

# A VISION OF PEACE

Roger Ash Wheeler finds that time-tested Buddhist logic directly addresses the spirit of our age.

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## The Wisdom of Sustainability: Buddhist Economics for the 21st Century

Sulak Sivaraksa

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I first met Sulak Sivaraksa some ten years ago in Bangkok. He arranged for my wife and five-year-old daughter to volunteer in a children's village school, located on the banks of the forested River Kwai. Sulak, social thinker, teacher, critic and activist, co-founded the democratically run school of socially disadvantaged young people, as he did many other grassroots organisations in Thailand and Asia, including the Spirit in Education Movement (SEM): a forest retreat centre for activists and social reformers, where courses are held in alternative development, conflict resolution, nonviolent action, Buddhist economics, globalisation and its impact, and meditation for social action.

Co-founder of the International Network for Engaged Buddhists (NEB), 76-year-old Sulak, who was educated in the UK, has authored more than 100 books in Thai and English, including *Seeds of Peace: A Buddhist Vision for Renewing Society* (1992) and *Conflict, Culture, Change: Engaged Buddhism in a Globalising World* (2005).

His latest book, *Wisdom of Sustainability: Buddhist Economics for the 21st Century*, based on a series of lectures and essays, continues the groundbreaking work on Buddhist economics begun by E. F. Schumacher in *Small is Beautiful: Economics as if People Mattered* (1973).

Sulak's succinct, 100-page volume, which is divided into eight chapters, expands on his past themes about the dangers of consumerism, the political, economic and exploitative realities of structural violence, and the need for grassroots interfaith



PHOTOGRAPH: DWIGHT MORTIN/ALAMY

Four Buddhist monks open the worship services at Central Union Church in Honolulu, Hawaii

activism. He addresses various dimensions of social and ecological sustainability, including creating cultures of peace, re-envisioning education and cultivating genuine security.

Sulak uses time-tested Buddhist logic and practices to question our Western approach to conflict. For example, when former US President George Bush's response to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center was to "rid the world of evil".

Sulak offered another solution: "When attacked, your choice isn't simply between violence and inaction. Other responses, including dialogue, law enforcement, negotiation and diplomacy are possible. When parties take the time to listen to each other, animosity often dissolves. Rather than divide the world between good and evil, we need to see each other, first and foremost, as ... fellow human beings."

Gandhian nonviolence helps to formulate Sulak's vision of a peaceful world. "An eye for an eye just makes the whole world blind," the Mahatma said. And Sulak asserts that nonviolence is the Buddha's master precept.

In each chapter, Sulak's moral vision, infused by the Buddha's teachings, addresses the spirit of our age, whether the subject is neocolonialism, global capitalism, modern agriculture, 'development' or the World Bank.


He approaches the problem and looks to 'Gandhian Development' which, he maintains, bases its ideas on the same foundations as Buddhist philosophy, for, he claims, "it aims at the reduction

of craving, avoidance of violence and development of the spirit". In Buddhist development, "work is not simply to 'get ahead', but is something to enjoy; a sense of working for basic needs, in harmony, with others".

This "with others" is a constant theme of the book, and emphasises the relationship to the world around us and to ourselves. Schumacher, quoted throughout, reminds us that "human beings are incalculably more important than profits".

And although, as Sulak suggests, "real security depends on working on ourselves", it is in relationship with others – our community, culture, social interactions and environment – that the wisdom of sustainability reveals itself.

"Trying to create a fortress, a gated community for the self can never work", he writes. "There is always a 'we'. Our only enemies – greed, hatred, and ignorance – are within us. External enemies are primarily projections of our inner fears. We rely on each other."

Perhaps Sulak doesn't offer all the answers to the questions he raises. But his message is very clear: inner work is inextricably linked to social action. Nurtured together, they can create a life that is fulfilling, rewarding and of benefit to others. 

Roger Ash Wheeler directs the Barefoot Barn, a meditation and yoga programme based on Dartmoor. [www.barefootbarn.org](http://www.barefootbarn.org)