

27<sup>th</sup> Sem Pringpuangkeo Public Lecture, Saturday 13 February 2021.

# COME ON, LET'S COMMON.

## East – West perspectives on Earth Trusteeship.

Hans and Wallapa van Willenswaard – Right Livelihood College Bangkok

*“Professor Sem is involved in both the birth of children and the birth of a new society”* – This is how Prof. Sem Pringpuangkaew, former Minister of Public Health and a gynecologist, was introduced by Prof. Prawase Wasee when Prof. Sem, at the age of 90, delivered the 2001 Komol Keemthong Foundation Lecture at Thammasat University, Bangkok.

### Birth of a new society?

Are we in 2021 still in the painful process of a new society being born? Apart from the great honour for which we are deeply grateful, it is an enormous challenge for us in this time of *multiple crises* to present the 2021 Sem Pringpuangkeo Public Lecture. Thank you Ajarn Surichai Wung’aeo and Ajarn Surasee Kosolnavin for your encouraging introductions. In our lifetime impulses for transformation of society have not only been analysed in a perspective of decades but also in a time span of millennia. That was in particular so of course in 2001, the year of Dr. Sem’s presentation, when humanity just made its first steps into the “third millennium”. Equally important, in the Buddhist world we are just decades away from the celebrations of the year 2500 BE (1957 Christian era), considered to be a major “Turning Point” in world history. So, here you are, already the way we count our years and reflect on the waves of time there is an East-West perspective to be taken into account. While in our personal partnership being born 5000 miles apart still confronts us with daily surprises.



Ratsadorn activists accused of *lèse majesté* in Thailand are forced into pre-trial detention. The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar unites people in resistance against the brutal military *coup d'état*. Activists in the region are inter-connected by the *Milk Tea Alliance*.

The auspicious legacy of Prof. Sem as well as the special meaning Ajarn Sulak gave in English to the notion of “Sem University” – that is the *Spirit in Education Movement (SEM)* – provide us with hope in dark times. May the pioneering spirit of persons who in the past co-pioneered SEM and passed away be with us, including Lodi Gyari Rinpoche, Tibet, Wanida (Mot) Tantiwithayapitak, Pak Moon dam activist, and Kunying Poonsuk Banomyong who was

a beacon of the free spirit in her time. She opened the building we are now using for gathering around this public lecture.

### **Resistance movements in Thailand, Myanmar, Hong Kong: the *Milk Tea Alliance***

Where are we today, 13 February 2021? It is even less than two weeks ago that a brutal coup d'état was forced upon Myanmar. Here in Thailand, many of the young protestors including pioneers of the Ratsadorn group, are in jail under arbitrary pre-trial detention. Their friends in Hong Kong are heartlessly jailed. And this in a context where activists in Laos, including the good friend of Ajarn Sulak and fellow educator Sombath Somphone, as well as Thai activists in Cambodia, most recently Wanchalerm Satsaksit, as well as noble activists here in Thailand in the last decades became victims of forced disappearance. Let's keep this in mind while exploring what SEM could mean for the future of the transformation movement, regionally known as the *Milk Tea Alliance*.

### **SEM: education in the *spirit of the commons*. Relevant for the resistance movement?**

What characterizes SEM? SEM is in the first place a lively meeting place for fostering friendship, something Ajarn Sulak always emphasizes as the most important spiritual quality to be cultivated. The "spirit" of SEM brought us, Wallapa and Hans, together and that is why we stand here and stand with SEM. It was during the Alternatives to Consumerism (ATC) conference convened by Ajarn Sulak in the exalted centre Buddhamonthon near Bangkok, in the year 1997, that we started working together. We organized a post-conference workshop for the international ATC participants at Moo Ban Dek children's village in Kanchanaburi.

The enigmatic "spirit" in education also entails, and for that reason Moo Ban Dek was the perfect host organisation for this first joint endeavour, that we co-organise alternative education as a "commons". Resource persons and participants, teachers and children, lecturers and students are united in collaboration as equals, without formal barriers.

And indeed, the "commons movement" is growing. More and more social initiatives in Thailand – and globally – discover that they share the principles of "commoning". What is "commoning"? Long time researchers on the commons David Bollier and Silke Helfrich, in their book *Free, Fair and Alive. The Insurgent Power of the Commons* (2019), emphasize that the legal status or an organisation structure are not in the first place what makes a project, programme or organisation part of the "commons movement". The quality of "commoning" – a verb invented to describe the act of commoning – makes the true difference. So, here is our call, let's common and celebrate our collaboration and friendship under the unfolding umbrella of the Spirit in Education Movement.

Silke Helfrich, Germany, was a resource person in the first international conference organized by the School for Wellbeing at Chulalongkorn University in 2011. The School for Wellbeing counts itself among the proud members of the SEM family. We all work on what Silke and David call *OntoShift*. Language creation is needed to catch the systemic impact of the commons movement: how does it incite *transformation* (paradigm change) of the economy, culture, politics, locally and globally? What does it mean in terms of personal development if you profile yourself as a "commoner"? How can we build trust, what do we

really want to share, what are our common goals? What are we willing to sacrifice and what benefits are we entitled to expect? Can we be a commons island amidst a hostile economy based on profit-making at all costs? What does it take to survive and flourish when conducting an alternative way of life in a de-humanizing, militarized, system? Do we have to undergo over and over again the pain and glory of “the birth of a new society”? Are these steps towards broader progress, or do we fall back again and again, or even move backward?

In the 27<sup>th</sup> SEM Public Lecture we try to answer the question **is the concept of the “commons” relevant for the present protest movement** in Thailand and the region. Is it relevant for the *Milk Tea Alliance*? Does the commons movement provide direction for a future scenario, a *post-corona scenario*, where the young changemakers – who are now totally absorbed by demonstrations, detention, court cases and hate-speech against them – ultimately will take leadership? Can we recognise the commons as a leading principle for transformation towards a (genuinely) sustainable future, securing the wellbeing of present and future generations? Can this transformation be enabled by “Earth Trusteeship”?

### Foundations of our socio-political order. The French Revolution and beyond.



On 27th June 1932 Pridi Banomyong was the co-leader of the Ratsadorn group which staged a revolution in Thailand. Pridi launched a draft constitution and proposed an economic system based on networks of peoples’ cooperatives. Elenora Roosevelt was the chairperson of a drafting committee which launched the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted 10 December 1948 in New York. Mahatma Gandhi supported Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, his political rival, to become major drafter of the constitution of independent India. The constitution was adopted on 26 November 1949.

Three important steps were taken in constitutional development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1932 the establishment of a constitutional monarchy in Thailand; in 1948 the adoption of the UN Charter and the launching of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR); and in 1949 the inauguration of the constitution of independent India, world’s biggest democracy. Pridi Banomyong’s Ratsadorn revolution and economic plans for Siam – again inspiring the new generation – were undeniably influenced by the three values of the French Revolution: “liberté, égalité and fraternité” or freedom, equality and brotherhood. And, although we can consider the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) close to genuinely universal – thanks to the vital influence of the Chinese diplomat Peng Chun Chang and his cross-cultural debates with Charles Habib Malik, Lebanon – the architecture of French law expert René Cassin, and thus the values of the French Revolution, are clearly

traceable. So, understandably also in the Constitution of Independent India drafted by Dr. Ambedkar, the threefold polarity of the French Revolution was felt to be central in particular in the Preamble. However, Ambedkar denied any Western influence and attributed the core values imbued in India's constitution to be firmly rooted in nothing else than Buddhist ethics. This position of Ambedkar leads us to the fundamental question whether, if there would be resonance between the values of the French Revolution and Buddhist ethics, whether in retrospect this Buddhist influence could also be discovered in pre-Ambedkar efforts: in the UDHR, in Pridi's proposals, and in the values of the French Revolution themselves. Can we accept an Eastern democratic worldview originating from the Buddhist era? Can democratic principles be traced back to original Buddhist philosophy? In his book *Dr. B.R. Ambedkar: Buddhist Revolution and Counter-revolution in Ancient India* the author Dr. D.C. Ahir attributes this statement to Dr. Ambedkar:

Buddhism was a revolution. It was as great a revolution as the French Revolution. Though it began as a religious revolution, it became more than religious revolution. It became a social and political revolution. To be able to realise how profound was the character of this revolution, it is necessary to know the state of the society before the revolution began its course. To use the language of the French Revolution, it is necessary to have a picture of the *ancient regime* in India.

This of course is essential as often democracy in the East is attributed to "alien" sources, something "from the West" (and thus to be ignored or abused ...). Dr. B.R. Ambedkar confirms the authenticity of democracy as an indigenous governance principle of Asian culture. His thesis has to be researched from various angles. How do Eastern and Western perceptions of democracy resonate with each other?

Needless to mention that Ambedkar's interpretation of Buddhism is perceived as controversial if not downright heretical by conservative Buddhists.

### **Societal transformation at the cross-roads of politics and religion: Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, Dr. Ambedkar and Sulak Sivaraksa**

On our path to explore possible resonance between Buddhist ethics and Western democratic values in more depth, let's take into account three milestones in the evolution of Buddhism in the 20th century.

Buddhadasa Bhikkhu established in 1932 – exactly the same year as Pridi Banomyong initiated his groundbreaking political revolution(!) – Suan Mokkh meditation centre in Southern Thailand. Later Suan Mokkh branched out to a Thai as well as international centre of progressive Buddhism. Two decades later in India, after completing his mission as drafter of the Indian Constitution, Dr. Ambedkar, based on thorough research, converted to Buddhism. Moreover, he passionately promoted conversion of Buddhism as path of liberation from the cast system. The human freedom to choose a religion had been enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, while in practice religious membership (still) is often considered determined by birth, bloodline and tradition. On 14 October 1956, at Nagpur, Ambedkar publicly converted to Buddhism. Around 380,000 of his followers converted to Buddhism at the same ceremony. This was just the beginning.

In the same era, soon after World War II, various Buddhist leaders and their communities became victim of authoritarian regimes, Human Rights violations or foreign occupation by means of military violence. H.H. the Dalai Lama, Tibet, Thich Nhat Hanh, Vietnam, and Maha Ghosananda, Cambodia, all had to live in exile. Ultimately, they followed the support of Buddhadasa for a bold initiative of Sulak Sivaraksa, Thailand. In collaboration with former Buddhist monk at Suan Mokkh, Pracha Hutanaawatr, Ajarn Sulak, in 1989, inaugurated the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB).



Buddhadasa Bhikkhu founded Suan Mokkh in 1932. In 1956 Dr. B.R. Ambedkar incited mass conversion to Buddhism as a path of liberation from the Indian cast system. In 1989 Ajarn Sulak Sivaraksa inaugurated the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) in Thailand.

Buddhadasa became a pioneering Patron of INEB, together with H.H. the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh and Maha Ghosananda. The Buddhist Peace Fellowship in the US joined as a founding member. Early support followed from Taiwan, pioneered in the person of Dr. Hsien-Chou Yo who gradually made efforts to bridge the gap with Buddhism in mainland China. Support followed from the Rissho Kosei-kai in Japan. An important milestone was the engagement of Dharmachari Lokamitra from India, and what is now called the Tri Ratna Community which stands for “Ambedkar Buddhism” (Navayana) in India and globally. The stable, if sometimes controversial, leadership of Ajarn Sulak who secured administration under the independent Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation established by him in Thailand as early as in 1968, was seconded by Harsha Navaratne, Sevalanka, Sri Lanka, who became INEB Chairperson in 2009. Harsha re-established collaboration with pioneer of engaged Buddhism in Sri Lanka A.T. Ariyaratne.

### **Recognition of INEB Patrons – Engaged Buddhism as a radical Middle Path.**

In the last decades, marked by the executive secretariat of Somboon Chungprampree, three Buddhist leaders received the Niwano Peace Prize: in 2011 Sulak Sivaraksa, while in 2020 Ven. Pomnyun, South Korea, and 2021 Ven. Shih Chao-hwei, Taiwan were INEB Patrons who received the prestigious prize. This stands symbol for the indispensable role of “engaged Buddhism” in the intriguing and dominantly conservative landscape of Buddhist associations and networks. Hence, the Middle Path can be radically transformative.

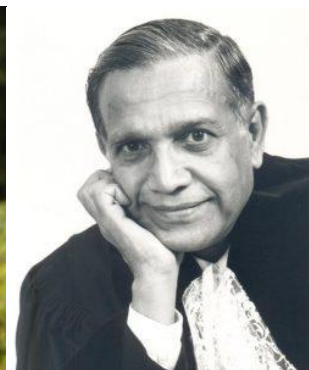
One of the inviting characteristics of engaged Buddhism is that it considers itself as a contributing stream towards “engaged spirituality” in general. It actively seeks interreligious and inter-cultural collaboration.

“Dhammic socialism” – an early social innovation close to the “commons” by Ajarn Buddhadasa – and the Economic Plan of Pridi Banomyong based on peoples’ cooperatives met with overwhelming suppression. Democracy, step-by-step built up by decades of common effort in Thailand, and under even more difficult circumstances in Myanmar, remains at risk of getting dissolved or violently destroyed giving way to authoritarian rule. In Thailand this is called “disciplined democracy”, meaning disciplined by military power. This is not what the present and future generations want.

Did political and religious transformation produce ideas for the future which can help guide young changemakers in co-creating the better world they want, and we all need? Let’s look at this from a point of view interreligious “engaged spirituality”. This perspective is not a side effect but at the heart of INEB as well as the diversity of educational initiatives under the umbrella of SEM.

### **Building blocks for a new society: Right Livelihood, Earth Democracy and Earth Trusteeship**

In addition to well-known concepts developed by H.H. the Dalai Lama, including “universal responsibility” and Thich Nhat Hanh’s “inter-being”, let’s closely look at leading ideas of three fellow Right Livelihood Laureates. Their independent visions stand in three different traditions: Sulak Sivaraksa, Thailand, in Buddhism; Vandana Shiva, India, in Hinduism; and the late Christoph Weeramantry, Sri Lanka, in Christianity. The Right Livelihood Award (or the “Alternative Nobel Prize”) was established in 1980 to recognize activism rather than academic achievement.



Sulak Sivaraksa, Thailand, received the Right Livelihood Award in 1995 “... for his vision, activism and spiritual commitment in the quest for a development process that is rooted in democracy, justice and cultural integrity.” Vandana Shiva, India, founder of Navdanya, received the award in 1993 “... for placing women and ecology at the heart of modern development discourse.” While Christopher Weeramantry, Sri Lanka, former Vice President of the International Court of Justice was awarded “... for his lifetime of groundbreaking work to strengthen and expand the rule of international law.”

In his famous book *Seeds Of Peace: A Buddhist Vision For Renewing Society* (1992) Sulak Sivaraksa says about Right Livelihood:

“Economic justice is bound up with Right Livelihood. We must take great pains to be sure there are meaningful jobs for everyone able to work. And we must also take responsibility for the theft implicit in our economic systems. To live a life of Right Livelihood and voluntary simplicity out of compassion for all beings and to renounce fame, profit, and power as life goals, are to set oneself against the structural violence of the oppressive status quo.”

The social critique of Ajarn Sulak, which prompted him to organize the pivotal *Alternatives to Consumerism* gathering, transcends the mainstream perception of Right Livelihood. The conventional perception of Right Livelihood as a step on the “Eightfold Path” in Buddhist liberation philosophy has been gradually determined by *stability* and by doing good within an existing social framework, without questioning it. Ajarn Sulak maintains simplicity as positive principle of lifestyle but adds the activist perspective of addressing structural violence and “theft implicit in our economic systems”. This epoch-making understanding of Right Livelihood corresponds with the contemporary and secular *transformative* meaning gained by the diverse, groundbreaking, achievements of the growing community of Right Livelihood Laureates.

Based on the insightful “deconstruction” of Sivaraksa, Vandana Shiva “reconstructs” in her book *Earth Democracy, Justice, Sustainability and Peace* (2005) governance and economic responsibility as common care. Earth Democracy implies that democracy is not only about humanity but that in our political and economic decision making we have to include Nature as a living partner. Vandana Shiva anticipated that this “oneness” would lead to the recognition of Nature Rights. Specific local ecosystems like rivers or lakes are increasingly protected by Nature Rights. Moreover, Nature Rights are introduced at constitutional levels in some countries. At the UN level they are central in the Harmony with Nature programme of the General Assembly. Ultimately Nature Rights urge us to address the novel challenge of governance of what we now see as “Earth System”:

“Earth Democracy globalizes peace, care and compassion”.

The third and concluding step in constructing an innovative approach to effective global governance in the face of climate emergency, economic inequality and decline of cultural integrity was made by Judge Weeramantry, Sri Lanka. Right Livelihood Laureate Weeramantry passed away in 2017 at the age of 90 years. His scholarly and activist legacy is being carried on by Neshan Gunasekera, Sri Lanka, councilor of the World Future Council.

Judge Weeramantry argued that the dilemmas and conflicts of interest between environment and development and related disputes between countries, as they reached the International Court of Justice in The Hague, often were caused by misguided legal frameworks based on the Western notion of property. Taking the way traditional farmers in Sri Lanka shaped their collaboration towards sophisticated, commonly managed, irrigation systems as example, he argued that it was not the Western notion of property rights that guided them, but “trusteeship” responsibilities. A trustee is a person who carries out ownership responsibilities and -rights not in his own benefit but for the benefit of others. Although the language may differ trusteeship has legal standing in most countries. In his book *Tread Lightly on the Earth. Religion, the Environment and the Human Future* (2009), Weeramantry elevates this principle to the universal level:

“Humanity is in a position of trusteeship of the environment and not in a position of dominance.”

This sense of ‘trusteeship of the environment’, later coined *Earth Trusteeship*, complies with what Weeramantry describes as:

(...) the world's religious traditions [and indigenous spirituality – later added by Neshan Gunasekera in line with Weeramantry's future unfulfilled vision] contain collectively an enormous reservoir of wisdom and principles concerning the relationship between humans and the environment, and on duties towards future generations.

(...) international law already incorporates these principles within its corpus of “customary international law” (...)

### **Earth Trusteeship: solid legal ground for the commons**

In this line of thought Right Livelihood College Bangkok / School for Wellbeing organized in 2019 an Earth Trusteeship Forum bringing an exciting diversity of perspectives together. Including an interreligious – exploratory – dialogue, with Harsha Navaratne, Sri Lanka (Buddhism), Alissa Wahid, Indonesia (Islam), Catherine Marshal, USA, (Christianity) and many others, parallel with secular visions. Dasho Karma Ura, President of the Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies and co-founder of the School for Wellbeing, spoke from the perspective of the Constitution of Bhutan and Vajrayana Buddhism.

“Every Bhutanese is a trustee of the Kingdom's natural resources and environment for the benefit of the present and future generations (...).” Article 5 of the Constitution of Bhutan (2008).

Thus, a redefinition of the relationship of humanity to the Earth, taking into account the notions of transformative Right Livelihood and Earth Democracy, results in a new Earth Trusteeship *maxim*: “*all global citizens are equal trustees of the Earth for the benefit of the community of life and future generations*”.

Weeramantry observes:

“A common misconception exists that a principle is not within the body of international law unless it is embodied in a treaty. (...) valid and and binding international law is also contained in the principles of “customary international law (...).”

Earth Trusteeship can in principle provide solid legal ground for a new commons-driven economy.

### **Independent “engaged spirituality” in the 20st century. *Threefolding*.**

One more step in our exploratory lecture is needed to come closer to the enigma of the “spirit” in the Spirit of Education Movement. A different historic perspective has to be explored to make this step. Notably, the 20st century (with its roots in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century) is marked by the emergence of streams of independent spirituality in addition to and sometimes in conflict with organized religion as well as with mainstream reductionist science.

The broadest movement, founded by Helena Blavatsky and colonel Henry Steel Olcott in New York, 1875, was the Theosophical Society. The founders were convinced to be par-anormally guided by “masters” from Tibet. Theosophy is still an existing movement, albeit much smaller than in its hay days in the early 20st century. The second generation leadership of the Theosophical Society, Annie Besant and Charles Webster Leadbeater, promoted a young Indian boy, Krishnamurti, as “the” new spiritual world leader, the reincarnated Maytreia as well as the re-born Christ. In 1929 Krishnamurti renounced all



claims, broke away from Theosophy and became an independent spiritual teacher. From Theosophy sprouted three off-shoots: 1. The re-vitalization of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, against the colonial mainstream but in a conservative frame. The movement was strongly supported by colonel Olcott; 2. The ongoing movement around Krishnamurti as an independent philosopher and teacher. 3. An alternative path guided by Rudolf Steiner who was leader of the Theosophical Society in Germany until he innovated, in discontent with the claims around Krishnamurti, his own spiritual “school” named Anthroposophy.



Helena Blavatsky, Russia / USA / UK, (1831 – 1891) was the co-founder together with colonel Olcott of the Theosophical Society. Rudolf Steiner, Austria / Switzerland, (1861 – 1925) split from the Theosophical Society and founded Anthroposophy as a movement for spiritual science. A contemporary Anthroposophist who focuses on the “threefolding” concept, bio-dynamic agriculture and on an alternative approach to Artificial Intelligence (AI) is Right Livelihood Laureate Nicanor Perlas, Philippines (born 1950).

Mahatma Gandhi, when he was a student in London, visited Madam Blavatsky. The visit remarkably urged him to re-connect with his own cultural roots. Gandhi found strength in the motto of the society “there is no religion higher than truth” and worked together with Besant in the liberation movement in India. But Gandhi was averse of the sectarian tendencies of the Theosophical Society and split with Besant – who promoted Home Rule or autonomy for India – once he started his radical non-violence and civil disobedience movement for full independence.

The Austrian visionary Rudolf Steiner, author of *The Philosophy of Freedom* (1894) and many works after it, ultimately settled in Switzerland to escape right wing aggression which developed into the First World War. To restore and renew post-war European culture Steiner proclaimed that a fresh, contemporary and non-violent understanding of the three values of the French Revolution could shape economic alternatives on the ground and ultimately a new world order in which independent but interactive cultural, political and economic “spheres of influence” would constitute a dynamic, Peace building, balance of powers. Rudolf Steiner died in 1925 and his “threefolding movement” could not prevent the rise of Hitler in Germany from 1919 to 1933 and the subsequent outbreak of the Second World War in 1938. After the war Anthroposophy branched out as one of the future-shaping engaged spirituality movements, realizing concrete alternatives in education, agriculture, medicine, social entrepreneurship and art.

### Contemporary evolution towards *tri-sector* global governance

In this context of independent engaged spirituality, Philippino intellectual and activist Nicanor Perlas (born 1950; Right Livelihood Award 2003) represents a new wave in the “threefolding” movement. His “development activism” culminates in a contemporary interpretation of “tri-sector development” hypothesizing that global governance should be guided by three independent, interactive but in principle equal powers: 1. elected governments, 2. a responsible business sector based on community values 3. and an interdependent but free and vibrant civil society.

The following comparative framework may serve as compass for critical dialogue and co-design of (action-)research.

**Resonance: a comparative framework of interactive development principles**

<b>Buddhism (Triratna)</b>	Buddha	Dhamma	Sangha
<b>French Revolution</b>	<b>Freedom</b>	<b>Equality</b>	<b>Sister- and brotherhood</b>
<b>Post-war world order (Rudolf Steiner)</b>	Cultural sphere	Legal and political sphere	Economic sphere
<b>Development theory</b>	Liberation	Justice	Community
<b>Tri-sector societal order (Nicanor Perlas)</b>	Civil society	Government	Business sector
<b>Political economy (origins and extreme manifestations)</b>	Liberalism > <i>Neo-liberalism</i>	Socialism > <i>Communism</i>	Commons-driven economy
<b>Ownership</b>	Private property	Public property	Community property; commoning
<b>Proposed overarching principle of Global Pact for the Environment</b>	<b>Earth Trusteeship</b> “all global citizens are equal trustees of the Earth” Dynamic balance of powers in a framework of Earth Democracy		

In Perlas’ analysis the present corporate sector hijacked the value of “freedom” in the guise of “liberalism”. Based on this “theft”, extreme neo-liberalism dominates the economic system and global governance. Civil society should have equal space to re-claim and cultivate genuine freedom. While the corporate sector should be driven by “sister- and brotherhood” or community, and, in Buddhist terms, by the Sangha principle in a modern manifestation as “commons movement”, and by social entrepreneurship. Governments should focus on guaranteeing social justice and withdrawal of all military power from the upkeep and radicalization of international conflict of interests as these are based on an outdated national sovereignty paradigm causing the revitalization of nationalism. Efforts and budget should be diverted to locally rooted global governance and transboundary ecosystem restoration initiatives. They directly address climate emergency, economic inequality and quality of life or cultural integrity. The *legal foundation* of this dynamic threefold governance

rooted in Human Rights, and complemented with Nature Rights – and thus based on participatory Earth Democracy – can tentatively be articulated as Earth Trusteeship.

Much more action-research is needed to clarify, verify, realise by means of experimentation, similar healthy interaction of values as the driving force of global, regional (determined by eco-systems) and local transformative governance. We should provide young changemakers – instead of putting them in prison for what basically are symbolic “crimes” – full opportunities to learn by experiment how to meet the immanent challenges.

**Emergence of a new economy. Is this theory only? Here are some concrete examples.**



Hansalim, Korea, is a well-known consumer – producer cooperative in South Korea. Commonland is an organisation for landscape restoration based in the Netherlands. The *Connecting the Commons* project, Thailand, was initiated by Innovation Network International (ini) and is supported by Heinrich Böll Foundation Southeast Asia. The CTC project organized a focus group gathering in collaboration with CUSRI (CU Social Research Institute) at Chulalongkorn University (picture).

In South Korea, Hansalim, is a globally renowned concrete example of a successful (not denying ups and downs) *consumer – producer food cooperative*. It is professional but genuinely participatory. With ca. 350,000 household members and annual sales in 2012 of US\$250 million it is said to be the biggest community supported agriculture (CSA) enterprise in the world. Hansalim is rooted in strong common values, celebration of festivals and experiential farm visits, collective and open negotiations between consumers and farmers about quality and price, a sophisticated distribution system including member-driven shops in the whole country and precise, transparent, information on all aspects of the supply chain. The present situation in which 76% of the total costs are spent on production (farm income!) and only 24% on operational costs is the result of a decades long learning process in which members knew how to overcome their differences, stay together and uphold the principles of a true “commons”.

The second example of what can be perceived as a budding *social enterprise* is Commonland, an organisation based in the Netherlands. It undertakes landscape restoration projects near Amsterdam, in Europe, Africa, Australia and in a growing number of countries. Commonland applies a “four returns” business model and agrees projects for a minimum of 20 years only. It categorizes landscapes in natural, combined and economic zones. The total sum impact is based on measurable achievements in the “four return” areas. The four areas are “return of inspiration” in situations where inhabitants feel they are

at the losing end of development; “return of social capital” in terms of improved multi-stakeholder collaboration; “return of natural capital”, healthier and more fertile ecosystems, and, as a final result, “return of financial capital”. Return of financial capital is achieved by diversification of existing (farm) enterprises including marketing as well as job creation and start-ups of new social enterprises. The participatory processes are guided by “Theory U” facilitation, inciting “deep” engagement. Some activities take place in the framework of the UN Decade on ecosystem restoration 2021 – 2030.

An affiliate foundation inspired by the legendary Chinese-American filmmaker and ecologist John D. Liu, has been set up. It organizes *Ecosystem Restoration Camps* all over the world including in Thailand.

Finally, at a much smaller scale and focusing on action-research in Thailand, Innovation Network International (ini) started the *Connecting the Commons* (CTC) project, supported by Heinrich Böll Foundation Southeast Asia. It initially identified – by means of interviews with a diversity of experts – some 30 projects and organisations in Thailand which work to various degrees in the spirit of the commons. Young anthropologists Kittipon Phummisittikul and Sittipat Tangsin guided by Narumon Paiboonsittikun, Coordinator TOA (Towards Organic Asia), undertook case studies of initiatives with sustainable food sharing as their core missions. The case studies included the longstanding *Hug Muang Nan* community and ecosystem restoration project, *Urban Gardening in Bangkok* providing food sufficiency during the COVID crisis, and barter trade (rice and fish) between *indigenous Karen and Moken communities*.

### **The future of SEM as an international platform of educational initiatives**

Let’s resume our questions. Can we co-design a future which transcends “business as usual” and resonates our deepest values? What is the development path towards realization of such a scenario? Would common efforts in this direction respond to the critique and the aspirations of the new generation changemakers who are now in the frontline of conflict with authoritarian governments who oppose change? How can we support these young changemakers – once authorities will be defeated – with a combination of experiential learning, opportunities for experimentation, reflection and transformative dialogue on the challenges of our time? How can we create an enabling environment based on social justice for the realization of these aspirations? With creative space for personal development as *free global citizens*, individuals and “commons”? How can we mobilize the insights and support of the people who signal growing awareness that we live in **climate emergency**, in an **in-equality crisis** and in a **debilitating cultural void**? So that an emergency plan will be broadly accepted and welcomed by citizens, the political system and spiritual leaders? Are business people able to overcome conventional money-driven strategies and open up to new paradigms of *investment*, with full cost accounting and social return on investment as indicators? How can we anchor our common efforts in a new constitution that provides us with the legal and political space and human security needed for long term common efforts? Can we reconcile Human Rights with Rights of Nature and include the global citizens’ voice in the UN system?



Nalanda was one of the greatest centres of learning in the world from the fifth century in the Christian era (CE) to around 1200 CE (800 years). It was based in Bihar, India. U Thant (1909 – 1974), Myanmar, served for 10 years as Secretary General of the United Nations. Right Livelihood College (RLC) was founded in 2009 as the educational arm of the Right livelihood Foundation, Stockholm, Sweden. One of 9 campuses is RLC Bangkok, affiliated with Wongsanit Ashram and Chulalongkorn University, Thailand (picture).

Although other issues may be at the forefront in different times and places, the above questions are in general what young people share globally as their core challenges. Progress along these lines will enable a new world being born.

### **SEM and the Right Livelihood College Bangkok: a joint incubation hub for activist Right Livelihood Studies? Conclusion.**

For the co-creation of a concrete educational emergency plan, firstly deep reflections in daringly broad and long term perspective are needed. Within the limited framework of our lecture and this article we propose to just have a quick glance at three flagpoles in history: 1. the educational prototype of 800 years Nalanda at the dawn of the first millennium; 2. UN Secretary General U Thant, Myanmar, as educator and as initiator of the first conference on Environment at Stockholm in 1972; and 3. the recent impulses emanating from the 40 Years Right Livelihood conference at Chulalongkorn University.

The first flagpole. Incredible Nalanda was a residential university believed to have 2,000 teachers and 10,000 students. Nalanda attracted Buddhist scholars from places as distant as China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, Turkey, Sri Lanka, and South East Asia, including scholars sent by the Sailendra dynasty of Java, Indonesia, builders of the Borobudur stupa. At the occasion of the start of an independent programme in *Nalanda Studies* supported by the Foundation for Universal Responsibility, HH the Dalai Lama – with his Mind & Life Institute a groundbreaking pioneer of cross cultural education and research – insisted that *Nalanda Studies* should be secular. This should not be in contradiction with genuine Buddhism. And in addition to recreating Nalanda University as an institute within the formal academic framework, as is now evolving in Bihar, India, supported by governments from the region, we should understand Nalanda in modern terms as a fluid, open and light international network of creative connectivity. Our SEM Lecture in 2021 may be the right momentum to hypothesize that SEM – as an umbrella for the diversity of educational initiatives around Ajarn Sulak, in Thailand and in Asia as well as globally – is one of the leading nodes in this network. After all its initiatives respond to the requirements of our time: being informal, experiential and activist in nature.

Second flagpole. In the present circumstances, the people of Myanmar demonstrate by means of the *Civil Disobedience Movement* (CDM) and individual actions, the most courageous and determined example of concrete “engaged spirituality”, learning by doing, including new ways of simply sharing food and shelter. If we look, beyond the tragedy of its present brutally violent crisis, at Myanmar as a source of educational impulses we may consider in the first place Vipassana Meditation. It inspired the broad “mindfulness” trend. And, Myanmar-inspired, the influential book of economist E.F. Schumacher *Small is Beautiful*. It prompted Schumacher College in the U.K., founded by Satish Kumar, to become a prominent alternative learning centre. Moreover, U Thant, a teacher from Myanmar, was not only Secretary General of the United Nations for 10 years, he tried to insert his interest in education in the UN system. He initiated the UN University, Japan, (proposed in 1969 and realized in 1973) and he anticipated the University for Peace (UPEACE) ultimately realized in 1980 and based in Costa Rica, with later affiliations in Manila and The Hague. Also the 1972 Stockholm conference on the Human Environment, the first ever UN conference on ecology, was prepared by U Thant. It triggered a host of new fields of academic studies as well as new purpose in activism. We plan to present the first results of our Right Livelihood College *Earth Trusteeship Working Group* (ETWG) as part of “50 Years Stockholm” events in 2022.

Third flagpole. What is the Right Livelihood College? One of the affiliates of SEM in Thailand is the Right Livelihood College (RLC) Bangkok, a new offshoot of the School for Wellbeing. The School for Wellbeing was co-founded with the Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies and the Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand, in 2009. In February 2020 RLC Bangkok organized together with the Right Livelihood Foundation, Stockholm, the celebration of *40 Years Right Livelihood Award*. Ajarn Sulak addressed the gathering as convening Right Livelihood Laureate, together with Ambassador of Sweden Staffan Herrström who made opening remarks. Participating laureates included Vandana Shiva, India, Nnimmo Bassey, Nigeria, Raul Montenegro, Argentina, Mona Abouleish, SEKEM, Egypt – a forward looking social enterprise – with Manfred Nowak, Global Campus of Human Rights. At this occasion Neshan Gunasekera, legacy holder of Judge Weeramantry, launched at Wongsanit Ashram the “Declaration on Education for Earth Trusteeship”. Young people from the region fully participated in the process. Coordinators of the Right Livelihood College from all over the world shared inspiration.

These perspectives on “spirit” in education marked by three flagpoles point to: the future; to the present characterized by violent conflicts and authoritarian regimes in the region suffocating education; and to the past Nalanda prototype. Together they lay out a landscape for our call for a renewed “spirit” in education movement: here in Thailand with reference to the *Ratsadorn group* and likeminded activists, in the Mekong region with the Myanmar *Civil Disobedience Movement*, in Asia with the *Milk Tea Alliance* as a binding force - and globally.

We propose an emergency plan with focus on *activist Right Livelihood Studies*.

Come On, Let’s Common.