Enlightening Crisis:
A Vision for a Post-COVID-19 World
The COVID-19 pandemic is a global crisis that threatens us in ways not seen since the world wars of the 20th century. Much local and international commerce, along with travel have come to a halt. Health systems are overwhelmed. Large populations in many countries endure lockdowns, “social distancing,” and realistic fears of sickness and death. The pandemic has interrupted numerous mechanisms of “globalization”—the contemporary phenomenon in which capital, business, and people have an unprecedented ability to move freely around the world, bringing illusions of greater wealth and well-being to all, albeit with very mixed results.

In reality, the pandemic is highlighting the already existing social distortions and growing inequalities of globalization and our present global order. Persons living in poverty and on the margins of society—because of race, religion, class, etc.—are the most vulnerable to disease and the least able to access health resources. The effects of poverty and discrimination—stress, diet, etc.—weaken immune systems. Crowded living conditions and the need to keep working increases exposure for millions with very limited access to testing and medical services.

Yet, as with all crises, the COVID pandemic provides opportunities to reflect on and rethink the very structures of our societies. Numerous organizations worldwide have been preparing the ground for decades, “building the new within the shell of the old.” With each war, genocide and dislocation of peoples, environmental tragedy, and national economic meltdown, progressive organizations respond with sustainable grassroots responses, solutions, and alternatives to these crises.

From a Buddhist perspective, crisis provides a moment of suspended animation from the status quo and the usual activities of daily life. Reality, as we know it, is reconsidered. In Buddhist psychology and practice, this is a precious moment when the awareness or mindfulness developed through meditation practice by may be used to interrupt the neurotic processes of our habitual, everyday thinking. This moment opens us to ethical and sustainable ways of living that transform neurosis into living with awareness.

However, without such mindfulness, without the wisdom of what is truly worthwhile to pursue in life, and without ethical consideration about what is of benefit to others as well as ourselves, the “pandemic virus” of our greed, anger, and delusion will quickly recreate our historical patterns of domination.

The COVID-19 pandemic is providing us with a creative moment. We can reconsider how to build our interconnected world, a very different kind of globalization. We have seen glimpses of what a Post-COVID world could look like as the smoke literally clears away: in northern India, we can view the Himalayan peaks as they have not been seen for decades; wildlife are reclaiming their natural habitats; cities around the world, choking with smog and pollution, have clean air again.

From this fundamental orientation, INEB is developing A Vision for a Post-COVID-19 World for these four essential areas:

1. Dharmic Economics, Right Livelihood, and Holistic Development
2. Environmental and Sustainable Interbeing
3. Cultural Diversity and Co-Existence
4. Good Governance, Human Rights, and Peace

These four dimensions of INEB’s Post-COVID Vision are bound together by the principles of Equality, Interdependence, and Justice. In The Buddha and His Dhamma, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar wrote in the Buddha’s voice:

Man’s misery is the result of man’s inequity to man… No caste; no inequality; no superiority; no inferiority; all are equal. This is what he stood for. “Identify yourself with others. As they, so I…as I, so they.” So said the Buddha.

Just a few years later, Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote that we are "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."
Our present economic systems are unsustainable—prioritizing continuous growth, short-term profit, and exploitation of human and natural resources. Operating according to an exploitative paradigm threatens the survival of living systems that have evolved over 4.6 billion years, the health and wellbeing of the 7.7 billion people, and the future of the human species itself. The consequences of this economic system, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, are unprecedented inequality, violent conflict, displacement and involuntary migration, food and water shortages, disease and epidemics, anxiety, insecurity, and fear. Further, ecological change—climate change, extreme weather and natural disaster, pollution and depletion, biodiversity loss—threatens the viability of all living systems.

Buddhism has important principles and values to offer as the foundation of a different economic paradigm. Buddhist Economics, or what we would rather call Dharmic Economics, means economics based on the law of nature (dharma) not the rules of man-made economic theory. In the present dominant world view, humans are seen as inherently selfish, as individual units for accumulating wealth. Human capacity is manipulated to maximize immediate profit, accumulate financial capital, compete, and grow. In the dharmic model as explained by one of INEB’s first patrons, the late Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, not only humans, but all sentient life live together in types of groups or communities and thus inherently have a sense for living with and for others. He explained that humans, specifically, have the duty (another meaning of dharma) to act for the benefit of society. This begins with understanding what is enough or “sufficient” (santutthi), reducing craving (tanha), and being joyful with what we have. Economic activity that creates a consumer lifestyle, amplifying craving and greed, cannot offer safety and serenity.

Dharmic Economics encourages a lifestyle that values the blessings we already have. The Zen poet Aida Mitsuo notes, “If we always take for ourselves first, there will never be enough. But if we share with others first, there will always be some left over.” These words highlight the Buddhist principle of generosity (dana). Our joy can come from the act of sharing, and this joy gained by giving up things increases sustainability and does not deplete our natural resources. When we can see the vast living web in which we live, compassion and connection naturally arise. We can choose to act mindfully and collaborate, prioritizing life and the environment.

On a systems level, our present economic paradigm sees humans as separate from and having dominion over nature. The economy has been engineered like a machine to maximize these values. A dharmic perspective, however, sees that we are interdependent (pratitya samutpada), a living part of global ecosystems. We can envision an economy that functions as a complex adaptive system, reflecting our diverse ecosystems.

Another problem is our deluded belief that money, like our own self, is permanent. We act as if it has inherent value and should be accumulated. Furthermore, it can be magically created from debt, which, of course, requires continuous growth for repayment. From a dharmic standpoint, money is a construct or story, developed by humans to facilitate the exchange of goods and services. It is empty (sunnata) of an inherent, permanent existence (anatta). According to pratitya samutpada, it is only valuable when it is circulated. If money is created through exchange, continuous growth is not a necessary requirement.

Powerful hierarchies resist change. Systemic problems are addressed or ignored by governments, multi-national corporations, and transnational institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund as well as by experts, the wealthy, and the elite. “Democracy” becomes a choice of which elites will make decisions for us.
In a community-based dharmic model, change happens through relationships and networks of interconnected individuals according to compassionate ideals. This is what Buddhists call sangha. Each person is a changemaker. We can speed the transitions by working together.

A dharmic economy is grounded in the practice of critical mindfulness which brings principle into reality through our attention to our actions. Mindfulness allows for creativity and innovation when tired and dysfunctional forms are questioned and abandoned. We can help others’ transitions by openly sharing our own practices and choices, celebrating the work of others, and disseminating new narratives. We can support and partner with others who are operating according to wholesome principles and new stories.

From these broad ideas, we can begin to build sustainable lifestyles. However, dharmic economics will not appear as a single, monolithic form, like in capitalist or communist models. Sustainable economics must adapt to the needs and potentials of different regions and societies. For those living close to the land, where basic needs are more directly met by the surrounding environment, the principles of Sufficiency Economy developed in Thailand can serve as a useful guideline. Accordingly, 30% of our land can secure water resources; 30% is dedicated to agriculture; 30% for forest cover (which also provides forest products); and 10% is used for our dwellings. Rural or urban, we all seek the “four benefits of sufficiency (santutthi)”: 1) sufficient food, 2) sufficient housing, 3) sufficient daily household needs, and 4) a sufficient and wholesome environment, with clean air, clean water, and natural beauty. These points may seem utopian or simplistic, but this model of development is being realized by a number of monks and eco-temple communities in INEB’s network in Thailand, Sri Lanka, and other southern Asian countries.

A fifth benefit is sufficient electricity. Collaborating with these groups in southern Asia is an INEB member in Tokyo who has been supporting people in the city since the 1990s to become energy sufficient. This work brings forth what we might call the “three benefits of energy sufficiency”:

1. reducing reliance on massive and inefficient, national power grids that overcharge individual consumers for the benefit of large industry;
2. divesting from fossil fueled and nuclear fueled systems that destroy the environment, while developing a green economy of sustainable, clean energy;
3. building a people’s dharmic economy by using profits made from selling solar energy to support a wide variety of community-based social activities that build human, social, and cultural capital for future generations. Tera Energy, a newly formed Buddhist-based power company in central Japan co-founded by another INEB member, is an example of new initiatives based on Dharmic Economy. Such initiatives point to the transformation of urban areas that have been most vulnerable to the dislocations of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Finally, INEB is partnering with Good Market, an initiative co-founded by INEB friends and others in Sri Lanka and now spread across the world as a living model of Dharmic Economics. Good Market is a curated platform that helps us to find and connect with social enterprises, responsible businesses, and changemakers who are creating a better world. Its goal is to catalyze the transition to a new economy by making the movement more visible and accessible for interested individuals and communities, working across economic sectors, income levels, language barriers, and regional divides. Good Market is set up as a self-financing, not-for-profit social enterprise. Surplus from transactions is reinvested to expand services for the wider community.
Environment and Sustainable Interbeing

COVID-19 reminds us that biologically we are one with the whole planet. The biome of our bodies contains more non-human microbes with different DNA/RNA than human cells. Our bodies depend upon them. From a Buddhist perspective, we can ask, “Where do ‘I’ end and these microbes begin?” Humans share 99% of our DNA with chimpanzees and bonobos. The ecological crisis extends beyond climate change and “6th extinction” events—with overpopulation, pollutants from fossil fuel, nuclear waste, and plastics, and the loss of forests and topsoil. In the long run, this crisis is a thousand times more dangerous than COVID-19, but short-term emergency always trumps long-term dangers. The coronavirus emergency can, in fact, be understood as another result of ecological damage, habitat encroachment, and destruction.

From a Buddhist standpoint, the fundamental problem is our relationship with the earth: we have lost the awareness that it is not just our home but our mother, and we can never cut the umbilical cord. We need to recover the sense of responsibility to it that many indigenous people have. Our sense of separation from the earth—seeing it reductively as a resource and means towards human ends—is a loss of life’s meaning, a source of dukkha. Our species has become autistic. We just try to enjoy ourselves as long as we can, and then we die.

COVID-19 has exposed these flaws, rooted in ignorance. Social, economic, and medical problems that have become critical in recent months. We see the virus is flourishing in areas of poverty and inadequate health resources, with much higher death rates among marginalized and oppressed communities.

Buddhism teaches us, most clearly in the Avatamsaka Sutra and Hua Yen tradition, that nothing exists in isolation from other things. All phenomena are interconnected; a change in one affects all the rest. This teaching is not a creation of human minds. It flows from a clear view of nature itself and was realized by Buddhist masters who spent their lives in forest retreats, in a symbiotic relationship with nature. The environment includes humans, and environmental sustainability requires humans to recognize that our continuing existence must reflect a harmonious existence with other people and with nature. Through the lens of ecosystem thinking, if we do not restore the natural environment, more outbreaks of new epidemics are likely.

Buddhism’s bodhisattva path expresses a double-sided practice: individual transformation together with social transformation. It is clear that we need both. The present lockdown provides a fresh opportunity to cultivate both lockdown provides a fresh opportunity to cultivate both aspects of the bodhisattva path, personal and collective. Personal practice begins with the Buddha’s 1st Noble Truth, the truth of suffering (dukkha) and the call to experience it fully.

Joanna Macy—one of INEB’s senior mentors and a respected deep ecologist—has asked of herself, “How can I be fully present to my world—present enough to rejoice and be useful—when we as a species are destroying it?” She teaches us that expressing our pain for the world can uncover a wellsprings of solidarity and creativity. Over the past fifty years of her work, Joanna has begun to sense a “loosening of the hyper-individualism that for centuries has cramped our natural abilities and isolated the separate self to the point that it seeks release in mob mentality.” This is what she calls the Great Turning, a transition already underway to a life-sustaining society, rooted in the Buddhist notion of bodhicitta as the dedication to the welfare of all. Here, personal transformation moves towards social transformation. Joanna explains that the Great Turning provides us with more than “a light at the end of the tunnel.” It provides us with a “compass and map, as well as a supply house of skills and tools—such as the buddhadharma, systems thinking, and deep ecology—for nourishing our spirit, ingenuity, and determination.”

Individual INEB members have been putting this vision of the Great Turning into practice for years and much of their work is now being coordinated in the Eco-Temple Community Development Project. This project seeks to develop communities that are sustainably interconnected with the natural environment through Buddhist temples. These temples strive to manifest ecological values on the material, relational, and spiritual levels. Eco-temple communities are already experiencing a high level of resiliency in the face COVID-19’s multiple dislocations. Unlike communities tied into the global economy—where people are panic shopping for food and basic needs, and where businesses themselves are going bankrupt after only a few months of inactivity—eco-temple communities are experiencing life that is relatively uninterrupted. For them, the gap between means and ends, between work and prosperity, is greatly reduced. With an initial focus on providing food, shelter, and a healthy environment, these eco-temples still have bandwidth for human interaction, study and learning, and personal development—which form the basis of a meaningful and contented life, something that is often so lacking in many of our psychologically and environmentally dysfunctional, consumer-driven societies.
COVID-19 is a call for change, reminding us that our global human crisis extends far beyond the pandemic to the present capitalist model of development based on consumerism and the unsustainable use of natural resources. In the long and short run, this is economic-driven model is more harmful to the world’s health, especially the well-being of vast populations of marginalized, oppressed, and exploited communities. The present situation helps us focus on the interconnection of human communities and the underlying principle of equality. Our need to heal our wounded humanity calls for compassion, loving-kindness, and mutual respect for all forms of life.

From a Buddhist perspective, the pandemic has quickly brought us back to basics, to ground zero. For many there is a sense of horror and panic, a fear of “zero,” of annihilation. However, in Buddhism, “zero” is the mark of sunnata, “emptiness” or “voidness.” This is not a negative quality, but in the sense of the archetypal feminine, the womb, it signifies the unlimited potential of creativity. Going back to “zero,” we have the chance to re-create our present and our future, based on equality and cooperation that express the empty center of Indra’s Net as imagined in the Avatamsaka Sutra.

Although the virus does not discriminate, people are affected differently depending on their economic status, race, caste, religion, gender, citizenship, or place of birth. Latent forms of racial discrimination and stereotyping have been allowed free rein, as individuals, communities, and nations react in fear to pandemic, uncertainty, and economic pressure. In India, as well as in other parts of South and Southeast Asia, simmering forms of communal and religious violence have come to a boil as the pandemic pushes people towards panic over resources.

Equality, cultural diversity, and co-existence are thus key areas of engagement. Crisis is fuel for all forms of oppression. Systematic and institutionalized oppression based on race, class, gender, etc., is pervasive, and the work to undo it requires a commitment and sincere effort.

Cultural diversity, however, is not simply a matter of meeting quotas. Neither is it a charity model based on the rich giving what they feel they can spare the poor. It is, rather, a practice of empowerment, where all members of society have seats at a round table with equal opportunities to bring forth their issues and to seek solutions with equal access to available resources. Cultural diversity implies justice and equality, and it invites us to understand that we must to slow down and dial down our greed. Various forms of social oppression and discrimination have been with us throughout history. Today, while the world and its peoples face an existential threat, we call for privileged individuals and societies to examine themselves and relinquish their habits and patterns of domination. In our study of the natural world and its systems, we see that diversity is a strength, the essence of a thriving system. In human systems, privilege, domination, and patriarchy are threats to diversity and our very existence.

We begin engagement by listening deeply to the suffering of others—the Buddhist practice of the 1st Noble Truth. The creation of a safe space is also essential, especially for historically oppressed voices. By listening, we can understand fully the extent to which structural violence causes inequalities and vulnerabilities on personal and societal levels. As a result, calling out all forms of abuse of power, silencing, and working to eradicate both the deliberate and unconscious exclusion of minorities from decision-making processes is the next step of engagement. From the protective to the proactive, we promote inclusion and alliance across socio-economic and political lines, building on each other’s strengths and wisdom.

Unified systems of belief and devotional practices in specific religions are often entangled with nationalism. This leads people to develop a particularized sense of religious-ethnic identity, which raises barriers to diversity. Many communities feel it is their moral right to oppose what they perceive as threats to their own traditions, beliefs, and cultural norms. This is one root of social conflict among communities. INEB envisions a world in which people come to accept and understand their respective communities. At the same time, we recognize that apparent cultural and religious conflict often serves as a cover for political and economic conflict, distracting us from struggles for power and access to resources that are the real issues.
Beneficial acts that may radically change people’s thinking and inspire cultural diversity and co-existence include:

1) Developing a culture of listening and understanding other’s lifestyles, culture, and traditions
2) Promoting feelings of mutual accommodation and gratitude through cultural events such as festivals, concerts, performances, and the sharing of traditions
3) Sharing forms of social engagement in which diverse communities work on a common social problem or serve and support a particular community’s problem with their own experiential wisdom.

A practical example of the above is when INEB partnered with like-minded groups in 2013 to form the International Forum on Buddhist-Muslim Relations (BMF). BMF has brought together Buddhists and Muslims from South and Southeast Asia—where Buddhist-Muslims tensions and ethnic violence have increased over the last decade—to develop tools for constructive engagement and strategic action to go beyond conflict. The founders and supporters of the BMF are rooted in their respective spiritual traditions. They feel exploring the inherent values of these traditions is necessary to overcome present issues and challenges.

While the members of BMF have different religious traditions, they seek shared values and action. BMF understands that institutionalized religions are subject to political interference and economic influence. Beyond their grasp of core values and traditions, religious leaders need to be well-versed in the multiple social, political, and economic spheres, and to be open to collaboration with like-minded experts in those fields.

Through the inspiration of BMF, INEB itself has reached out in dialogue with fundamentalist elements in the Buddhist world in these regions, taking responsibility for our Buddhist traditions and how these traditions can be distorted for personal, political, and economic gain. INEB stands in solidarity with religions, traditions, and communities confronting the common threats to humanity—including the pandemic, fundamentalism, poverty, inequality—supporting spiritual values that lead to peace, harmony, and wellbeing. INEB appeals to all governments to embrace equality, to stop the segregation of communities, and to support each community as an expression of our shared humanity.

INEB is also appealing to relief agencies to renounce discriminatory practices of delivering aid based on race, caste, religion, citizenship, or place of birth, and gender. INEB is making this universal appeal to maintain communal harmony and extend the hand of love and care to all people everywhere.

Interfaith Gathering for Peace, northern Sri Lanka
Good Governance,
Human Rights, and Peace

In a recent appeal to “political leaders, especially in emerging markets and developing economies” the heads of the International Monetary Fund and the World Health Organization wrote:

“In far too many places health systems are unprepared for an onslaught of COVID-19 patients and it is paramount to give them a boost. And this can and must go together with support for economy-wide priorities required to reduce unemployment, minimize bankruptcies and, over time, ensure recovery.

We are seeing a variety of such appeals during the COVID pandemic by political leaders, national governments, and inter-governmental agencies—such as the UN, WHO, IMF, and Asian Development Bank—hoping to preserve the global status quo by providing massive amounts of aid to “emerging markets and developing economies.” This approach is a tired recycling of old methods of economic globalization that have made the First World richer, created a global imbalance of power, and ruined the original objectives of the Bretton Woods Institutions coming out of WWII.

Such appeals only further show how our political systems around the world are in crisis. There are nations that political scientists identify as failed states. A failed state is one that has lost its mandate of legitimacy and governance, and they face social disruption and international economic conflict. Many such nations today fit this definition, including well-regarded Western democracies, and we are seeing them turn inwards to populism, isolationism, and virulent nationalism. The COVID pandemic exacerbates and highlights these problems, which involve the fundamental human rights and prosperity of citizens.

While INEB supports on-going dialogue with larger institutions of governance and power, listening to their concerns, and helping to arrive at common solutions, we also feel it is unrealistic to imagine that degraded institutions will be able to remedy the problems they themselves have created. As such, INEB seeks to build “the new within the shell of the old.” It is important to work for a “new world order” that involves shifts:

1. From the concept of human-centered rights, to the rights of all sentient beings—what Buddhism calls “interbeing.”

2. From the domination of crony capitalism and vested interests, to participatory governance that balances economic development, natural resource management, and grassroots decision making.

3. From the narrow trinity of nation-ethnicity-religion to multi-cultural societies, where diverse identities are equally and openly respected in any one region.

4. From the ceaseless pursuit of wealth and material gain, to a post-consumerist society where human relationships and connection with nature form the basis of “the good life.”

INEB will seek to support the development of the four agendas above by:

1. Using our values, practices, and presence to help build global community

INEB’s vision is to develop the practice of socially-engaged Buddhism to promote understanding, cooperation, and networking.
among Buddhist groups, among religious groups, among social action groups, and among secular civil society organizations. This widening base will allow us to join these groups in a movement for social transformation. INEB as an organization with members of diverse backgrounds will also facilitate dialogue leading to cooperation between governments, inter-governmental agencies, and common people at the grassroots.

2. **Activating this global community for collective engagement with the present system, towards a paradigm shift**

INEB must challenge and expose the hidden agendas that wreak havoc among disadvantaged groups in rural and urban areas. INEB can provide a platform for like-minded groups developing forward-thinking systems. Such groups may include community organizations, think tanks, research institutes, universities, social enterprises, trade unions, academics, etc. Wide cooperation across sectors is necessary for critical engagement with government regimes, inter-governmental agencies, regional power groups, and big corporations who often hold a controlling power over people’s lives.

3. **Organizing and building capacity towards complex adaptive systems which are people-friendly and non-exploitative of beings and the environment.**

This work should focus on areas of food, health, education, environment, energy, and technology. INEB has long worked for environmental principles that bolster food security and long-term health standards. INEB is also increasingly involved in the political and economic decentralization of energy, promoting its mindful and sustainable use. Finally, INEB seeks to become more involved in developing ethical perspectives for the rapid growth of IT. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, block chains, nanotechnology, and bio technologies need to be aligned with environmental and structural sustainability, rather than blind exploitation. Technologies and business models need to be safe, affordable, and directed towards the betterment of the society, citizens, and the future. These systems need to be accountable to the people.

In the United States, INEB members and allies from other religions and progressive organizations take a long view in favor of justice and in opposition to political corruption, inequality, poverty, social violence, and environmental degradation, as well as the ongoing scourge of the pandemic. For the last fifteen years, adapting traditional models of Buddhist values and practice, they have been engaging in electoral work, working with and for candidates whose values are closer to their own. At times, they may not be fully aligned with a candidate’s full platform, but politics is a matter of reality and compromise. Standing fixed in a position of righteousness while the world is on fire is both intolerable and life-threatening. The Buddha’s middle-way practice of balance and harmony does not stop at the threshold of politics. We must cross that threshold.

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About INEB

INEB was established in Siam (Thailand) by Sulak Sivaraksa and a group of Buddhist and non-Buddhist thinkers and social activists. Over the years the network has expanded to include members, both individuals and organizations, from more than 25 countries across Asia, Europe, North America and Australia. INEB operates as an autonomous organization under the Sathirakoses-Nagapradeepa Foundation (SNF), Thai NGO, established 1968.

Vision and Objectives

INEB’s overall vision is to develop the perspective and practice of socially engaged Buddhism that:
1. Promotes understanding, cooperation, and networking among inter-Buddhist and inter-religious social action groups, as well as a variety of secular civil society organizations.
2. Acts as an information resource related to areas of social concern
3. Facilitates conferences, education, and training based on Buddhist values and practices that support and strengthen socially active individuals and groups

The focus of INEB’s work is to overcome suffering through the practice of dharma. This practice creates unity and solidarity with individuals and groups who hold similar such values from other beliefs and other fields of social work. In this way, INEB remains steadfast in its commitment to non-violent engagement and articulating holistic social development to build sustainable and harmonious societies.