believe the answer to our current crisis is in ‘renunciation’. We must accept that we cannot live as we have done in the 20th century. All who can, need to give up things to make life possible on Earth. We have to give up fixed ideas, wealthy, comforts, our arrogance, our ignorance. The rich must renounce. The poor must renounce. The powerful and the humble. We all have atonement to make. We all have to liberate ourselves from attachments that hold us back from truth, responsibility, wisdom, compassion and generosity.

Within the crisis of climate change, the suffering, the fear, the death and the tragedies – in the stinking dirty ditch we have made of our lives, so blooms the lotus the floor. In our filth is nourished a resurrection of our mind, a deeper truth, a way to liberation, a way to end all suffering. May all being be free from suffering and the causes of suffering.
As representatives from different faith and religious traditions, we stand together to express deep concern for the consequences of climate change on the earth and its people, all entrusted, as our faiths reveal, to our common care. Climate change is indeed a threat to life, a precious gift we have received and that we need to care for.

We acknowledge the overwhelming scientific evidence that climate change is human-induced and that, without global and inclusive action towards mitigation and unless fully addressing its fundamental causes, its impacts will continue to grow in intensity and frequency. At the same time, we are ready to dialogue with those who remain skeptical.

In our communities and thanks to the media, we see the manifestations of climate change everywhere. From our brothers and sisters around the world, we hear about its effects on people and nature. We recognize that these effects disproportionally affect the lives, livelihoods and rights of poorer, marginalized and therefore most vulnerable populations, including indigenous peoples. When those who have done the least to cause climate change are the ones hardest hit, it becomes an issue of injustice. Equitable solutions are urgently needed.

We recognize that climate change stands today as a major obstacle to the eradication of poverty. Severe weather events exacerbate hunger, cause economic insecurity, force displacement and prevent sustainable development. The climate crisis is about the survival of humanity on planet earth, and action must reflect these facts with urgency.

Therefore, as faith leaders, we commit ourselves to the promotion of disaster risk reduction, adaptation, low carbon development, climate change education, curbing our own consumption patterns and reducing our use of fossil fuels. Based on our spiritual beliefs and our hope for the future, we commit to stimulating consciences and encouraging our peers and communities to consider such measures with urgency.

We share the conviction that the threats of climate change cannot be curbed effectively by a single State alone but only by the enhanced co-operation of the community of States, based on principles of mutual trust, fairness and equity, precaution, intergenerational justice and common but differentiated responsibilities and capabilities. We urge the rich to support the poor and the vulnerable significantly and everywhere, especially in Least Developed Countries, Small Island States and Sub-Saharan Africa. Significant support would include generous financial resources, capacity building, technology transfer and other forms of co-operation.

We encourage Heads of State and Ministers attending the Climate Summit to announce pledges for the Green Climate Fund, including commitments to increase them thereafter, to establish new partnerships for climate resilience and low carbon development, and to assure access to renewable energies for all people.

As people of faith, we call on all governments to express their commitment to limit global warming well below 2°C Celsius. We emphasize that all States share the responsibility to formulate and implement Low Carbon Development Strategies leading to de-carbonization and the complete phase-out of fossil fuels by mid-century.

Consequently we encourage...
world political and economic leaders to exercise their leadership during the Climate Summit by announcing joint actions such as important short-term emission cuts, phasing out fossil fuel subsidies, coal caps or coal divestment, forest protection, increased energy efficiency in construction and transportation, and other concrete steps. We further call on all governments to identify medium and long-term adaptation needs and to develop strategies to address them based on country-driven, gender-sensitive and participatory approaches to better manage residual loss and damage due to adverse climate impacts.

Ultimately we request all States to work constructively towards a far-reaching global climate agreement in Paris in 2015, building on transparency, adequacy and accountability. The new agreement must be:

- ambitious enough to keep temperature from rising well below 2°C Celsius;
- fair enough to distribute the burden in an equitable way; and
- legally binding enough to guarantee that effective national climate policies to curb emissions are well funded and fully implemented.

As religious representatives and citizens in your countries, we hereby commit ourselves to address the climate change threat. We continue to count on your leadership, and we encourage and expect you to make the right decisions. When difficult decisions need to be taken for the sustainability of the earth and its people, we are ready to stand with you. We pray for you and for all humanity in caring for the earth.

We want world peace. We want good governments. We want a sustainable environment. We want a stable climate for future generations. These are all normal thoughts for Buddhists and other peoples of faith. Why would we not want all these things? And yet, this is not what we have. We have a situation where poverty grows worse daily, where conflicts surge, states fail, multinationals violate all imaginable ethics and decency. Here in New York we gather in our religious and spiritual attire to wring our hands about a twenty-year failure by the member states of the United Nations to protect themselves and their citizens from the catastrophic impacts of climate instability.

Buddhists find these crazy situations understandable. The Buddha’s first sermon started with the premise that there is suffering – dukkha. Moreover, most dukkha we experience comes from our inability to see things as they really are. The stories we tell ourselves lead us to false solutions, misreading ourselves and misunderstanding the world, and ultimately lead us to anxiety and frustration. No doubt some of you here today are feeling this frustration. How have we let this situation get to such a bad state?

The Buddha graciously also taught us the path of liberation. He guided us in achieving freedom from suffering. This is not a matter of tuning out or holding conferences to discuss our failures and desires. The path to liberation requires change in our behaviour. It requires understanding that some of what we like to do is harmful and rooted in ignorance. It requires understanding that a life built on generosity, wisdom, concentration of the mind and compassionate action breaks down the “us / them, me / you” dichotomy and that we must live ethically in the world. Our own salvation requires understanding our impact on others.

Paṭiccasamuppāda is a useful phrase brought to us by the Buddha. It is translated as ‘dependent origination’. It means that no situation exists without a cause and prior condition. One thing leads to another. If we have climate instability and a grossly negligent multilateral negotiations process – then these things did not spring out of thin air. They are the product of human intentions and actions.

Climate change is caused by greenhouse gas emissions. Are greenhouse gases evil? No. They are a normal part of the universe. The problem is in the human grasping which has at first found a clever way to make energy and an enjoyable life,
and then allowed that to pervert itself into oil wars, greed, extreme wealth, and a modern day colonisation of the rich against the poor to ensure control over fossil fuels.

We humans have a shameful past in the modern era: slavery, colonialism, systematising of torture for political purposes, commodification of nature, wars for energy resource dominance. We could not even meet the targets of the Millennium Development Goals. All of these conditions arise in the human mind and the human heart. They are the poisons which the Buddha spoke of: greed, anger and ignorance.

In the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), we have maintained that the Eightfold Noble Path to liberation from suffering is both an individual journey of awakening, and at the same time it is a social engagement to challenge systemic unwholesomeness which establishes itself in our political, economic, cultural and social systems.

As we, religious leaders and spiritual practitioners gather here in New York City, we have a great duty weighing on our shoulders. In speaking truth and seeing the world as it really is, let us be frank that our political leaders are failing to see the suffering for what it is. What sane person would listen to all this science and not act swiftly and compassionately?

We have choices before us. We can mobilise the faithful masses of this planet to put pressure on the political leaders. We can ensure that our councils, clergy, hierarchies and laity understand the seriousness of this crisis. We can actively protect the natural environment, shift our own use of energy to renewables, defend the forests, defend the Earth, link the issues of poverty and peace with sustainability, equity and justice.

Or we may need to admit that the multilateral policy system is anachronistic and in the hands of a tiny global elite that will not act for the common good of all sentient beings. If that is our conclusion, then we have some even bigger challenges in front of us. Maybe we need to speak truth to power? Maybe this is not convenient for some imams, cardinals, senior monks and rabbis. Maybe we are too close to power to want to challenge the status quo?

To whom are we loyal in the end? To the powerful? To the vulnerable? Or do we find our inspiration in our age-old scriptures and the teachings of the prophets and awakened ones? Did your prophets or gurus ever tell you to be afraid of power and those in love with material things? Did they recommend you look the other way during wars, colonisation, gender violence and child mortality? Mine teachings do not say this to me. They say that my own well-being and liberation is intimately tied to how I live in the world, my generosity, my compassion, my ability to see the world as it really is and to have the courage to act skillfully, even if this means changing how I see myself.

To return to our theme of dependent origination. What we as spiritual and religious leaders choose to do as role models, as influence-makers, as human beings, will help shape the world to come. If there is to be compassion for the vulnerable, it must be in our hearts. If there is to be justice for the people of the Developing World, it must arise from our actions. If the media is to awaken to the interconnectedness of power, self-interest, elite hegemony and the fossil fuel oligarchs, then we must be the messengers.

The climate change disaster must be couched as a profound ethical and spiritual crisis. We must open up the question to show the linkages to issues of global power, equity between nations, equity between rich and poor, equity between generations, even equity between species. Band-Aid solutions are not going to change this situation. We need to awaken the minds of our congregants and faithful that they are change agents.

We cannot leave our destiny to the elites locked in negotiation rooms and cocktail receptions – whether governmental or non-governmental. Climate change must be addressed from the bottom upwards – sustainability from solidarity, organic
agriculture that ensures biodiversity and food sovereignty. A fundamental rejection of the centralising powers of the multinationals in energy, commodity production and food production.

We from the coastal countries are particularly called on to protect our oceans from industrial over-fishing and return power to the artisanal fishers and stewards of our seas. Each level of the system must be seen, understood and addressed through community to community action and sharing.

In the end, faith requires sacrifice - nekkhama. Sacrifice of privilege, of ego-attachments, of illusions and ignorance. Sacrifice of attachment to power and to the convenient lifestyle we take for granted at the expense of others. That sacrifice can only be made out of good faith and introspection. What replaces those losses is so infinitely more important. It is the blessing of inner peace, of connectedness to the world, it is the nibbana that can only arise from right effort and right understanding.

I praise this initiative to bring people of all faiths together. It is through making our united action a reality that we demonstrate the way that the world must be governed with wisdom, generosity and compassion. I say to you: be courageous, our time is now.

A speech Delivered by Ajahn Sulak Sivaraksa, drafted by Dr. Nigel Crawhal
A Statement to Support Establishing the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Siam (Thailand)

By International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB)

The International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) follows the Buddha’s teaching closely and sincerely. From earlier times the Buddha’s Sasana or teachings have depended on the Fourfold Sangha of Bhikkhu, Bhikkhuni, Upasaka, and Upasika. To maintain true Buddhism we must maintain the Fourfold Sangha.

When the Bhikkhu Sangha disappeared in Sri Lanka, the King of Ayudhya sent Venerable Upali and a group of Siamese Bhikkhus to rebuild the sangha there. When the Chinese Buddhists wanted to create a Bhikkhuni order in their country, they approached the Sri Lankan Bhikkhuni Sangha for help. In our Buddhist heritage the Sasana is universal, beyond any nation state and beyond the narrow views of nikayas, orders or sects.

Likewise, Mahavihara opened its doors to the whole Bhikkhu Sangha from South East Asia.

In recent times, when Sri Lankan Buddhists sought to maintain the Fourfold Sangha, they supported the ordination of a Bhikkhuni Sangha. As they had done more than 260 years ago when their Bhikkhu Sangha had disappeared, Sri Lankan Buddhists invited Bhikkunis from China to help them. With thorough research and scholarship in vinaya they determined a proper process for ordination.

As mentioned earlier, Bhikkhuni ordination had originally been transmitted to China with the assistance of Sri Lanka’s Bhikkhuni Sangha. While we don’t know the exact number of Bhikkhus and Bhikkunis in China, Taiwan’s Bhikkhuni Sangha is six times more populous than their Bhikkhu Sangha. Bhikkhunis contribute significantly to the Taiwan’s social and spiritual welfare and that of all sentient beings. Unlike other Buddhist orders in Asia, there have been no financial or sexual scandals among the Taiwan’s Bhikkhunis.

The Bhikkhuni Sangha in Siam (Thailand) has been established cautiously with the help of the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhuni Sangha from Sri Lanka and members of the Thai Bhikkhu Sangha. This Bhikkhuni lineage is growing in Siam, Vietnam, and Indonesia. It needs to be supported and encouraged by all good people, not only Buddhists.

Some members of the Supreme Council of the Thai Sangha have questioned the validity of the Bhikkhuni Sangha in Siam. We sincerely ask them to reflect on the shortcomings of their own Thai Bhikkhu Sangha, including sexual and financial misconduct. Is their opposition to Bhikkhuni ordination based on the Dhamma and the Brahmavihara, or are they acting out of jealousy and ignorance?

The Sangha Council has resorted to an obscure 1928 order, dating to the time of absolute monarchy, to jail sramaneri. We hope that Thai lawmakers will not be foolish as the Council of the Elders. Siam is on the path to democracy. We hope those who are involved with reforming the country bear in mind that we need liberty and equality in religion and gender. We must respect human rights.
Local Communities From Dawei
Call For Human Rights Violations
To Be Addressed In Special Economic Zone

Bangkok, Thailand, October 21, 2014 – Community representatives from areas affected by the Dawei Special Economic Zone (DSEZ) questioned how the mega-project could move forward when so many social and environmental impacts and human rights violations have already taken place that have not been addressed. These problems need to be resolved, before considering a new phase to this already problematic project.

“When the road construction came to my village we didn’t know anything. We have lost our farmlands, our clean water and our livelihoods… but received no compensation. They did not tell us all the problems that the project would bring,” said Saw Keh Doh who has travelled from Thabyuchaung village in Dawei District of Myanmar to Bangkok to present his concerns to the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand.

“We need information, we need to know exactly who will take responsibility, what will be done to remedy the existing problems and how those responsible will protect against further negative impacts,” said Daw Su Su Swe, from the Tavoyan Women’s Union.

“We know that our standard of living must not be lowered as a result of the project. For me I was only given 500,000 kyats per acre for my land, others were given 3 million kyats per acre. But even with 3 million per acre, it is not enough to buy new farmland at current prices,” said U Aung Myint from Mudu village in the DSEZ project area. “Development projects must not do harm to people and to our environment.”

The communities’ concerns are documented in a new report by the Dawei Development Association (DDA), entitled “Voices From the Ground: Concerns Over the Dawei Special Economic Zone and Related Projects,” released today at the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Thailand (FCCT) in Bangkok. The report was also presented to the National Human
Rights Commission of Thailand in a public hearing at the Government Complex.

The report calls on the National Human Rights Commissions of Thailand and Myanmar to collaborate and carry out a full investigation into all complaints of human rights abuses; relating to land confiscations and forced evictions as a consequence of the Dawei SEZ project activities or operations conducted by companies domiciled in Thailand or Myanmar.

DSEZ is located in an agricultural, coastal region of southern Myanmar. First initiated in 2008, DSEZ will comprise, among other components, a deep seaport, an industrial estate, a water supply reservoir, and a road link between the two countries. If completed, DSEZ would become one of the largest industrial zones in Southeast Asia. The Italian-Thai Development Company (ITD) was responsible for the operation of the projects from 2008-2013. Stalled since November 2013 due to lack of finance, direct responsibility for the project was transferred to a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) owned by the Thai and Myanmar governments in equal shares. After the recent visit by the Thai Prime Minister, Gen. Prayuth Chan-ocha to Myanmar, both governments have indicated that new investors have made bids for the project but very little information has been made available to the public.

There is a fragile political context in both countries, particularly in the border areas of Myanmar that are under the control of armed groups. “Are investors fully informed of the risks? And do they realize the full extent of their environmental, social and human rights responsibilities?” said Saw Kho, from Community Sustainable Livelihoods and Development (CSLD).

It is expected that people in 20-36 villages will be directly affected by the DSEZ and related projects. Based on the results of a quantitative and qualitative study in 20 villages directly affected by the DSEZ projects, it was found that communities’ have lost farm-lands and natural resources that are vital to their livelihood, without prior information. There was no meaningful consultation, but only a deeply flawed compensation process. The report presents a series of recommendations to the major stakeholders, including the Thai and Myanmar governments, as well as to investors from Thailand, Japan, and elsewhere who may be considering investment in these projects.

Furthermore, the report shows that already, DSEZ developers have not adhered to relevant international, regional, and domestic legal obligations, standards, and other responsibilities in relation to forced evictions, rights to adequate food and housing, and indigenous people’s rights. These gaps must be urgently addressed by the project partners.

“It is the primary responsibility of the State to protect its citizens. If this project creates human rights violations, destruction of the environment and livelihoods of the people, both governments will be judged very harshly by history” said U Thant Zin, Coordinator of Dawei Development Association.

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After Vandana Shiva (2012) and Satish Kumar (2013), Rajagopal P.V. – Founder and President of the Indian people’s movement Ekta Parishad – delivered the third Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Lecture for sustainable development at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, Saturday 20 December 2014.

“Ekta Parishad”, Rajagopal explained to the audience, “evolved as a people’s organization in 1991. Prior to that, it had been a loose grouping of NGO training institutes that had created a large base of community development work. It first articulated the agenda of people’s control over livelihood resources in 1996 in the process of consolidating its vision around the key issues of land, forests and water rights. The majority of the people in Ekta Parishad at the time of its inception, were tribals or adivasis, who had been increasingly alienated from their lands because of constant displacement.”

Rajagopal came to Thailand in 1997 for the ‘Alternatives to Consumerism’ conference organized by Sulak Sivaraksa in Buddhhamonthon, Thailand’s centre of Buddhism. There Rajagopal presented, among ‘alternatives’ from all over Asia, his mission, together with a group of adivasis or indigenous peoples of India, he was closely living with in a remote part of Bihar. Pracha Hutangwat, who co-organized ‘Alternatives to Consumerism’ with Ajarn Sulak, reminded the audience, during the Thai spoken panel discussion in the afternoon following the public lecture of Rajagopal in the morning, how he visited Rajagopal at that time.

The morning had been opened by Indian music and a lighting of the lamp ceremony after warm welcome words of the host organizer Surat Horachaikul, Director of the Indian Studies Center of Chulalongkorn University. The Third Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Lecture was organized in collaboration with Suan Nguen Mee Ma publishers – who launched the book of Rajagopal Journey through the other India in Thai language – the Wellbeing Studies Programme and Local Action Links.

“The adivasis were also suffering due to being barred from entering adjacent forest areas, because of the 1980 Forest Conservation Act. This problem was aggravated with hijacking of water resources for the use of industries and large-scale agriculture. Without land, forest and water, people (and especially forest-dependent communities such as the adivasi groups) could not hope to survive on the land. This was the impetus that brought the groups into a larger social formation after 1991. By the end of the 1990s, Ekta Parishad had gathered around it a constituency of about 200,000 members.”

In 1999-2000, the first padyatra (foot-march), which traversed from western to eastern Madhya Pradesh, was organized. During this padyatra, Ekta Parishad discovered that ‘walking’ was an enabling tool, one that allowed...
the marginalized people to participate readily and with dignity, since it only demanded their physical strength and not funds or political patronage. The foot-march, like Gandhi’s Salt Satyagraha of 1931, was also a way for people to highlight their rights and become visible by attracting the attention of the media, policy-makers and the general public.”

Rajagopal, who was accompanied by his Canadian wife, co-activist Jill Carr-Harris, on his visit to Chulalongkorn University, was Vice-Chairman of the Gandhi Peace Foundation for several years. But he had chosen to lead the grass-roots movement Ekta Parishad as a more direct way of mobilizing people.

“Following that first foot-march, about a dozen marches took place in different states of India on various issues. It was then decided to hold a national march in October 2007. The march was named ‘Janadesh,’ which means ‘People’s Verdict.’ For one month the landless poor, tribals, poor women, bonded labourers, children and old people walked along the national highway, attracting the attention of people from all walks of life. After the arrival in Delhi, the government reacted swiftly and promised to meet the demands of the activists. It was one of the largest non-violent actions in human history. This march was followed by an international march in October 2012 called the Jan Satyagraha (‘People’s March for Justice’) when 50,000 people walked to Delhi.”

One of the secrets of the success of the Jan Satyagraha organized by Ekta Parishad under the leadership of Rajagopal P.V. was the strategic decision in 2011 to choose the international day of nonviolence, 2 December – the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi – for the launching of its epic mission. “Although there is a discussion now on Gandhi’s personality and political choices, his indications for non-violent action are universal and still very, very powerful. The principles of nonviolent resistance as taught by Mahatma Gandhi are, among others: 1. maintaining courage in the face of oppression; 2. seeking reconciliation with, rather than defeat of the oppressors; 3. attacking oppressive systems instead of oppressors; 4. accepting self-suffering without causing harm to others; 5. and maintaining hope that social justice will result.”

Rajagopal P.V.’s Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Lecture for sustainable development at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, 20 December 2014, can be understood as a powerful event launching the UN International Year of Soils 2015 in Thailand from an alternative development perspective.

According to Journey to the other India – a book about courage, non-violence and success – it is not just the soil which is important, but “it takes many years of relationship with the soil that makes someone a good farmer. Only this long term relationship results in lasting soil fertility. Fertile soils are the hope for happy lives of future generations.” Here is why Ekta Parishad emphasizes that farmers need a legal framework which not only gives them access to land but also long term security.

The growing conflict of interest on landownership between industry and commerce at one side, and the livelihood of small-scale farmers who care for the earth, at the other side, pose an enormous dilemma to policy-makers. Wrong decisions will intensify mass migration to the big cities, unsustainable economies, inequality and violent social unrest.

In his introductory remarks Sulak Sivaraksa cautioned the interim government of Thailand to take heed of the words of Rajagopal P.V. and leave space for open debate on genuine land reform.

To create a greater awareness about what is the connection between what we are eating, who is producing it, where our food is produced and under which conditions, is a huge challenge. The implications of not knowing, or not wanting to know the truth, are far reaching.

Let us make the International Year of Soils 2015 in Thailand a turning point in history. It can be, if we learn from the example of Ekta Parishad. Rajagopal plans an international march of young people from New Delhi to Geneva in the year 2020.
It is a great honour and privilege for me to be a recipient of the Jamnalal Bajaj International Award for 2014. I have not done much in promoting Gandhian values outside India. I feel as though the crises in the world today are similar to the falling of big trees, they make a lot of noise. However trees are being planted everywhere yet there is hardly any noise.

The Buddha has said that we should learn from trees; need good seeds and the seeds must be able to adapt themselves to the soil and the environment. Then they need to be patient with the wind, the sun, the rain, and the storms. Ultimately they will become big trees, the trees will contribute their leaves and their fruit to birds, bees, animals and human beings.

For human beings the good seeds are made of truth. With truth the heart core of man, he or she needs to adapt herself/himself to the surroundings without giving up the truth. He or she needs patience in order to endure in any society, mostly against structural violence. When a human being becomes mature he or she can be generous to all sentient beings.

Gandhiji stressed truth, His whole life was experimenting with truth, and abides by the truth. The Buddha’s essential message is the Four Noble Truths—the truth of suffering—personal as well as social and environmental. Once one confronts the truth of suffering one must find out its roots derived from greed, hatred and delusion, which can now be seen in capitalism /powers that be, whether democratic or dictatorial, while mainstream education and the mass media are the proselytization of delusion. Once one sees the roots of suffering, one can overcome them with the noble path of non-violence, in thought, speech and action. The end result is achieved so that equality is established with fraternity and liberty from greed, hatred and delusion.

I believe that The great liberator of human-kind after the Buddha was Ashoka and Gandhiji. Gandhi Satyagraha understood the application of the truth in nonviolents through Ahimsa. His message on Hind Swaraj is not only relevant to India but for all humankind. We need to liberate ourselves from colonial domination not only politically and educationally but spiritually as well. We must go beyond the Cartesian concept of cogito ergo sum. We must learn to tame/turn the ego towards selflessness. We must learn to be humble, and move to be arrogant or aggressive. We must learn to be compassionate and collaborative, not competitive.

The Buddha’s message and Gandhiji’s message are now spreading all over the world like trees growing, without noise, but the more people put these messages into practice, the crises in the world will be overcome. The world will certainly survive the present climate change and structural violence.

Suffering will be overcome, personally, socially and environmentally.

Let it be so.

28 November 2014.

Sulak Sivaraksa
Next I’ll address the subject of the confusion about the term, “communist.” I’ve been widely accused of being a communist along with Phra Pañña. Many kinds of people have come to Suan Mokkha and made this accusation or refer to me as a future communist along with others. Listen carefully. How can I be a communist when I always say that we kill communism when we love others, and point out communism’s evil and poisonous nature. Those who call me a communist are jealous publicity hounds, or have some other self-serving motive. They hope to be successful in their accusations if 80-90% of the Thais believe it. Since 80% of the Thai people hate communism and the population of Thailand is 40 million so about 30 million would hate me as a communist!!

One doesn’t need to be a communist to help restrain evil in the world. No one believes those who accuse me of being a communist. It’s those who envy me who make such malicious accusations, and spread the rumor that I’m a communist. I can’t do anything about that, but if I were a communist, I’d be a better communist than my accuser says. Such a communist is unusual in that he intends to make the world a happier, peaceful place. Consider the fact that communist philosophy aims to make the world a more peaceful and happy place; however, communists’ purpose and method differs from us Buddhists. Both Buddhists and communists want the world to be peaceful, but their methods differ. Communists kill others to create peace. They teach that the world will be peaceful when the distinction between self and other results in mutual love. The best communists continuously help the world and strive to achieve this goal non-violently. I’m not a communist; however, there are communists who hold the highest ideals.

Everyone should have his or her own religion (sāsanā khong ton). With a strong faith one can confront communism. Don’t foolishly think that communism is anything like Buddhism, because Buddhism is not weak and fragile. Rather, Buddhism is like a mountain, and communists will perish trying to take its summit. Buddhists have the very heart of the best of religion. It’s important that we confront and get rid of communism. Communism is like an enemy. It’s a poison that kills people.

We should love others, even communists. We feel sorry for them. We would like for them to have a change of heart and understand the importance of understanding others. If everyone lived together as friends, the thinking that capitalists should be killed would disappear and everyone would act appropriately.

Now we’ve arrived at a very important subject, namely, that my teaching about interdependent co-arising (paṭicca samupāda) is incorrect; that I transpose it into an ethic in order to engender a fear of papa (sin) and karmic consequences. That has always been part of the teaching of paṭicca samupāda, but it is much more than that. Paṭicca samupāda teaches that in one lifetime or even one day, interdependent co-arising is operating; that it is connected to dukkha, and that we try to prevent it from arising or, if it arises, to stop it so that we may rise above dukkha. If we’re able to do so and act correctly, then we’ll
not continuously be subject to rebirth and the kilesa (depravity) that comes with paṭicca samupāda.

The Buddha clearly explained that from grasping (upādāna) arises contact and rebirth. One hundred (taṇhā) produces one hundred rebirths before we die—10,000, 100,000 and so on. Paṭicca samupāda is clearly explained in the Pāli that whenever there is taṇhā there will be grasping, contact, and rebirth. This cause and effect doesn't occur only at death. It has already begun. So it is the case that whenever there is taṇhā there follows kilesa (passion and prejudice), rebirth and dukkha. Whatever we do in this life will have consequences in future lives. We cannot escape the consequences of rebirth; however, we can try to correct our actions every time dukkha arises.

It is not difficult to understand rebirth. At birth we emerge from our mother's womb; at death our bodies disintegrate. However, a rebirth devoid of grasping is not a life in the physical sense of birth, old age, and death. It is a birth without a 'self' (tua ku khong ku).

When taṇhā arises upādāna arises in the heart-mind (cai), and the self (tua ku) arises. This is the physical rebirth from the mother's womb, the ordinary natural process when dukkha arises—birth, old age, sickness, and death. This is the conventional meaning. Birth, old age, sickness and death together constitute the arising of the self. This is the birth that is constituted by craving (taṇhā) and grasping (upādāna). It is birth in interdependent co-arising. This is what the Lord Buddha meant by birth, namely, birth characterized by craving and grasping.

The arising of upādāna is a problem for the heart-mind. Suffering arises with the appearance of the sense of the self—birth, old age, sickness and death—a suffering that is difficult to endure; sorrow suffering, grief, and unrest arise. We encounter those things for which we have no affection, and which lead us astray and create a sense of self. If the feeling of self (tua ku) does not arise, then there is no locus for a sense of the self to emerge. This is the meaning of "birth" (jāti) in the dhammic sense. Birth in the conventional sense is birth from a mother's womb. Dhammically, birth arises from craving and grasping. Birth in a dhammic sense arises first followed by birth in the conventional sense which is suffering.

My brief comments follow the Buddha's explanation of interdependent co-arising. I have been interested in paṭicca samupāda from the time of my ordination, and my explanations have sometimes been correct and others have been incorrect over the past fifty years. It took about twenty years for me to arrive at a correct understanding. At first paṭicca samupāda seemed very enigmatic, but I gradually came to a certainty about its meaning; however, my explanations were often opposed, and criticized by those who had only begun to study the subject while I've been studying paṭicca samupāda for years before they were born.

Everyone should understand that paṭicca samupāda has two meanings. There is the traditional meaning that is always asserted by those who accuse me of wrong-view, of holding a new, idiosyncratic interpretation that overlooks the traditional meaning taught by the Buddha; and that I'm incorrect. However, I teach the principle of paṭicca samupāda from a dhammic perspective. Paṭicca samupāda is not confined to death and rebirth, but occurs the first moment that taṇhā and upādāna arise. When this is understood, rebirth can be controlled by sufficient awareness (sati) and insight (vipassanā). Awareness will generate the protective power of paṭicca samupāda. We should train ourselves to attain awareness from the first moment of contact (phassa) and feeling (vedanā). Then taṇhā cannot arise and there will be no rebirth. This is the result of exercising control. If you are not sufficiently aware, you should practice awareness by means of meditation (kammaţţāna).

We now come to the subject of karma. It is better to speak about karmakan than karma. In ordinary language we say, "to do karma," or to receive the consequences of the fruit of karma, and that there's no way of escaping the consequences of karma. Indeed, the Buddha spoke in this way. However, he also said that there is karma that is neither black nor white that eliminates the self; that we do not have to be governed by karma. This is the deeper meaning of karma in Buddhism, and is beyond the conventional understanding, "to do good is to receive good; to do evil is to receive evil." Other religions hold such a view and accuse the Buddha of such a teaching. The Buddha, however, taught that there is another kind of karma. Buddhism teaches that it is possible to be beyond karma. This is to act in the knowledge that there is no "I" who acts karmically; no "I" that is born or dies.

Buddhism teaches there is another kind of karma that ends kamma; that one is beyond karma. This karma is acting in the clear knowledge that there is no actor, no
“self” that is born and dies. This teaching angers those who say that the fruits of acting in this lifetime will be realized in a future lifetime. This view relies on the notion of a self. They are disturbed with our teaching that there is no self that is born and dies, and they accuse me of a false teaching.

I do not abandon the teaching of karma. Rather, I teach its deepest meaning. There are various types of karma ranging from white to black, but there is another type of karma that is neither black nor white which ends karma. This is the Noble Way (ariyakamma). It transcends all dualities—black/white/good/evil, merit/demerit, happiness/suffering. This is the karma taught by Buddhism.

Can karma be avoided? It cannot be escaped, can it? We must reach the point where karma is transcended by following the teachings of the Buddha. He explained its meaning in the most surprising way. As the person most knowledgeable about karma he spoke about its ending. He explained karma in order to instill the fear of evil (papa), and the transcendence of karma—no birth, death.

There is no mutual understanding between those who speak conventionally about karma, and those who explain it dharmically. I am reviled for saying such things as there is no karma or the transcending of karma; that there is neither birth nor death. We must eliminate, transcend, end karma in order to reach and realize the path and its fruit.

Let me remind you that we cannot escape our karma; however, there is also a Buddhist saying that speaks about the end of karma and the attainment of Nibbâna. Nibbâna transcends karma; it is the end of karma. Those who say that the Buddha did not speak about the end of karma—birth, old age, death—and the path to its cessation, are foolish.

Let me clarify; To say, "to do good is to receive good; to do evil is to receive evil," is incomplete. We should say: the good and evil, one does is just that; one doesn’t need to wait for the result. The moment the mind is filled with kilesa is the next moment the mind will express kilesa and thinking will be governed by kilesa. One does not need to wait an hour, a day, a month, or a lifetime. The kammic consequences of good and evil are immediate. If the mind is filled with kilesa it will result in evil mental, physical, and verbal acts and there will be necessary consequences (vipaka).

In sum, I do not explain karma conventionally, but in a clearer and fuller way and the way to end karma which is Nibbâna. Karma will disappear when we arrive at ariyamaggañāṇa, knowledge of the worthy path, namely, that there is no self. This is the elimination of clinging. With the elimination of the self karma is exhausted. We must realize the dharma to the point of eliminating the self I do not teach only part of the dharma, but rather it’s pinnacle, namely, the end of karma.

In the cycle of paṭicca samuppāda, kilesa is the cause of karma. Paṭicca samuppāda begins with contact which leads to feeling, craving (taṅhā), desire (kilesa), and grasping (upādāna), which leads to birth and the karma of birth, rebirth and vipāka; fruition connected with rebirth which leads to suffering old age and death latent in fruition. In the passage of 100,000 cycles there is kilesa, karma, and the fruit of karma that occurs continuously. We should know this truth and act accordingly in order to benefit from this knowledge, and not waste the opportunity of being reborn as a human being and encountering Buddhism.

I now want to address the topic of vaṭṭsamsāra (rebirth) and Nibbâna. These two are always connected. Nibbâna is the cessation of rebirth. Some say that my explanation of rebirth is not orthodox because it is not in terms of the three rebirths: this karmic existence, the next existence as the result of karma and the desire that produces future karma. Karma straddles existences. That which is coming into existence is called that which revolves in death and rebirth in the cycles of samsāra. There are three vaṭṭas.

[karma, kilesa, vipāka] in one vaṭṭsamsāra. When kilesa occurs it leads to karma which, in turn, leads directly to, vipāka or result. The instant when citta (consciousness) first makes contact it produces, kilesa, and the next instant it leads to karma and to consequence (vipāka). If we have a developed awareness we can stop the cycle of rebirth, kilesa ceases, and there is no karma. That is to say, we are able to control the evolution of samsāra. Our mindful wisdom (satipaññā) exhausts its power. We do not need to wait until we die, or wait for three lifetimes to pass. During one day, vaṭṭsamsāra revolves several times.

I am accused of misinterpreting rebirth and advocating a new meaning. My intention is to show that vaṭṭsamsāra is not something in a far distant future life-
time, but in the present. We can understand rebirth and protect ourselves from its arising now. Rebirth that I am talking about from a dharmic perspective occurs within the moment. It is not confined to birth and death but links past, present, and future. Within one day the cycle of rebirth revolves several times interconnecting causality. Kilesa leads to karma, the result of karma, and then to the karma-kilesa cycle.

Now we come to a very important subject that have characterized as “vaṭṭsamsāra is Nibbāna” or we encounter Nibbāna in vaṭṭsamsāra. We must quench the fire at the fire; extinguish dukkha at dukkha. In the fire itself there is the extinguishment of fire; in dukkha itself the extinguishment of dukkha. Within one thing we can find its opposite, hence, we can find Nibbāna in samsāra.

As a comparative illustration, contemplate an extraordinary coconut tree in a grove of coconut trees. That tree can be likened to Nibbāna in the midst of vaṭṭsamsāra. It must be sought out in the midst of all the other trees. It cannot be found elsewhere. Similarly, dukkha must be extinguished in the midst of dukkha, just as fire is extinguished in the midst of fire.

I am attacked as crazy for saying that Nibbāna is in samsāra because usually they are considered opposites. Consider, however, where and how we can’t extinguish dukkha except in the midst of dukkha; likewise we discover Nibbāna in samsāra, not elsewhere. The Buddha said what appears to be a contradiction: “suffering is good, the cause of suffering is good, the end of suffering is good; the means of ending suffering is good. In this fathom [long body] there is citta, cai (heart-mind), saññā… In this body there is dukkha, the cause of dukkka, the cessation of dukkha, the path to the end of dukkha. Dukkha is dukkha; the cessation of dukkha is nirodha, and this is Nibbāna. All this is in the body—both suffering and its cessation. This is the nature of our lives.

Suffering and the cessation of suffering co-exist; hence, Nibbāna and vaṭṭsamsāra exist together in the heart-mind (citta) in the body. The body is the outer covering; the citta is the essence. The Four Noble Truths concern the citta; is known via the citta; is attained by the citta. Dukkha is extinguished by the citta. The citta is like the body’s main office. It is there that both Nibbāna and vaṭṭsamsāra are encountered. When the citta is released (Thai: lut phon) Nibbāna is realized, and we are no longer bound by the cycles of rebirth.

Consider carefully—in conventional language Nibbāna and vaṭṭsamsāra are entirely different. However, if that is the case, how can we extinguish [suffering]? However, in dharmic language Nibbāna and vaṭṭsamsāra occupy the same space so to extinguish samsāra is to realize Nibbāna. When I speak in this manner, I am accused of heterodoxy, of abandoning Buddhism and the teachings of the Buddha and merely presenting my own views. No matter, It is a sacrifice I am willing to make. That which is easy and convenient without pain and forbearance brings only little wisdom; but, if one endures a great deal one gains much merit.

Finally, I am accused of being out of my mind for saying, “the more one studies the Tipiṭaka the more one misunderstands Buddhism.” People curse me, saying that I demean the Tipiṭaka, but in their preoccupation with studying the texts, they do not practice. The more they study the Tipiṭaka the less they know about Buddhism. They have only book knowledge and fail to understand the truth which must be known by the heart (cai). They ask what one must study to know Buddhism. The more they study the texts the less they understand the Dharma. To understand Buddhism is to understand the nature of life. To say that excessive study of the Tipiṭaka detracts from really understanding Buddhism is a dharmic language claim not a conventional statement. In the scriptures the Buddha says, “One who studies the Tipiṭaka with an empty mind does not understand the Dharma.” One does not have to read all the Tipiṭaka to understand the Dharma. There is another kind of Tipiṭaka—the essence of the text in one’s heart-mind (Thai, cit-cai). It knows no ending. The written text can, in fact, conceal the Dharma. To read the Tipiṭaka as literature is not to understand its dharmic nature. (dhammajāti).

By studying nature (dhammajāti), one quickly discovers the Dharma. You cannot really understand Buddhism by listening to my lectures or reading my writings. To really understand the Dharma you must truly understand yourself and your own fundamental nature. It is all right to stop reading dharmic texts but not the text of yourself—your body, feelings and heart-mind. There you will discover the Four Noble Truths. This knowledge surpasses all the books in your library. Study the Tipiṭaka in order to understand the Dharma in nature—the elements, the five aggregates and so forth. In nature one discovers the Dharma.
Sulak Sivaraksa's 82 years show no sign of slowing him down. The prominent Buddhist activist from Thailand continues to travel the world lecturing and publishing, mentoring young activists at home and abroad, and participating in groundbreaking inter-religious dialogues. He also works across a number of spiritual, humanitarian, cultural, and environmental movements. And from his home in Bangkok Sivaraksa still supports the many organisations he has founded, including the International Network of Engaged Buddhists.

Sulak also continues his role as a key intellectual speaking out about ecological suffering and sustainability. And when speaking of ecology, he starts by articulating the Buddhist understanding of interdependence (Pali: paticcassamuppāda). Like the notion of interconnectedness in deep ecology, Buddhists assert phenomena exist in mutual dependence; from a plant seed to animals to human beings to the mind itself, all of existence comes into being dependent upon a complex matrix of causes and conditions.

Sulak's own elder and Buddhist teacher, the late Bhikkhu Buddhadasa, asserted that to see profoundly the totality of Nature was to realise the ultimate truth of the Buddha's teachings. Buddhadasa had a deep impact on Sulak. Realising how we as individuals, and the entire world around us, are not independent entities, but rather depend upon a multiplicity of conditions, gives rise to a deep sense of responsibility and ethical behaviour. Buddhadasa stressed that it is impossible to act selfishly if one were to realise this deep interdependence.

Sulak's writings and activism have their foundation in a reinterpretation of traditional Buddhist teachings applied to modern socio-economic, ecological, and political dilemmas, which he develops fully in *Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society* and his most recent book *The Wisdom of Sustainability*, in which he elaborates on E.F Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered* – two of over 100 books and monographs in Thai and English that he has now authored.

With a concern for the preservation of Indigenous forms of knowledge, promotion of social justice, and protection of the environment, throughout the 1970s and 1980s Sulak established cultural organisations, founded and/or wrote for many widely respected journals and magazines, and organised activist groups, all of which formed the basis upon which Thailand's robust network of non-governmental organisations currently exist. He
also established a publishing house and bookstores. Sulak generated meaningful impact though rural and urban community programmes, gave political voice to the poor and displaced, and effectively challenged environmentally destructive pipelines and dams in northern Thailand.

During the 1980s and 1990s a number of monks in Thailand built upon Sulak’s training and encouragement by developing creative responses to the clear-cutting of forests – these eco-monks ordained trees, sanctifying them with monastic robes to serve as a reminder that to cut the forests contravened Buddhist principles. They were successful, though not without the accompanying arrests of both monks and lay activists. Sulak sent lawyers to argue for those in custody. The eco-monks inspired Sulak in two principal ways; the first was that his own Buddhist identity deepened, and secondly, Sulak found new ways to articulate his views on alternatives to consumerism, including establishing the Spirit in Education Movement (SEM) College.

Today Sulak still lives in his traditional teak family home in the centre of Bangkok. His home serves as a physical and intellectual retreat from where his socially-engaged Buddhism has radiated for four decades. His work has been acknowledged with nominations for the Nobel Peace Prize (1993 and 1994), and awards including the Right Livelihood Award (1995) in Sweden and the Niwano Peace Prize (2011) in Japan. His speeches and writings, attacking Thailand’s generals and politicians, and suggesting the King should be open to criticism, have landed him in trouble with authorities forcing him to have to flee his home into exile on two occasions (1976–77 and 1991–94), leaving his wife and family behind, in order to escape arrest.

Today, Sulak’s home continues to be a refuge and hub of activity for refugees, poets, writers, artists, activists, nuns and monks, and other intellectuals with Sulak in the centre of it all. His friends and associates are a global community of varied religious faiths and political stripes.

He locates the genesis of today’s environmental crisis and ecological suffering—from the damming of rivers to climate change, from our petrol dependency to hydraulic fracking, from Bangkok’s urbanisation to endangered flora and fauna around the world—squarely in the lap of free-market capitalists and consumerists.

“I explicitly name capitalism because without doing so any critique will be simply abstract, moralistic and toothless,” Sulak recently wrote. “Ecological suffering is the result of systemic violence rooted in the global political economy.”

What is the root cause of ecological suffering? Sulak returns to his Buddhist upbringing, though with his 21st century take on things, to explain: “Greed is clearly personified in capitalism and consumerism. Human beings are taught to worship money, worldly sciences and technological advance, at the expense of human development and the spiritual dimension of men and women. Descartes said “cogito ergo sum – I think therefore I am.” I feel that he started the Western dilemma that has now come to the core concept of consumerism, which says ‘I buy therefore I am.’”

Despite the grave ecological suffering wrought by consumerism, Sulak has not lost hope: “To counteract these global forces, we need to walk a different path from the one offered by capitalism. The teaching we need in order to walk this path already exists. The challenge facing humanity is not the development of more and more technology, markets and bureaucracies but the spiritual development of wisdom and compassion.”

Sulak is quick to advise us to return to what sustains every individual – the breath. By connecting with the breath of life through meditation, this is where Sulak stresses activists, organisers, politicians, nuns and monks must start, and return to, in order for their work to remain non-violent and have long-lasting results.

“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 in the world.”

Coupled with one’s inner meditation practice, through sustained outward efforts within society, Sulak believes a positive course can be charted. He advises and promotes on a wide range of projects including eco-villages, organic and ecological small-scale farming, local ecosystem conservation, urban gardening, food security projects, and indigenous knowledge system support and community forestry. His multi-disciplinary approach brings together those working in the environmental, cultural and political spheres, and has brought about many positive results over the years. Sulak is a symbol of synthesis between action and contemplation and an inspiration at home and around the world.

Matteo Pistono is the author of Fearless in Tibet and In the Shadow of the Buddha. www.matteopistono.com
Politics In The Bay of Bengal: Curbing Violence; Enhancing Harmony

By Chandra Muzaffar

This paper I shall attempt to analyze the underlying causes of tension and violence between Buddhists and Muslims in three countries around the Bay of Bengal, namely, Thailand, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Are there certain common threads that run through the three cases? How have geopolitical factors impacted upon Buddhist-Muslim relations?

I shall also examine how governments and people in the region have addressed challenges arising from relations between the two communities. This will include the role played by civil society actors. The paper will end with reflections on Buddhist-Muslim relations in the context of a changing world.

Thailand.

Of the three countries around the Bay of Bengal, it is the conflict involving Thai Buddhists and Malay Muslims in Southern Thailand which has been going on for the longest while. It has its roots in the Thai (Siamese) conquest of the independent Malay Sultanate of Pattani in 1785. Right from the beginning, the Malay Muslims of Pattani resisted Siamese Buddhist rule as evidenced in rebellions in 1791 and 1808. However, the Thai rulers maintained their grip and further consolidated their position through the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909 which acknowledged a segment of the area covered by the old Sultanate --- known today as Pattani, Yala, Narathiwat, Satun and Songkla --- as part of the Thai kingdom.

Because Thai rulers, especially some of the authoritarian military strongmen in the post second world war decades sought to assimilate Malay Muslims into the Thai way of life, resentment on the part of the latter gave rise to a series of liberation movements such as the Barisan Revolusi Nasional Pattani Melayu (BRN) in 1960, the Pattani United Liberation Organisation (PULO) in 1968 and BERSATU in 1989. These movements pursued their goal of an independent nation called Pattani Darul-salam through violence, and the Thai state also responded with force. The level of violence on both sides has ebbed and flowed over the decades.

After a lull of sorts for a few years in the nineteen nineties, which seemed to coincide with the growth of democracy in Thailand, a new round of violence suddenly erupted in January 2004. It began “when an organized group of more than 50 men, according to some sources, raided an army depot in Narathiwat killing four soldiers and stealing some 100 rifles and a large quantity of ammunitions. Eighteen schools were also simultaneously set alight in what appeared to be well-coordinated attacks. Immediately after this incident more violence broke out with acts of arson, drive-by shootings and attacks against government officials and property.” The kidnapping of a Muslim human rights lawyer who was defending some alleged Muslim terrorists, the arbitrary arrest and detention of a number of so-called Muslim militants and the inspection of mosques and madrasas (Islamic religious schools) by Thai officials, further exacerbated the situation.

To make matters worse, Thai security forces “killed 107 suspected militants, many of whom were members of a local soccer team, who were accused of planning acts of terrorism. Thirty-two were gunned down inside the historic Krue Se Mosque in Pattani” in April 2004. Though a government commission of inquiry...
found security personnel guilty of excessive force against
the militants, Krue Se engendered a lot of anger against
the government among the Muslims.

Muslim anger reached a crescendo when another
incident happened in October 2004. While “trying to
break up a demonstration at the Tak Bai Police Station by
about 1500 protesters who were demanding the release of
six men accused of giving weapons to Islamic militants
Thai security forces shot dead six protesters and detained
over one thousand three hundred people. The detainees
were then stacked like logs into a number of military
trucks and transferred to a military camp on a journey
which lasted as long as five hours for some of the detainees.
Many later alleged that they were maltreated and even
tortured and abused by the Thai security forces while
under detention. As a result of this, almost 80 people died
of suffocation while there were also claims that many
more had been left unaccounted.” The Tak Bai incident
ignited a huge international outcry especially in the Muslim
world. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was harshly
condemned by groups and individuals right across the
globe; The prime minister’s image was in tatters.

As expected, Tak Bai generated even more acts
of violence from both the militants and the government.
In March 2012, for instance the militants coordinated
car-bomb attacks in various parts of the South. The
government now deploys about 60,000 security personnel
in the three Malay Muslim provinces of Patani, Yala and
Narathiwat. It has been estimated that since 2004, some
6,000 people have been killed in the conflict, 60% of them
Muslim and about 40% Buddhist.

The question that one should ask at this point is
this: What are the underlying causes of violence and
conflict in Southern Thailand? Some of the answers have
already been provided. The conquest of an independent
entity with a different religion, culture and language
which wants to maintain its own identity is an important
explanation for the unending conflict. The situation has
been exacerbated by concerted attempts by Thai elites, at
different times, to assimilate Malay Muslims into what
they regard as the nation’s identity. It arises from an
inability on the part of the Thai elite to appreciate the fact
that because of the way they perceive and practice their
religion, Malay Muslims may exhibit a strong antipathy
towards certain symbols, rituals and forms associated
with the Thai Buddhist majority. The well-known Thai
Malay-Muslim intellectual, Dr. Surin Pitsuwan --- one of
Thailand’s most effective inter-ethnic, inter-religious
bridge-builders --- has provided a number of examples of
a collision as it were between two different cosmologies.
He recounts an incident way back from 1983 when
Ministry of Education officials in Bangkok thought it was
alright to place a Buddha image beside the flagpole
during the morning ceremony of singing the national
anthem in those schools where there were also many
Muslim students. In more recent years, Muslim villagers re-
ceiving personal loans have been charged interest (usury)
and scholarships awarded to students have been drawn
from legalized gambling funds. This lack of sensitivity to
the religious sentiments of a minority is sometimes the
product of a majoritarian psychology. It feeds the drive
towards assimilation which is one of the causes of the
alienation of the Malay Muslim in the South.

When the drive towards assimilation is
accompanied by authoritarian elite postures and policies,
there is a real danger of serious damage to inter-ethnic
relations. This happened when Thaksin Shinawatra was
in power in the years leading to the tragic events of 2004.
According to a researcher he "resorted to combative
measures to tackle problems in the South, refusing to
negotiate and compromise. He ordered the dissolution of
the Southern Border Provinces Administrative Centre on
April 1, 2002 and transferred the then Army Chief,
Fourth Army Commander, Defense Minister, Provincial
Governors, the Police Chief and Interior Minister to other
posts and filled the vacancies with his close confidants
who would comply to his demand for a quick solution.”
He ignored wise counsel on the resolution of the problems
of the South in a peaceful manner. Instead, he initiated
draconian measures and declared an emergency which
further estranged the Malay Muslim population. This
explains in part the abysmal performance of his party, the
Thai Rak Thai, (TRT) in the Malay Muslim provinces in
the February 2005 General Election. Although TRT "won
overwhelmingly in all of Thailand securing more than a
two-thirds majority, it suffered a major setback in the
southern provinces where it lost all but one constituency."

That the authoritarian approach is counter-
productive becomes obvious when one contrasts it with
the relative success of accommodative, conciliatory
measures adopted within a democratic framework in
addressing Malay Muslim challenges in Thailand. Such
measures related to the acceptance of Islamic banking practices, the introduction of organized halal certification, and the streamlining of religious education, instituted in the democratic ethos of the nineties, have been among some of the attempts to provide Malay Muslims in the South with a sense of belonging to the larger Thai nation. Malay Muslims themselves have sought to advance their needs and interests through articulation and action via the democratic process.

It was not just Shinawatra’s authoritarianism that turned the Malay Muslims against him. His open support for the Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 and his readiness to send Thai soldiers to fight under the banner of the invader disappointed and angered a lot of Muslims in the country. It was partly because of strong Muslim opposition that the Thai contingent was withdrawn from Iraq within a year.

So far I have only looked at those causes of the Thai Buddhist-Malay Muslim conflict which are connected to the Thai State and the Thai elites. But Malay Muslims opposed to the State are also responsible in a sense for the perpetuation of the conflict. Apart from their resort to violence, with all its dire consequences for the people in the region and the nation as a whole, many of the militant groups also subscribe to ideas about Islam and society which appear to be exclusive rather than inclusive, parochial rather than universal, retrogressive rather than progressive. There is some evidence to suggest that this is the result of the exposure of some of the key elements in these groups to narrow, conservative teachings associated with some of the madrasas in the three provinces, apart from Islamic institutions in South Asia and West Asia. In more concrete language, there is a Wahabi strain in the ideological outlook of a significant segment of the movement for the independence of the southern provinces. It is this outlook that hinders and hampers the ability of its leaders and followers to understand and empathize with the Buddhist Other.

Myanmar

There are some important parallels between Thailand and Myanmar as my analysis of the conflict in Myanmar will reveal. But before that, I shall present a brief overview of the conflict itself --- a conflict between a largely Buddhist elite and a Muslim ethnic minority known as the Rohingyas. It is this conflict that has captured media headlines in various parts of the world in the last few years.

Discrimination against the Rohingyas, in a sense, began soon after a Burmese king annexed Arakan (now known as Rakhine) in 1784, the province in which the Rohingyas have lived for centuries, perhaps since the eighth century. There were episodes of violence though there were also long periods of relative harmony between Rohingyas and Buddhists in Rakhine and between Muslims and Buddhists in the rest of Myanmar. In fact, in the early years of independence, Rohingyas were recognized as full citizens and participated in various sectors of national life, including politics and culture, apart from the economy. They served in parliament and held positions in the country’s security forces and other ministries. Their language was broadcasted over the national broadcasting service three times a week and they were permitted to form their own communal, professional and student associations bearing the name “Rohingya,” and above all, granted a special administrative region for the two large pockets in western Burma made up of 70 percent Rohingya Muslims. Of course, the Rohingyas, given their long association with commerce, were economically active in Rakhine and in Myanmar as a whole.

Things began to change for the Rohingyas in early 1978. In the guise of a crackdown on illegal immigrants, the government started to target Rohingyas. 200,000 of them were forced to leave and relocate in Bangladesh. Their specific ethno-cultural identity was denied and they were labelled “Bengalis” since some recently domiciled groups in Rakhine had links with Bangladesh, the nation with which Rakhine shares a border. This operation against the Rohingyas culminated in a 1982 law which formally removed them from the list of officially recognized ethnic and religious minorities. It implied that Rohingyas qua Rohingyas were no longer citizens of Myanmar! In its recently concluded population census from 30 March 2014 to 10 April 2014 --- the first in three decades --- the Myanmar government refused to recognize the Rohingyas as a distinct ethnic group.

It is the abrogation of their status as citizens which sounded the death-knell for the Rohingyas. Since 1982 there has been systematic marginalization and even oppression of this minority. It is important to emphasize at this point that it was a harsh, authoritarian military government that stripped the Rohingyas of their citizenship.
For more than three decades, they have been subjected to what the well-known scholar-activist from Myanmar, Maung Zarni, describes as “a government-organized, systematic campaign of mass killing, terror, torture, attempts to prevent births, forced labor, severe restrictions on physical movement, large-scale internal displacement of an estimated 140,000 people, sexual violence, arbitrary arrest, summary execution, land-grabbing and community destruction.” It is because of the disastrous impact of all this that life conditions for the Rohingyas are abysmal. Zarni highlights that their “doctor-patient ratio is 1:80,000 (the national average is about 1: 400), the infant mortality rate is three times the country’s average, and 90 percent of Rohingyas are deliberately left illiterate in a country with one of the highest adult literacy rates in all of Asia.”

It explains why in the last twenty to thirty years there has been a mass exodus of Rohingyas to a number of countries, notably, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Australia, Canada and Saudi Arabia. The exodus, Zarni argues, is a direct consequence of all the acts of commission and omission against this minority of 1.3 million people. He asserts boldly that, “The military-controlled state of Myanmar --- now headed by ex-general Thein Sein and his quasi-civilian government in Naypyidaw --- has both paved the way for and carried out ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya. Ethnocide of the Rohingyas has empowered the racist, ultra-nationalists among the local Buddhist Rakhine, national leaders and Buddhist society at large to dehumanize the Rohingyas.”

It is against this backdrop that one should view the serious eruptions of violence that have occurred in recent years. In June 2012 for instance a number of Muslim males were killed when angry Buddhist mobs attacked a bus incensed by a baseless allegation that some passengers on that bus had raped and murdered a young Buddhist woman. In October of the same year there was another violent clash that resulted in the death of more than a hundred people mostly Rohingya. There was another major episode in March 2013 that began in the district of Meikhtila. It resulted in forty-four deaths. 2014 has also witnessed violence between the two communities.

What are the principal causes of this continuous turmoil and violence?

As in the case of Thailand, the annexation and incorporation of a kingdom populated by a numerically significant ethnic and religious community that is distinct and different from the kingdom that had invaded the former appears to have been a contributory factor. But unlike Thailand, the minority in question was at various points in history --- and certainly in the first couple of decades after Independence --- accepted into the mainstream which might suggest that the genesis of the conflict did not have that great an impact.

It is equally significant that the acceptance of the Rohingyas coincided more or less with that period in Myanmar’s political history before the military which usurped power in 1962 succeeded in tightening its grip upon authority. The earlier part of this period especially between 1948 and 1958 when Myanmar was a parliamentary democracy was a time when not only the Rohingyas but also other minorities such as the Shans, Kachins, Chins and Karens had some political and cultural space to articulate their rights and to protect their identities. It shows that ethnic minorities are relatively safer and more secure within a democratic framework, as the Thai experience also proves to a limited degree.

Needless to say, Myanmar establishes yet again that military authoritarianism --- this is also true of Thailand --- is the greatest challenge to the integrity of minority groups like the Rohingyas. Indeed, the situation is much worse in Myanmar for a majoritarian military mindset has been wedded to an ideology that unashamedly expresses hate and fear towards a small, weak and helpless minority. It is this politics of hate and fear that has spawned an ethnocide that is riddled with religious bigotry. The Muslim dimension of Rohingya identity has become the object of a form of Islamophobia.

This is why right at the forefront of this virulent campaign against Rohingya Muslims and Muslims in general in Myanmar are some Buddhist monks with substantial followings like Ashin Wirathu of Mandalay who in his speeches has presented Muslims --- given their alleged fertility --- as a huge demographic threat to the Buddhist majority. He has also railed against the Muslim role in the economy. The 969 movement of which he is a leading light seeks to discourage Buddhists from patronizing Muslim businesses and wants the State to impose severe restrictions upon Buddhist-Muslim marriages. That the 969 movement is growing is an indication of the danger posed by ethno-religious chauvinism parading as Buddhist nationalism in an ethnically and religiously diverse society. Wirathu and
others of his ilk have succeeded to some extent in fusing rabid ethnicity with religious bigotry --- a combustible combination which threatens to subvert some other societies too in Asia and elsewhere.

It is partly because of the ethno-religious chauvinism of some monks and a segment of Buddhist society that a section of the Rohingyas and Muslims in Myanmar have begun to adopt more exclusive and antagonistic positions on issues pertaining to religion. They are reluctant to reach out to Buddhists in their neighborhood and work-place. They have become increasingly susceptible to narrow, sometimes even fanatical interpretations of Islam propagated by Wahabi preachers and the like.

What this suggests is that popular sentiments among Buddhists and, to an extent, Muslim Rohingyas do not condone towards the promotion of better understanding and harmony between the two communities. Because these sentiments are not only pervasive but also entrenched, politicians seeking power and position in the forthcoming general elections in 2015 will not dare to swim against the tide. On the contrary, most of them are already exploiting and manipulating religious and ethnic emotions for votes. The party linked to the ruling elite for instance, the Union Solidarity and Development Party, is projecting itself as the true defender of Burmese Buddhist identity. Even the National League for Democracy (NLD) of Aung San Suu Kyi which enjoys some support among the Rohingyas has maintained a deafening silence in the face of their persecution because it needs the endorsement of the majority Buddhist community especially the Buddhist clergy. This shows that while democracy allows for the representation of community interests, the electoral process sometimes serves as a conduit for the escalation of religious and ethnic emotions which in turn leads to a deterioration in inter-community relations. In other words, electoral democracy can also be a cause for inter-religious tensions and inter-ethnic ruptures.

This brings us to yet another cause which, in a manner of speaking, lies outside Myanmar. Geopolitical rivalries may also be responsible for the perpetuation of the conflict between a segment of the Buddhist community and the Rohingyas. For more than a decade and a half now, the United States has been concerned about what it perceives as growing Chinese influence over the government of Myanmar. This influence manifests itself in various ways, especially through Chinese investments in infrastructure development, trade and aid. China has also developed extensive linkages with plans and projects aimed at harnessing Myanmar’s rich, untapped resources. Given Myanmar’s strategic location vis-à-vis the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean, the US is apprehensive that China may use its economic ties with Myanmar to extend its reach into the Bay and the Ocean. This could have an adverse impact upon the US’s dominant position in the Indian Ocean --- reflected in its base in Diego Garcia --- and its global hegemony.

This is why when the Myanmar government itself under Thien Sein began to open up to the US mainly because it did not want to become overly dependent on just one big power --- its neighbor to the North --- the US seized the opportunity to cultivate good ties with a nation it had shunned for decades. While developing these ties, the US, has through some NGOs such as the Soros outfits and the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) continued to support the Rohingyas and other minorities. Going on the basis of how the US Administration has operated in other countries, its support for the Rohingyas is a subtle warning to the Myanmar government that it should not tilt too far towards Beijing; otherwise the US will create problems for her through other channels. To put it in another way, it is quite conceivable that in order to ensure it has influence over Myanmar, the US may want the Rohingyas to continue to stand up to the Myanmar government. It would not be the first time that support for a genuine human rights cause also serves a geopolitical agenda.

Sri Lanka.

From Myanmar to Sri Lanka, there are some similarities in some of the causes behind Buddhist-Muslim tensions. I shall analyze these similarities after I have looked at the nature of the conflict itself between elements from the two communities.

In the last two years in particular, Muslims who constitute 9 percent of the Sri Lankan population have been the target of a campaign with Buddhist monks at the core that seeks to marginalize and suppress them. Mosques have been vandalized and defaced. Women wearing the hijab have been harassed. Buddhists have been discouraged from patronizing Muslim owned restaurants and shops. Muslims have been pushed out of
The Christian minority, it should be observed, has also been targeted as evidenced by attacks upon churches and pastors. Because Buddhism has been dragged into this present phase of Sinhalese chauvinism, Buddhist monks are in the forefront of concerted moves to demonize Muslims and Islam. Given their moral stature, their stance has had a negative impact upon inter-ethnic relations. As antipathy towards Muslims grows among the people, politicians are also exploiting communal sentiments for political gain. A few ministers in the government of president Rajapaksa have been openly playing the anti-Muslim card.

Of course, there are both monks and politicians who argue that increasing Wahabi type thinking and practices among Sri Lankan Muslims have also exacerbated the situation. Money and missionaries from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies are the source. It is said that wealthy Saudis have also been buying land and properties from Sinhalese some of which are then converted to mosques and madrasas. If one reflected upon these causes, one would realize that there are some similarities to Myanmar. Majoritarian chauvinism would be one of them. The role of monks and politicians would be another. The growth of narrow, exclusive attitudes among the Muslim minority would be a third parallel. There is perhaps a fourth parallel related to geopolitics.

Like the Myanmar government, the Rajapaksa presidency has also developed close ties to Beijing. In fact, the war brought Rajapaksa closer to Beijing as China became one of the main suppliers of weapons to the government. Sri Lankan naval facilities have also been made available to Chinese warships. Expanding military ties between the two nations should be viewed in the light of growing Sri Lanka-China trade and economic exchanges. The US, needless to say, is uneasy about this bilateral relationship. So is Britain. It is one of the reasons why both these countries and other Western states are targeting Sri Lanka on its human rights record. They have been extremely critical of Sri Lanka’s alleged suppression of, and discrimination against, the Tamil minority during and after the war. Now they are focusing upon the government’s alleged failure to protect the Muslim minority. Once again, a nation’s human rights performance is on the radar screen --- perhaps for valid reasons --- but areas where they have been living for hundreds of years. Buddhists have been advised not to take contraceptive pills because the Muslim birthrate is allegedly much higher and they will one day take over Sri Lanka and make it into an “Islamic State.”

At the center of this campaign is the drive to rid the country of halal certification. Some Buddhists argue that requiring shops and supermarkets to carry the halal label is an unjust imposition of an Islamic tenet upon the ninety-one percent non-Muslim population. The halal issue has divided society and intensified negative sentiments towards the Muslim minority.

The group behind the halal issue, the Bodu Bala Sena (BBS) is the most radical anti-Muslim group in Sri Lanka today. Its leader is a Buddhist monk, Galagod Aththe Gnanasara Thero who has developed a significant following through his pronouncements and actions which denigrate the Muslims and Christians while seeking to glorify Buddhism and Sinhala identity. The BBS and Gnanasara insist that the purity of Sri Lanka as a Buddhist, Sinhalese state should be protected and preserved from the pollution of minorities such as the Muslims who are determined to clinging on to their own way of life.

And indeed, for some Buddhists in Sri Lanka it is the Muslim attachment to halal products, a distinct attire for women, a notion of identity that separates the latter from the former, which is the real problem. The Muslims, they allege, do not want to conform to the demands of a Buddhist state. It has given rise to tensions and conflicts between the majority and the minority.

What explains the deteriorating relationship between a segment of the Sinhalese, Buddhist population and the Muslim community? Perhaps the most important reason is linked indirectly to the decades-long conflict between the Sinhalese and the Tamils which was to all intents and purposes a full-blown civil war. The war and the military defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 2009 appears to have boosted Sinhalese pride and confidence which within certain sections of the populace has morphed into a sort of chauvinism. It is a chauvinism which insists upon privileging the position of the Sinhalese Buddhist in society and finds its ultimate expression in the idea of a Sinhalese Buddhist state that marginalizes its non-Buddhist minorities. The Muslim minority with its somewhat distinct identity has borne the brunt of this post-war Sinhalese Buddhist chauvinism.
Muslim religious leaders themselves.

Seven, democratic governance may in some instances help to reduce tensions, reconcile antagonistic positions and offer solutions to inter-ethnic conflicts. But when mass sentiments are mobilized along ethnic lines, democracy becomes a conduit for the articulation of base communal feelings which invariably threaten inter-ethnic peace.

The Geopolitical Dimension.

Outside domestic politics, there is yet another common thread which this analysis has revealed. This is the geopolitical dimension of the conflicts in the region. In both Myanmar and Sri Lanka ---- less obvious in the case of Thailand --- Buddhist-Muslim tensions are now enmeshed in the larger struggle for geopolitical influence in the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean between an established superpower and an emerging world power.

The US, there is no need to repeat, is as determined as ever to maintain its dominance over the Indian Ocean and will brook no rival. This is a crucial aspect of its "Pivot to Asia", euphemistically described today as "rebalancing." Since the US perpetuates dominance partly through regimes that are allied to it, the present inclination of the governments in Myanmar and Sri Lanka --- as I have noted --- is not to its liking. This is why it is quite conceivable that the US Administration will continue to be actively involved in the politics of the two countries.

China, on the other hand, realizes that as its economic muscles get stronger, it needs greater access to both resources and routes. Its ties with Myanmar ensures the first while its relationship to Sri Lanka facilitates the second. As it seeks access, China is bound to collide with the superpower that is bent upon perpetuating its hegemonic control. At the moment, there has been no open flare-up between the two in the Indian Ocean --- unlike the South China Sea or the North China Sea where skirmishes between the Philippines and China, on the one hand, and Japan and China, on the other, conceal and camouflage deeper tensions between the US and China.

However, the danger of a more insidious conflict between the two is ever present. In order to curb and control the growing influence of China in Asia, the US elite may choose to employ a tactic that most imperial powers have resorted to in their desire to perpetuate their
hegemony. It may play community against community, religious group against religious group in different countries in the region. In other words, it could embark upon a policy of “divide and rule.” Muslims and Buddhists --- more than other religious communities in Asia --- should be cognizant of this. In a number of countries all over the continent, Buddhists are the majority and Muslims are a minority and vice-versa. In the three countries that are part of this study, for instance, Buddhists are the majority community while Muslims are a minority. However, in Indonesia and Malaysia, Muslims are in the majority and Buddhists are a minority group. It is significant, that in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) with its 600 million inhabitants, 42% are Muslim and 40% are Buddhist. If Muslims and Buddhists are embroiled in continuous friction and conflict not only will individual ASEAN states suffer but ASEAN as a regional entity will also be crippled.

This will only serve the interests of those who want to see ASEAN sapped of its strength. China will be deeply concerned if ASEAN is in turmoil. When your neighborhood is in chaos, your own peace and stability will be adversely affected. This is why it is critical that Muslims and Buddhists who live cheek by jowl, within and without ASEAN, develop harmonious relations between them. They should not allow anyone to exploit their differences with the aim of controlling and dominating their societies.

Addressing Challenges.

How will Buddhists and Muslims cultivate harmonious relations? How much has been done so far to overcome the challenges facing the two communities? I shall first focus upon the efforts of governments, inter-governmental organizations and international bodies and then examine the contributions of civil society actors, specifically NGOs.

Governments, Inter-Governmental Organizations and International Bodies.

Since the sixties the Thai government has made attempts to solve the conflict in southern Thailand. These attempts have come in fits and starts. The first serious endeavor to address the root causes of the conflict and propose viable short-term and long-term remedies was through the establishment of a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) in March 2005. The NRC chaired by a former Prime Minister, Anand Panyarachun had representatives from different religious and ethnic backgrounds. One-third of its members were Muslims from the South. Buddhist monks, social activists, academics and other public figures were also members of the NRC.

The NRC submitted its report to the Thaksin government in June 2006. It produced some outstanding recommendations. It proposed the establishment of a Strategic Administrative Center for Southern Border Provinces. Through this center, the local population in the South, specifically the Malay Muslims of Yala, Narathiwat and Pattani, would manage their own affairs. The Pattani-Malay language would be recognized as a working language in the three Malay majority provinces. Aspects of Islamic law would also be applied. The NRC also suggested ways of dealing with the problem of unemployment, of improving the education system and of building confidence in the judicial process. It called upon the authorities to act decisively against state officials who abuse their power. The NRC even urged the state to engage with the militant groups through sustained dialogue.

Unfortunately, the NRC’s enlightened report was never implemented. It became a victim of Thailand’s highly charged, partisan, divisive politics. Since 2006, it is this divisive politics that has taken center stage. Now a military junta is back in the saddle of power. It is doubtful if it would be inclined to address the challenge of the South. Consolidating its own power would be its main preoccupation.

In passing, it should be observed that over the last 20 years or so, there have been moves to involve the Malaysian government obliquely in the challenge of restoring peace and stability in the South. The Malaysian government has been receptive to these overtures but the complexity of the situation especially the problem of identifying the real leaders of the militant groups, and the approach adopted by some elements in the Thai security hierarchy who place a high premium on law and order above everything else, have stymied these efforts.

When one compares Thailand to Myanmar, one gets the impression that the Myanmar government is not even prepared to acknowledge that there are issues connected to the Rohingyaas that should be addressed. It has denied that certain massacres ever took place. Even when it admits that the security forces had killed Rohingyas,
there is hardly any attempt to prosecute the wrongdoers. This is one of the reasons why some analysts have concluded that the state is complicit in at least some of the massacres.

The Myanmar government is also hostile towards any attempt to involve so-called “outsiders” in resolving the Rohingya issue. ASEAN of which Myanmar is a member has not been allowed to discuss the plight of the Rohingyas, mainly because of the staunch opposition from the Myanmar government. It is only on the sidelines of ASEAN summits or other conferences that other ASEAN leaders have tried to talk to the Myanmar president about his country’s treatment of the Rohingyas. Besides, it should be remembered that ASEAN itself has a fundamental rule about “non-interference” in the internal affairs of member states.

Another inter-governmental organization, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), was also given the cold shoulder when it attempted to seek some answers to questions about the Rohingyas. When a delegation from the OIC led by its then Secretary-General, Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, visited riot-hit areas and Rohingya refugee camps in Rakhine in November 2013, it was greeted by anti-OIC demonstrators opposed to the visit. It is suspected that the demonstration was organized with the connivance of the government.

The government also rejected outright the resolution of the United Nations General Assembly’s human rights committee of 19 November 2013 which urged the Myanmar government to grant citizenship to the stateless Rohingyas. The resolution also asked the government to curb violence against Muslims.

It is apparent that while the Myanmar government does not want to come to grips with the question of citizenship for the Rohingyas, it will not accept advice or guidance from any regional, inter-governmental or international organization. Perhaps it knows that its quiet defiance of world opinion will not result in sanctions being imposed against it or in other punitive measures for the simple reason that everyone is now vying to invest in resource-rich Myanmar.

The attitude of the Sri Lankan government towards the problem of rising tensions between the Buddhist majority and the Muslim minority is not very positive either. True, it recognizes that there have been incidents which have led to a deterioration in inter-religious ties. But the government does not act firmly and decisively against the guilty. Indeed, there have been occasions when law enforcement agencies appear to be reluctant to rein in an overtly aggressive monk or a Muslim baiting politician. This has given rise to allegations that certain ministers and public officials are complicit. They are protecting or even encouraging BBS. It explains why the state appears to lack the political will to fight hate speech and acts of sacrilege against the Muslim minority.

Like their Myanmar counterparts, the Sri Lankan elites also bristle at criticisms from “outsiders.” Individual Western governments have been taken to task for their comments on the country just as the Sri Lankan government was offended by the OIC’s condemnation of its handling of the Muslim minority. A number of UN human rights experts and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights have also incurred the wrath of Sri Lankan officials for their negative views on the Sri Lankan government’s human rights record vis-a-vis its Muslim minority.

While a lot of these criticisms have a basis, one should not be naïve and ignore the possibility --- given other situations --- that there may be some exaggeration. There may not be incontrovertible evidence in some instances to support the contention of some government critics that it is the government that is orchestrating all the attacks against the Muslims. One should also bear in mind that there are external actors who have a stake in chastising and denigrating the Sri Lankan government. As noted previously, it serves their geopolitical agenda.

My analysis has shown that for different reasons the three governments have not done enough to address the challenges related to Buddhist–Muslim ties in their respective countries. Neither are inter-governmental and international organizations in a position to act. This leaves us with civil society actors or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). What have they done to reduce friction and conflict between Buddhists and Muslims in the region and enhance harmony and amity between the two?

**NGOs and the Quest for Muslim-Buddhist Harmony**

NGOs from within and without the region have been vocal articulators on issues pertaining to Buddhist-Muslim relations in Thailand, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Given the breadth of their work, it will not be possible to offer even
a brief review of their activities. What I will do instead is to look at the role played by my own NGO, the International Movement for a Just World (JUST) on the question of Muslim-Buddhist ties for eighteen years. JUST’s modest contribution is in a sense a microcosm of what NGOs as a whole have been doing in this area.

In trying to address challenges faced by the two communities, JUST, a multi-religious international NGO with a Muslim majority based in Malaysia, has partnered a handful of Buddhist NGOs. The International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) has been our constant partner in this endeavor. We have also joined hands with Soka Gakkai Malaysia at various times and cooperated with the Taiwanese Buddhist monk, Master Shin Tao’s Global Family for Love and Peace and his Museum of World Religions in organizing Muslim-Buddhist dialogues in Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta and Paris.

JUST’s first venture into the realm of Buddhist-Muslim dialogue was in 1996 when it joined the Bangkok based Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute, an educational outfit under the spiritual leadership of Ajarn Sulak Sivaraksa, one of the founders of INEB, to convene a conference in Penang, Malaysia on the theme “Alternative Politics for Asia” which sought to establish the relevance of eternal spiritual and moral values garnered from Islam and Buddhism for the transformation of contemporary Asia. Since then JUST has initiated and participated in numerous Buddhist-Muslim dialogues in different parts of the world.

By and large, there are three dimensions to JUST’s approach to Muslim – Buddhist relations which may resonate with the work of other NGOs as well. One, addressing eruptions in relations between the two communities in a fair and equitable manner. Two, proposing mechanisms and instruments to improve relations between Muslims and Buddhists. Three, emphasizing shared values and principles in the philosophies of the two religions that could help to strengthen their bond as they struggle for a more just and compassionate world which enhances the dignity of all living beings.

One, from the very outset, JUST reckoned that eruptions that occur from time to time in the interaction between Buddhists and Muslims will have to be addressed with courage and integrity. Hence, our strong stand against the destruction of the Bamiyan statues in Afghanistan in 2001 which gave birth to JUST’s international campaign on the protection of places of worship that elicited support from a wide spectrum of groups and individuals from all over the world. At the same time, incidents like Tak Bai in Thailand in 2004 or the persecution of the Rohingyas in Myanmar in recent years have also evoked a principled response from JUST. It is because of our just position on what are perceived as Buddhist or Muslim concerns that we have succeeded in gaining the trust of both communities which is a vital prerequisite for keeping the channels of dialogue open.

Two, JUST realizes that it is not enough to take positions on issues of concern. NGOs should also come up with specific ideas on how to resolve inter-religious challenges. This is why in June 2006, JUST, together with the Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute and INEB, proposed the establishment of a Buddhist-Muslim Citizens’ Commission for Southeast Asia in the Dusit Declaration that we adopted at our joint conference. It was hoped that the Commission would help foster “a more inclusive and universal approach to both religions informed by values of justice, compassion and forgiveness.” Unfortunately, the Commission did not take off mainly because of a lack of financial resources. Another attempt is now being made to forge a shared platform. This time, JUST and INEB, have been joined by the New York based Religions for Peace and the Muhammadiyyah movement from Indonesia. The new body is called the Buddhist-Muslim Forum (BMF) and was launched in Sri Lanka in August 2013.

Three, nourishing a more inclusive and universal understanding of Islam and Buddhism is part of a larger mission to convince adherents of both religions that they should connect with the essential values and principles of faith that transcend religious boundaries. JUST has attempted to put across this message through a 1+2+7 formula. What is this formula?

The first principle is that both Islam and Buddhism recognize the primacy of the spiritual and the moral as against the material and the sensate. For Islam, the root of that spiritual basis of human existence is Allah; for Buddhism it is Nibbana. This fundamental principle is linked in turn to two other inter-related principles: the principle of upholding what is right and the principle of prohibiting what is wrong. It is significant that the concept of virtue in Islam and Buddhism bears many
striking similarities. Honesty, truthfulness, kindness, a sense of justice, a feeling of compassion towards the weak are values which both religions cherish.

Justice is the leitmotif of the Quran. Justice was the hallmark of the Buddhist emperor, Asoka. Compassion was the outstanding quality of the Buddha. Every chapter in the Quran, except one, begins with the proclamation, “In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful…”

Equally significant, both Islam and Buddhism adopt a similar position on a whole gamut of vices. It is not just murder or theft or lying that they regard as wrongdoings. Gambling, the consumption of intoxicants and adultery are condemned in the two religions.

The concept of right and wrong found in Islam and Buddhism suggests that the basic moral structure in the two religions is quite similar. Out of this moral structure, I have derived 7 principles applicable to different spheres of living which run parallel in Islam and Buddhism. They are as follows:-

1) Living in harmony with the environment and protecting natural resources for future generations.
2) Establishing government and political authority on a moral basis.
3) Developing the economy guided by ethical principles.
4) Strengthening the family as the moral foundation of society.
5) Reinforcing the integrity and cohesiveness of the community.
6) Ensuring amicable, cordial relations between different religious and cultural communities.
7) Evolving a culture that strengthens human character and fortifies values such as justice, compassion, love, freedom, equality and honesty.

These shared principles and values it should be emphasized do not imply in any way that the two religions are the same. There are vast differences in theology and ritual which distinguish Islam from Buddhism. Nonetheless, they uphold certain ethical concerns which are fundamental to the life of a practicing Muslim or Buddhist.

It is in this regard that the 1+2+7 formula could serve as a basis for Muslim–Buddhist cooperation for the larger good of humankind.

Reflections.

Of course, the 1+2+7 formula will mean little for segments of Buddhists and Muslims in Thailand, Myanmar and Sri Lanka ensnared in friction and conflict. Nonetheless, those of us who are committed to ensuring peace and harmony between Buddhists and Muslims in the region and beyond should not cease to remind both communities of what is good and beautiful in their religions. By the same measure, however difficult the situation may be in some societies, we cannot abandon our duty to speak truth to power --- whether it appears in political or religious garb, at the national or international level.

And the truth will be heard because we live in an age where marginalized, dissident voices can no longer be ignored. If the ravings of bigots sometimes saturate the air, it is because the wise have chosen to remain silent. With all the channels of communication that are available to all of us today, it is an unforgivable sin to remain silent in the face of bigotry and hatred.

For Buddhists and Muslims in the Bay of Bengal nothing is more urgent at this moment than speaking and acting on behalf of justice and compassion --- the sort of justice and compassion that understands the pain of the other.

Chandra Muzaffar, Phd
Malaysia.
2 September 2014.
Jim Blumenthal
(12 August 1967 - 8 October 2014)

Jordan Baskerville

Professor James (Jim) Blumenthal passed away on October 8, 2014 at the age of 47 following a lengthy battle with cancer. Memorial services were held in Madison, Wisconsin; Portland Oregon; and Southern California. He is survived by his wife Tiffany, his son Ben, his parents and his brother Tom.

Jim was born and raised in Southern California and finished his undergraduate degree at the University of San Diego where he first encountered Buddhism. Following his undergraduate studies – by then a Buddhist – Jim spent four years working for Greenpeace as an activist and, as he describes, “was arrested more than ten times for non-violent acts of civil disobedience in defense of the planet.” Jim went on to enroll at University of Wisconsin-Madison as a graduate student in its innovative Buddhist studies program under the guidance of Geshe Lhundhup Sopa. Geshe Sopa, a renowned scholar and monk, was the first Tibetan to receive tenure at an American University and was an active engaged Buddhist peacemaker with the International Peace Council.

As a graduate student, Jim was heavily impacted by his adviser’s wisdom and socially engaged example. At UW-Madison, Jim focused his studies on Indo-Tibetan Buddhism and the work of the legendary Indian master and first abbot of Samye monastery, Śāntarakṣita.

During the course of his career, Jim published dozens of both scholarly and popular articles on a range of Buddhist-related topics including socially engaged Buddhism, Tibetan philosophy, and Buddhist ethics and history. Jim’s doctoral dissertation, a translation and explanation of one of Śāntarakṣita’s most celebrated texts, was expanded and published in 2004 as The Ornament of The Middle Way: A Study of the Madhyamaka Thought of Śāntarakṣita (2004). In 2004, Jim translated Nagarjuna’s Sixty Stanzas of Reasoning for a series of teachings given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Los Angeles. He also recently completed a book with his teacher Geshe Sopa on Je Tsongkhapa’s shamata chapter in the Lamrim Chenmo, called Steps on the Path to Enlightenment: A Commentary on the Lamrim Chenmo, Volume 4: The Perfection of Meditative Stability.

Jim began teaching at Oregon State University after the completion of his Ph.D in 1999. There, he taught courses on Buddhist intellectual history and philosophy, as well as a course on Buddhism, non-violence and social justice that drew from the work of Sulak Sivaraksa, among other thinkers. In 2003, Jim invited Ajahn Sulak to OSU to give the annual Linus Pauling Lecture for World Peace. Jim had a vision for expanding opportunities for the practice and study of Buddhism, and for integrating social engagement and service into that mission. Toward those ends, he helped found the now flourishing Maitripa College in Portland, Oregon whose pillars are ‘scholarship, meditation and service.’ Jim once wrote that Maitripa “is something of an engaged Buddhist graduate school.”

I first met Jim in 2003 as an undergraduate student at OSU and had the honor of taking nearly a dozen classes with him. One of the most striking things about Jim was the exceptional combination of qualities he possessed: an exceedingly deep range of knowledge and understanding about all things Buddhist, coupled with genuine humility, kindness and generosity. To cite one of the many examples of Jim’s magnanimity, when another student and I were interested in studying Tibetan language, we asked Jim about this prospect, and despite having an already full, full-time course schedule, he happily agreed to teach us. Above all else, Jim lived the teachings that he taught and positively influenced the lives of countless students, friends and colleagues alike. His kindness, compassion, wisdom and humility were a constant, and he will be missed.
Rev. Dr. Taitetsu Unno
(5 February 1929 - 13 December 2014)

Mark Unno

Rev. Dr. Taitetsu Unno completed his life journey on Saturday, Dec 13, 2014. To the very end, he was fully aware and at peace, saying, “Thank you for everything, Namu Amida Butsu,” and when he could no longer speak, simply putting his palms together in gassho. His family and close friends who came to visit in his last days and hours experienced the deep joy of being with him and chanting together, immersed in the rhythms of boundless compassion. He received the remarkably good fortune, the great gift of the Dharma, of the life of Namu Amida Butsu, which he was able to share with so many.

He was born in Shojoji temple in Kokura, in the city of Kita-Kyushu, February 5, 1929, the son of Rev. Enryo Unno and Mrs. Hana Unno, the first of five siblings. He arrived in the U.S. in 1935 at the age of six, went through the turbulent years of the Pacific War when he and his family were put into internment camps, first at Rohwer, Arkansas, then at Tule Lake, California. After the war, his family settled in California, where he eventually graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, with a bachelor’s degree in English literature. Well into his eighties, he could recite Chaucer in the original Middle English. It was at the end of his career at Berkeley that he met D. T. Suzuki who encouraged him to study Buddhism in Japan, and Taitetsu Unno went on to receive his M.A. and Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies at Tokyo University in 1968.

For the next forty years, he taught in the field of Buddhist studies, first at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, then for the next thirty-seven years at Smith College, where he served as Department Chair, and was Jill Ker Conway Professor of World Religions. He was also a Visiting Professor at the University of Hawai’i at Manoa, and a Japanese Ministry of Education Fellow in Kyoto, Japan. He was the author, translator, and editor of numerous academic volumes and articles, but he is perhaps best known for his two works introducing Shin Buddhism to English-language audiences, River of Fire, River of Water: An Introduction to the Pure Land Tradition of Shin Buddhism (1998), and Shin Buddhism: Bits of Rubble Turned into Gold (2002), as well as his translation, Tannisho: A Shin Buddhist Classic (1996).

He was the recipient of the Ernest Pon Award of the National Association for Ethnic Studies, for his efforts to increase and retain Asian American faculty among the Five Colleges (1998), the Cultural Award for the Promotion of Buddhism, of the Society for the Promotion of Buddhism (Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai)(2006), and the inaugural President’s Award of the Institute for Buddhist Studies (2014). In addition, he was also a fourth-degree black belt in Aikido, and was the translator and author of the “Foreword” for The Spirit of Aikido by Kisshomaru Ueshiba (1984).

Although prolific as a scholar, his passion was always in teaching and working with his students, many whose lives he helped to transform. Although passionate as a college professor, his calling was as a Buddhist minister, ordained as a Shin Buddhist priest at Nishi Honganji, as the thirteenth-generation Shin priest in his family. He devoted his career to working with Shin temples, Buddhist centers, and Buddhist groups in North America and elsewhere, as much as he did to make contributions in academia. After retiring from Smith College, he and his wife Alice founded the Northampton Shin Buddhist Sangha in Northampton, Massachusetts, which they led until 2007.

For the last seven years of his life, he, his wife, and their beloved dog Metta, a Lhasa Apso, spent their lives with their son Mark and his wife Megumi in Eugene, Oregon, where they continued the work of the BuddhaDharma as a family, leading events in Hawaii, California, and Eugene. His last public appearance was at the Pacific Seminar, held at the Berkeley Buddhist Temple and the Jodo Shinshu Center in Berkeley, California, in July 2014.

With a twinkle in his eye, sharp sense of humor, gentle spirit, and compassionate presence, he left an indelible impression on those who came to know him through his work in all arenas. He is survived by his wife Alice, a retired schoolteacher and Buddhist teacher in her own right; son Mark, the fourteenth-generation Shin minister in his family and also a scholar of Buddhism; daughter-in-law Megumi, a teacher of the Japanese Way of Tea in the Urasenke School; and of course, dog Metta, who truly embodies her Buddhist name, “Loving Kindness.”
Throughout my academic career, I have always taken my mother’s words to heart that “all can be taken away from you, but not your education.” Those words were never truer than during my work experience at the United Nations Secretariat in New York.

Since the last time my mother, my brothers and I were in our beloved country my love for Thailand has only grown. As we have not yet received our orders to return, I had to watch the changes in Thailand from a far away land. With ambition to serve humankind and the people of Thailand, if only in a small way, I became determined to work for the United Nations. Following my graduation from law school, I decided to take a chance at an internship at the United Nations. I submitted my application into the online fray along with hundreds, if not thousands, of others from around the world for a coveted internship. Weeks went by, and to my great delight, I received a response and accepted a position working in the Executive Office of the Secretary General for the Post-2015 Development Planning Team. A swift move to New York began a whirlwind experience that would last a lifetime, and left me with a profound hope to help change the course of humankind for the better.

At the 69th General Assembly debate, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs affirmed Thailand’s commitment to the Post-2015 agenda, as well as to carry forward the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The Post-2015 sustainable development agenda promises to be much more inclusive, and build upon the Millennium Development Goals. This concept remains foreign for many, and it was daunting to get my arms around. My supervisor’s advice during my first meeting: “Don’t try to understand everything at once.” Diving in head first, the vision of the Post-2015 agenda came together like a jigsaw puzzle. It dawned on me that this very complex, yet manageable concept of sustainable development was something that all Thais, of all ages and walks of life, should take ownership of and feel excited about.

To understand the Post-2015 sustainable development agenda, one needs to understand the Millennium Development Goals that were established following the Millennium Summit in 2000 that outlined eight development goals to achieve by 2015. Those goals included eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; achieving universal primary education; promoting gender equality and empowerment of women; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and enforcing global partnerships for development. The deadline of the Millennium Development Goals is fast approaching. Even though the number of people living in extreme poverty has been cut in half, and many targets have shown significant progress, the results remain uneven among countries. In order to accelerate the progress of the MDGs, the Secretary General established a Post-2015 development task force led by Ms. Amina Mohammed as a Special Advisor on Post-2015 Development Planning, who I worked under and has been my source of inspiration. Whether accompanying Ms. Mohammed in meetings with heads of state and business leaders, or listening to heads of government addressing the General Assembly, I have heard all express their commitment to sustainable development; I cannot help but think how Thailand can participate in and benefit from this initiative.

In order to ensure the success of the MDGs, and to address new global challenges and short falls of the MDGs, a new strategy was forged based on the “Future We Want” outcome document adopted at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 2012. The Secretary General has set out a monumental task in creating the Post-2015 development agenda. It includes seventeen goals and 169 targets...
Natural disasters can wreak havoc on agriculture and air pollution can affect the health and well being of citizens inhibiting employment and academic productivity. For Thailand, as a premier holiday destination, sustainable tourism and conservation is essential.

From a personal perspective, with my mother’s strong belief in education, perhaps one of the most important aspects to the success of the SDGs is a strong foundation in education. A quality education will equip boys and girls, not only for meaningful employment, but to feel empowered and aspire to their dreams and goals and contribute to their communities. Furthermore, when women and girls are educated, they feel empowered and can make informed decisions about their own health and their family's health. She will educate her family, which in turn will educate the community and eliminate gender inequality, violence, and human trafficking. Seeing my mother make sacrifices and work tirelessly for my brothers’ and my success, I have witnessed how a strong woman can be an advocate for change. Leaders come in all forms, but firstly as mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters.

Mahatma Gandhi said, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.” As Thailand is in a transition period, now is the right time for everyone to take action in the Post-2015 development agenda in their own capacity. This does not mean that we need to start our work from zero. As an essential player in the Asia-Pacific region, it is crucial that Thailand continues to strengthen its partnerships with ASEAN, especially with the ASEAN Community launching in 2015. Perhaps the most important aspect is the action of local governments, businesses, community leaders, and individuals to create innovative ways to implement and enhance the Post-2015 development agenda. His Majesty the King’s philosophy of the “Self Sufficient Economy,” of perseverance and wise management, among numerous other works, that can be a source of inspiration we can all carry forward.

The SDGs, of course, cannot be successful without fair access to justice, peace and security with human rights at the core. This is the moment where Thais, young and old from diverse backgrounds, can contribute to a common goal in shaping the future of Thailand. Citizens and businesses can foster innovation and entrepreneurship to live sustainably with the land. Sustainable development is truly a universal agenda. As I became more deeply
involved in Post-2015, I witnessed first hand the hard work and passion of Ms. Mohammed and the Post-2015 Team. When I see the lessons my mother taught me reflected in the goals we are advocating, I cannot help but urge everyone to see the children in the street as their own and women as their own sister or mother, for we are all part of the same solution.

In the past few years, the people of Thailand have seen some uncertain times. For us, if our lives have taught us anything, it is that life is not at all perfect. However, I would rather strive to create a better world, than sit idly. Even if we fail, our efforts will move the bar forward. We can no longer carry on business as usual. We must think beyond ourselves for a mutual commitment to our country. Political will and ambition is necessary. This all may seem impossible, and some have good reason to be skeptical. The Millennium Development Goals proved to be the most successful anti-poverty program in history, and the Secretary General calls upon all stakeholders to come together to create a better world and a life of dignity for all. Perhaps, through collective effort, the Sustainable Development Goals can offer a glimpse of hope as a way forward for our country. With a culture deeply rooted in tradition and religion, Thailand is known the world over for our kindness and perseverance. I have full faith in the goodness of the Thai people to step up to the challenge.

Ms. Mohammed once said, “This is about reaching for the moon, but if we fall to the stars it will be nothing less.” The Millennium Developments Goals will come to an end in 2015, and the Sustainable Development Goals of the Post-2015 development agenda will come into effect in September 2015. There is a lot of work to be done. However, with ambition, faith, and focus, Thailand can be a star and we can shine as a leading example in the global community. After witnessing the Deputy Prime Minister’s address to the General Assembly, I was filled with pride for my country. As the final day of my internship arrived, with a full heart, I returned home and bowed down to thank my mother. She embraced me and said that she was proud of what I have done. That made all the difference in the world to me. As for my brothers and I, we will endeavor to be the best that we can be and to give back to our community and our family, even if the difference is just a drop in our small corner of the world.

I remain respectfully yours,

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My Declaration on My 18th Birthday:
I am a conscientious objector

Military rule has dominated Thai society, not only now but for a long time, and its power increases every year. However, the Thai army is a joke for people around the world.

I think it is very important for us, to know that in this time the Thai army has tried to increase their power and brainwash civilians. For example, they banned criticism on TV as reported in the media. They defamed Thai academics and interrogate student activists. They controlled text books to promote nationalism and respect to the army. We know they want to make Thailand a military state. They have tried before and are trying again now.

Do we want to manage this situation or do we want to bury our heads in the sand like the ostrich?

If you choose the first one then we should join together! This is the time for change.

For me,

We should protest against it and move Thailand or Siam towards democracy and Human Rights, shouldn’t we? We should support our young Thai people; support them in rejecting conscription.

In our time conscription is obsolete. Many countries in the world have abolished conscription or have changed the system to voluntary military service.

They have learned that the voluntary system is more efficient. And also it cultivates violence and follow the leader without thinking for themselves; it is a symbol of violence, unreasonable and anti-democratic.

We also know many people don’t want to take part in conscription. They can join to The Service Training of Territorial Defence Course for 3 years. Some people, whose families have enough money, can pay under the table. However why can people not have the right to reject
this out-of-date system? Why can we, who support peace and hate war and have the potential for helping society and humanity through non-violent actions, not reject conscription? Don’t forget we are citizens of the world. Non-violence can create a better society than wars, can’t it?

These are my thoughts since I was 16 years old and now I am 18 years old.

Although I am grounded in Buddhism, I cannot not say I am a Buddhist in a country which is full of violence and violates Human Rights. I should say I am a conscientious man. I want to declare my intention for a peaceful land, in a country that does not allow people to have freedom of speech.

Everyone is a human being; I do not kill anyone.

I will be a ‘conscientious objector’,
I will not be a soldier in the Thai army or any violent army.

All for Now,
Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal

A Thai student and also an ordinary world citizen.

PS. If you are interested, I want to persuade you to stop conscription in Thailand by becoming a conscientious objector. We want peace and democracy.

Published on website War Resister’s International

In Dharma,
Katie
Co-directors of
Buddhist Peace Fellowship

Dear Khun Sulak Sivaraksa,

I wish to extend my warmest congratulations to you upon receipt of the Jamnalal Bajaj Awards 2014, and as the first Thai awardee, on International Award for Promoting Gandhian Values outside India. Your achievement in integrating the practice of Buddhism with social action for a healthy, just, and peaceful world, has been well and highly acknowledged by many Thai people and that includes myself.

I have also learned with much appreciation of your active role in a number of social, humanitarian, ecological and spiritual movements. As a prominent scholar, thinker, and philosopher, you have guided and given new valuable perspectives to our Thai society. I am certain that your continued engagement in the numerous activities will be beneficial to the betterment of the people of Thailand and around the world.

I wish you good health, happiness and the best success in your challenging task ahead.

With my best regards,

Yours sincerely,

(Chalit Manityakul)
Ambassador of Thailand to the Republic of India

Khun Sulak Sivaraksa,
Founder, International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB),
BANGKOK.

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No. 19001/1109

November B.E. 2557 (2014)
Phra Maha Udom Saramedhi of Wat Thong Nopakun is a senior monk who has admirably performed Sangha duties as instructed by his superiors. He holds various administrative positions such as assistant-abbot of Wat Thong Nopakun and secretary to a regional ecclesiastical head. Yet, he has also found the time to write a series of books such as on death, justice, and blessings. His latest book is entitled *Boon Talord*, which can be roughly translated as merit-making through the ages. In this book, he recounts the story of building abodes for monks during the Buddha’s time, and explains the merits of such action. He also tells many old stories that will benefit the reader. He has an interesting appendix on how to properly address monks while making offerings, including contemporary commodities such as the television set, personal computer, mobile phone, etc. But monks should also be mindful that some of these goods may not be appropriate for consumption—i.e., they are not good for consumption by the ordained. The mobile phone for instance enables a monk to maintain regular contact with a female layperson. And so on.

Speaking of merit-making, it is clear that Thais tend to focus on material objects—building the biggest Buddha statue, the tallest Guanyin statue, etc. The Buddhist nun Sansanee had even managed to attract a ridiculous amount of donations in the form of gold to adorn the pinnacle on the top of Bodh Gaya stupa. (But why do this?) There are also at least 15 Thai temples in that area. Their main function appears to be nothing more than serving as money-laundering sites for their creators. They also act as comfortable hotels for many Thai pilgrims—who want to look good and feel pious above all. Can this really be merit-making?

What if the money and gold donated to the Buddhist nun Sansanee are used for other purposes such as constructing a Buddhist institute near Bodh Gaya? It will be open to all, Buddhist as well as non-Buddhist. It will provide relevant information about Buddhist temples in India—the different sects, monastic duties, etc. It will chart the rise and decline of Buddhism in different parts of the world through the ages. It will aim to make Buddhism relevant to the contemporary world as well as explore current problems that Buddhists face and/or create (such as the problem between Buddhists and Muslims in Burma).

The land to build this institute can be obtained through donation. This institute should have a small conference room equipped with the appropriate media and telecommunications. This room can be used for a small group to engage in serious talk and discussion—for holding a larger crowd or organizing a big conference we may have to rely on nearby temples.

Won’t this proposed Buddhist institute at the place where the Buddha achieved enlightenment be a better act of merit-making than the ones that have taken thus far in Bodh Gaya? Hopefully, this proposal will be able to attract Buddhists who are concerned about the dominant cheap and shallow forms of merit-making.
Recommended Readings

Buddhist Art and Architecture
Publisher: U Nyunt Htay
Writer: Than Tun

Islam & Higher-Order Thinking: An Overview
Publisher: Penerbit IKIM
Writer: Mohd Zaidi Ismail

An Islamic Paradigm in Economics: Vision and Mission
Publisher: Penerbit IKIM
Writer: Nik Mustapha Hj. Nik Hassan

Madrasah of Ramadhan: Lessons from Different Dimensions
Publisher: IKIM Press
Edited by: Azizan Baharuddin

Islam, Wildlife Conservation & You
Publisher: Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM)
Authors: Rosmidzatul Azila Mat Yamin / Abu Bakar Yang

Transforming Societies in Myanmar: The Dynamics of Conflict and Cooperation
Publisher: The Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD)
Keynote speaker: Lahpai Seng Raw

The Shadows of Success: Transformation and Marginalisation in Southeast Asia
Publisher: The Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD)
Keynote speaker: Jonathan Rigg

Publisher: Cambridge University Press
Writer: Jack Goody

A Siamese Story
Printed: Amazon.co.uk, Ltd.
Writer: Danny Campbell

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The 2nd ICE Conference
(Asian Civil Society Conference on Climate Change & Ecology)

Climate Change, Sustainability and Resilience

The 2nd ICE conference will focus on exploring ways to implement actions in response to climate change and increasing awareness of cooperation and creating a common ground for joint response to climate change among civil society groups including faith-based, international development, and environmental groups in Asia while building their capacity to respond to climate change. Topics will include: poverty, food crisis, energy, disasters, biodiversity, good governance, reduction & adaptation cases, human capacity development, etc.

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Registration Fees</th>
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<tr>
<td>22-25 April</td>
<td>Japan Energy Tour (in Japan)</td>
<td>Low Income (South Country): USD 80</td>
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<tr>
<td>24-25 April</td>
<td>A to Z Climate Change Workshop (in South Korea)</td>
<td>High Income (North Country): USD 150</td>
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<td>27-28 April</td>
<td>Korea Energy and Environmental Tour</td>
<td>USD 50</td>
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<tr>
<td>29-30 April</td>
<td>The 2nd ICE Conference (in South Korea)</td>
<td>USD 30</td>
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※ The registration deadline is open until March 31st, 2015.
The registration form can be downloaded in INEB website www.inebnetwork.org or http://jneb.jp/english/international/icebase/ice-2southkorea

Organizers

- INEB (International Network of Engaged Buddhists)
- ICE Network (Inter-Religious Climate & Ecology Network)