

**Transformative Education for Social Justice**  
**The 28th Annual Sem Pringpuangkeo Public Lecture**

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Good afternoon...

I am so honoured to be invited today to speak at this 28<sup>th</sup> SEM Lecture.

The topic of “Transformative Education for Social Justice” is really a challenging one in today’s ever more complex world where many societies are deeply fractured and experiencing divisions in all spheres: politically, socially, economically, spiritually, and environmentally. When we look around us, we cannot but help ask ourselves “What has gone wrong”?

We are today richer and technologically more advanced than ever before, yet we seemed to be mired in even greater levels of inequality, greed, hatred, social breakdown, environmental collapse, rampant violation of rights, injustice, and pandemics of global proportions. Governments around the world, especially in our ASEAN region, have reacted to these problems not by being more inclusive and more consultative, but they have become even more authoritarian, and militaristic.

So the fundamental issue is how do we get out of this kind of toxic environment, and how do we ordinary citizens overcome such challenges. I assume that many of us here today are here because we have been involved in the Spirit in Education Movement’s (SEM’s) work, philosophy and values of social justice and social engagement. And that’s why we are here to explore how do we use transformative principles of education to address many of the growing political and social divisions we see around us, and seek ways towards greater social justice and harmony in our communities and societies.

## **Failure of Formal Education Systems**

I have spent most of my working life in UNICEF to support the improvement of basic education systems in various countries, in the belief that basic education is a fundamental right of all children and a fundamental responsibility of any government. Indeed that is true. But, what I eventually realized is most governments are only interested in using education to equip their citizens with knowledge and skills in literacy, numeracy, and technical competencies to enter the workforce. A small minority drawn mostly from families of the urban elite will be schooled to become leaders, thinkers, and innovators to lead politics, industries and the economy. The most important role of the education system is to produce loyal and compliant citizens of the state. The role of organizations and development agencies like UNICEF and development NGOs is to provide enough money and funds to the state education system to become more efficient to reach this objective by helping to build more schools, print more books and train more teachers.

This is why of all the government ministries, the Ministry of Education is one of the most difficult ministries to convince to embark on any kind of reform, whether it is curriculum reform, revision of textbooks, testing systems, and to embrace more open and inclusive systems of thinking and learning. The more authoritarian the governance system, the more difficult it is to engage the education officials in debates of positive change in the interest of the learners, the disadvantaged, and the ethnic minorities. And I have firsthand experience in what it is like to work with such systems, having worked in both Laos and China.

However, it is not just authoritarian states that resist education change, even in so-called democratic or more liberal societies, the formal education system is, to varying degree, the state's tool to brainwash their citizens to conform to the state's dominant ideology and value system – hence, the stress on nationalism, loyalty, national stability, and mainstream economic development.

Obviously people like you and I do not regard such formal education systems as adequate, appropriate or even desirable to nurture and bring out the innate potential and varied intelligences of our children and young people. Nor is this kind of education adequate to make us better human beings capable of building better families and communities.

As Sombath Somphone, my husband, who worked for many years with rural Lao communities, and had seen the failures of the Lao education system often said, “the formal education system is not about education, it can only be called *schooling* and in fact even *bad schooling* because it not only does not bring out the potential of every child, it often “dumbs down” their intelligence. It makes them “cogs” in a societal machinery serving the needs of those in power”. Sombath sees the formal education system as a way for those in power to manipulate the public, and deny most citizens the right to critically think for themselves, asks questions or take actions to address the inequalities, exploitation, and injustice they see around them. By not being able to question, to speak out and act, many ordinary people have become both the victims and perpetrators of the social problems and injustices in their communities and society.

Of course Sombath did not come to these conclusions on his own. He learned from other great educators, thinkers, social activists, and spiritual leaders such as Paulo Freire, EF Schumacher, and of course Ajarn Sulak Sivaraksa, and many others.

### **Transformative Education**

*“At present, there can be little doubt that the whole of mankind is in mortal danger, not because we are short of scientific and technological know-how, but because we tend to use it destructively, without wisdom. More education can help us only if it produces more wisdom”.*

Helena Norberg-Hodge in *Small is Beautiful:  
Economics as if People Mattered: 25 Years Later*

It is clear that increasingly, concerned citizens are looking for education systems that are not just content dominant, but alternative education that is more holistic, humanistic, and can develop wisdom in people to make positive change. Many are turning towards transformative education as a way to combat the social fragmentation, ethnic tensions, inequalities, and toxic political divides they experience in their own community and society.

The literature on Transformative Education talks about transformative education as a process that provides people with the understanding, skills and values they need to take action in resolving the interconnected challenges they face in their community or society. Transformative education equips individuals with skills to critically reflect upon the underlying reasons behind issues of equality, justice and sustainability. For transformative education to have impact it needs to lead to structural shifts in basic assumptions and support action-oriented strategies for learners and participants to anticipate and manage uncertainty. It requires learners and participants to exercise critical thinking, practice deep reflection on their own value systems, embrace diversity, and develop empathy.

Simply put, it requires learners and participants to confront challenges and uncomfortable truths within their own families, work place, and community. These include issues on human rights, gender equality, ethnic and religious discrimination, peace education and education of the heart. Rather than focusing on differences, it encourages addressing commonalities and areas of convergence and synergies. The end goal is towards a more just, inclusive and sustainable future and greater fairness in use and distribution of resources at all levels.

Understanding the theories of transformative education may sound easy, but putting such theories into practice is a life-long endeavor. It needs personal convictions to do what's right and fair.

For those, especially young people, who sincerely want to embark on transformative education for social change, the most effective way is first to examine your own values systems, including your own social and cultural beliefs, such as gender, ethnic and class biases that are learned from your upbringing, social background, education, and from your peer groups. You will need to confront and examine these biases, and deal with them honestly before you can accept diversities and differences, and cultivate respect, tolerance and acceptance. Changing oneself and one's own biases is the first step towards engaging in real social change.

Another area to embark on transformative education is to engage in open dialogue, discussions and study sessions on issues of human rights, conflict resolutions, peace education and practice of non-violence and compassion. These are the fundamental building blocks for bridging differences, scaling back discriminations, and developing social harmony and social justice. Such a learning journey takes time and needs to be guided by experienced mentors, and spiritual leaders.

### **Some Concrete Examples**

There are already many examples we can find in our region, especially here in Thailand and Myanmar, where individuals, groups, and progressive organizations have adapted and applied transformative education principles and practices to bring about positive change and social justice to their own areas of work and their own communities with good results.

To illustrate, I will give the example of the work of Sombath Somphone who adapted the principles of transformative education in his 30-year long work on

youth education and community development in Laos. More importantly, Sombath also drew heavily upon the training of SEM, and the teachings of Arjan Sulak Sivaraksa on Engaged Buddhism in his work. Sombath believes that the principles of engaged Buddhism are most relevant to addressing social issues for the predominantly Buddhist society of Laos.

One of the most successful example of Sombath's work is in the area of youth education for community development which he started in the early 1990s. Through this programme Sombath and his team trained young people in high schools and universities using many of the transformative education and engaged buddhism principles. After the training the youth volunteers must go immerse themselves in rural communities all over Laos to work and live with these communities to find out their problems. Using consultative approaches and working with local leaders, the youth volunteers then work with the communities to develop simple plans to resolve some of their most challenging problems. The actions the young people with the community were able to take included:

- constructing simple water systems for irrigation,
- making household water filters for safe drinking water,
- making of energy-saving stoves to reduce firewood consumption and deforestation,
- gender empowerment through establishing women handcrafts enterprises for employment and income generation, and so on

To address social issues, like drug addiction, HIV-AIDS, etc., Sombath was able to draw on the support of the more progressive monks from the Sangha to be trained with the support of SEM. After their training, the monks would go into schools to teach children about self-respect and how to avoid destructive behaviors like drug use. Working with the temples and schools, the Sangha in their various temples also organized meditation courses for children and young

people during the school holidays as a means to learn about Buddhist practices and mindfulness.

On more sensitive issues of deforestation, encroachment of community land and water resources by investors, Sombath was able to involve the monks to protect some forest and water resources by encouraging local temples and monks to conduct annual ordination ceremonies to protect the forests and water resources with participation of the local communities and local government officials. Once ordained, these resources are considered sacred and protected from indiscriminate exploitation.

Another example was providing training to villagers on the law on land rights, and to guide villagers on how to register their land and obtain official land titles. Once the villagers have proper land titles, the land will be theirs and cannot be misappropriated for other use.

These are some examples that Sombath and his team used to educate the communities, protect their rights and achieve social change for the disadvantaged.

As I said, in the region, and especially here in Thailand there are already many committed individuals and organizations that are using transformative education for social change. Many are taking actions to combat food injustice, restoring organic and safe agriculture, improving rights of migrant workers, supporting relief work for refugees, addressing issues of climate change, and advocating change of unjust laws to protect the victims of exploitation and so on.

### **Transformative Education for Social Change Requires Conviction and Courage**

However, taking supportive actions to bring about greater social justice for the disadvantaged often brings about personal risks, and hence requires personal conviction and courage to continue in such work. Such risks may involve

offending those in power and expose the individuals to risks of social isolation and economic insecurity. The risks and price paid for standing up for truth and justice may even be higher. These may be in the form of risking political oppression, and enduring physical violence from local authorities, imprisonment, extra-judicial killings, and enforced disappearances. Unfortunately we have seen such violations occurring much too often and to too many of our loved ones. The enforced disappearance of Sombath is a case in point.

To many of you, and especially to those who have been engaged in the SEM and INEB's programs and training, the engagement of transformative education for social change is not new. Many of you are already in your own way working and taking actions to address the issues of inequalities, discrimination, prejudices arising from gender, religion, and ethnic differences. You are already engaged in such transformative change. Many of you have also face risks and violence, but you have chosen not to stand down. You have chosen to live by your values and principles and never give up. For this I congratulate you and I wish you greater success in all your endeavors to bring positive change in your own community and society

Thank you.