

ENGAGED BUDDHISM IN SIAM AND SOUTH EAST ASIA

Introduction

In South East Asia, development has taken a western secular route focusing on economic growth without adequate consideration for environmental sustainability, social justice, cultural diversity and spiritual wellbeing. This approach has created great suffering among the people in these countries many being traditional Buddhist societies. A response to this suffering is an emergence of a socially engaged Buddhism, a frame of reference that is a critical embrace of traditional values and cautious critical selection and integration of appropriate values from modernisation. It is an attempt to renew ancient wisdom using Buddhism as a guideline to confront contemporary suffering in an inclusive way. It advocates changing one's consciousness side-by-side with transforming structural violence in society.

This paper looks at the conditions that led to the formation of Engaged Buddhism and focuses on South East Asia, especially Siam, using several initiatives inspired by Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Sulak Sivaraksa. Both are renowned Buddhist intellectuals and practitioners and regarded as the founding fathers of the Engaged Buddhist Movement in Siam.

What is the suffering?

Since World War II the Americans used South East Asia as another battlefield against Communism. Hence the imposition of American style development. The previous simple, diverse and largely harmonious societies are fast disappearing in the race towards development and globalisation. Not unlike its predecessors of colonisation and European modernisation, the process of development and globalisation is actively encouraging the degradation of sustainable indigenous ways. Many communities are becoming direct victims of development projects such as large dams, expanded road construction, promotion of cash crops, chemical dependent agriculture, unsustainable and illegal logging and so on.

In Siam alone, after four decades of development, the gap between the rich and the poor has widened to an unprecedented scale. Self-subsistent farmers have lost their land to absentee landlords from the big cities and become indebted to government banks and private shark loaners as they move from subsistence agriculture to cash crops and from simple living to a consumer society. Desperate for cash and no longer able to provide for basic needs there is a huge migration from rural to urban where massive numbers live in slums and poverty.

On top of this more obvious degradation, as mentioned above, is the sense of intellectual inferiority of the educated class, a much more subtle kind of colonisation. With their Western education either abroad or within the country, these elites lose confidence in their own spiritual and cultural values and are obsessed with a catch-up mentality. 'We have to catch up with the West'. 'Anything Western is superior. This inferiority complex is a fertile soil for planting consumer mono-culture in Thai society.

Four countries in South East Asia - Laos, Cambodia, Burma and Siam are of Theravadan Buddhist background and at different stages of western style development. To see how consumerism effects traditional Buddhist societies in South East Asia it is helpful to look at the contrast between Siam and Burma. Whilst Siam whole-heartedly followed the Americanisation process in the last 50 years, Burma at the other extreme tried to close the country from western domination in every way during the same period.

In Yangon, the capital of Burma, if we visit Shwedagon the most important pagoda of the country, we see Burmese of all ethnic backgrounds, monks, nuns and lay-people, paying

homage to the Buddha in different ways. Some pray and meditate and others perform devotions of all kinds. The pagoda is crowded all day, every day of the year. In Bangkok, the capital of Siam, the Emerald Buddha Temple next to the Grand Palace, is filled nearly every day of the year with foreign tourists. A much smaller number of Thai are around to pay homage to the Buddha. Every day Thai people crowd the big shopping malls in Bangkok like Jusco, Lotus, Tesco and Robinson. You even see people queuing before opening time. It is very clear that for the majority of the Thai, these shopping malls are the new temples and consumerism is their religion, even though, if asked, they would state their religion as Buddhism.

It seems ironic that the entire Sangha (Buddhist church) that is supposed to generate the Buddhist values of simplicity, generosity and compassion is now almost completely under the spell of consumerism. With few exceptions, the monks of Siam are naively welcoming this new religion and blending it with Buddhism as an unavoidable friend. Many monks are competing with each other to possess consumer goods such as mobile phones, BMW's and portable computers, others are obsessed with raising money from their newly rich parishioners to build ever-bigger Buddha statues and rarely used halls and buildings.

Whatever your social status, you have to climb up to the top. If you are from a farming family, you must not be content with being a farmer. You have to buy education to escape from being a farmer to become somebody, to become someone else. The whole ethos of society especially the media and the education systems inflict a sense of inferiority about whoever you are. You are never good enough.

From a Buddhist perspective this is a basic form of alienation. The *vibhava-tanha* (existential sense of not being good enough) has been stimulated by western-dominated international and national media and advertising to the extent that –today's young people reject the very basic facts of who they are.

In short to have consumerism as a religion means that the aim of individual life and the aim of the whole society is to gain unlimited wealth, power, recognition and sensual pleasure. The Buddha warned his followers not to cling to these four worldly temptations. Yet the present social structures that support consumerism encourage people to run after them madly.

These are the issues challenging socially engaged Buddhist leaders.

What is the root cause of the suffering?

Seeing the above mentioned problems faced by Thai society, Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, a renowned Buddhist monk and thinker, put it bluntly that modern development with its consumer monoculture has created madness and messiness in society. Sulak Sivaraksa, a lay Buddhist thinker and activist, stated that consumerism is a new demonic religion.

From a Buddhist perspective, the very core of the present development policy and resulting consumerism is the amplification of *tanha* (craving). According to Buddhist analysis *tanha* is the root cause of all suffering. Traditionally *tanha* is classified with three aspects: craving for sensual pleasure, craving for existence and craving for non-existence. In other words *tanha* is manifested in the three unwholesome roots (*akusala-mula*). These are greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*) and delusion (*moha*). In the context of consumerism the maximization of the desire to acquire unlimited wealth, power, recognition and sensual pleasure can be classified as *lobha*. The anxiety about acquiring these four worldly desires, the fear of losing them; the anger, sadness and depression (some of which can turn into physical violence) when they are lost or not attainable can be classified as *dosa*. *Moha* is the individualism and competition to

get them, the pride when one has them and the defining of who you are according to what you have. It also includes the loss of self-esteem and the feelings that you are not good enough when you don't get them, the jealousy when others get them and you don't.

However, in Siam we can see clearly that *tanha* doesn't work only on the individual level: it manifests itself in accepted social values. It is also manifested in the form of structural violence (*vihimsa*) such as the whole free market economy, the control of media by Transnational Corporations and the state mechanisms that favor the rich against the poor. The unsustainable industrialization process that overuses natural resources for excessive human consumption without compassion for other beings is another form of structural violence. In short the present social structure produces social values that promote *tanha* and perpetuate *vihimsa*-violence, exploitation and oppression in society.

Of course *tanha* has existed in all societies at all times since history has been recorded. However, in non-consumeristic societies past and present people of all cultures have learned to curb this *tanha* in one way or another so that harm to individual, community and nature is kept to a minimum. It is only in the consumer monoculture, rooted in the capitalist mode of production and the European Enlightenment worldview, that *tanha* been eulogised as a desirable value.

In contrast to Buddhist teachings, consumerism assumes that human beings can be happy by satisfying *tanha* whilst Buddhist belief advocates reducing and getting rid of *tanha* as the path to happiness.

$$\text{Happiness} = \frac{\text{satisfying } \textit{tanha}}{\textit{tanha}}$$

From this equation happiness can be increased either by adding to satisfying *tanha* or reducing *tanha*. While consumerism chooses the former and Buddhism the latter the Buddhist argument is that the more you satisfy *tanha* the more it will increase as the Buddha said :

'there is no river bigger than tanha'

This implies that *tanha* is something insatiable. Hence the endless circle of acquiring more and more and more but never fulfilling the sense of lack within.

The Vision

For socially engaged Buddhist leaders like Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Sulak Sivaraksa, South East Asia before colonisation was a rich region of the world in terms of natural resources, cultural diversity and spiritual well-being. The Buddha made a clear statement that to be contented is to be wealthy. It is clear that these societies belonged to a different form of civilisation than modern civilisation. They operated from a different set of values and worldviews. Buddhism and other spiritual traditions helped people to live a contented simple life close to nature but well advanced in the cultivation of human consciousness, relationships and community life.

Relating to the above-mentioned equation of happiness in Buddhism greed, hatred and self-conceit are also called *akusalamula*, the unhealthy roots. In the Buddhist culture we are encouraged to develop the opposite qualities of life, the healthy roots, which are generosity, compassion and wisdom of non-self centeredness.

With these teachings as a basic worldview, Buddhist societies in traditional South East Asia, fortunate with an abundance of natural resources, did not worship wealth or power or success. This does not mean that these societies did not have any flaws but it is clear that the enjoyment of a simple subsistence existence close to nature and rich in community life was highly respected. In these societies, contentment is highly valued. The life of the historical Buddha who left life in a palace full of wealth, power, recognition and sensual pleasure and became a wandering beggar living close to the earth in nature is a compelling story. Since the Buddha's time serious monks have pursued higher happiness by living such a simple life with minimum personal belongings.

Another aspect of good life is in the community. The sangha is a model for community life and individual growth. The highest aim of life is liberation from suffering and this is something that each individual does alone. However a community of good friends is very important to gain this liberation. The Buddha made it crystal clear that good friends are as important for individual liberation as dawn is precedent to daylight. Many sets of teaching have been laid down for living a harmonious and fruitful community life. All of them have an emphasis on participatory decision-making and equality both for lay community and monks. The Buddhist principles of participatory democracy (*vajji-aparibhaya*) will be explained later in the next section.

The way the Buddha organised his sangha showed very clearly that he preferred small and decentralised units of communities. Before he passed away, he was asked who would be the leader of the sangha. He replied the dhamma and vinaya, the teaching itself. During his lifetime, the sangha was organised with the highest number of members of community needed to make the most crucial decision as 20. Other important issues can be varied but at least 4 must be involved. So the ideal society is a loose network of small non-centralised communities where the highest aim is individual enlightenment but to achieve that one has to respect other members as equals and care for their well-being.

The Formation of Engaged Buddhism in Siam

In Siam, in 1932, Buddhadasa Bhikku started a very important Buddhist reform movement when he saw the degradation of the Buddhist sangha because of the modernisation process. He not only gave a theoretical framework but also experimented with creating and living in an alternative community for monks and nuns that became the famous Suan Mokh (Garden of Liberation). He proposed the use of the original sangha model as an ideal for social reconstruction and coined the words 'Dhammic Socialism' as an alternative to the present system. His socialism is completely different from the Marxist concept of socialism. Dhammic Socialism sees human beings as part of the natural system not as the dominating agent, hence human beings have to live a materially very simple life and devote their energy to cultivating the Buddha potential within.

In the 60's in Siam, Sulak Sivaraksa also articulated an alternative to the mainstream American style development adopted by the military junta and modern Thai technocrats. He agreed with and elaborated on Buddhadasa's criticisms of Western modernisation and its development process as a path to madness. In those difficult days of the Vietnam War in South East Asia, Sulak clearly saw a need for engaged spirituality and a place where social activists could carry out their work with mindfulness and live in natural and harmonious surroundings. Instead of trying to be over virtuous and avoid real issues, as many conventional Buddhists are prone to do, he felt that for the Buddhists to be true to themselves, they need to confront the tremendous suffering in society with mindfulness. This relates to the first Noble Truth of the Buddha, to see the truth of suffering. If one devotes one's life to social change without taking care of and nourishing the healthy aspects within

such as compassion, generosity and wisdom, one will burn out and escape from dealing with ones own baggage. If we meditate and calm our mind and inner qualities without looking at and tasting the suffering of our fellow beings, we are escaping from real issues and avoiding suffering. The two aspects need to be combined.

As an activist and organiser Sulak has risked jail several times in his life. As a social critic he has given a sharp warning to different authorities including the monarchy. He regards this role as the voice of mindfulness to the powers that be. He has challenged many dictators and Prime Ministers to make room for the freedom of expression that he considers vital for a healthy democratic society. As an organiser he is a pioneer in starting modern NGOs in Siam. During his forty years of committed engagement he has built a network of small organisations based on Engaged Buddhist teachings working with different target groups. Sulak has also taken it as his mission to organise numerous seminars and workshops among the progressive middle class, challenging the mainstream development discourse and arguing for Buddhist alternatives.

At the grassroots level Sulak and his colleagues have spearheaded countless initiatives in Siam and South East Asia to organise moral and intellectual support to strengthen community initiatives for self-reliance. Spirit in Education Movement, International Network for Engaged Buddhists, Thai Inter-religious Commission for Development and Wongsanit Ashram are a few examples. (See case studies below)

Sulak 's approach for change is very different from that of Ariaratne, the leader of the Sarvodaya Movement in Sri Lanka, an important rural reconstruction movement, also using a Buddhist approach to development. Although he highly admires and propagates the work of Ariaratne in Siam, Sulak saw his weakness in building a big hierarchical organisation. Sulak is also critical of Ghandi's oneman show type of leadership. According to his interpretation, the Buddha's way of organising initiatives should be autonomous but working together in a co-operative spirit where necessary. Hence the above-mentioned initiatives and many others some of which he has never interfered with after helping them get started. These small non-governmental organisations are fertile ground for young leadership to grow and form a strong social movement among Asian countries. So democracy has to be realised through democratic spirit.

The Path

The following examples show how development is understood by some of the groups Sulak founded or co-founded and their efforts to confront the negative aspects and to come up with more sustainable solutions. The first three case studies: the Thai Inter-religious Commission for Development; the International Network of Engaged Buddhists and the Spirit in Education Movement are three initiatives spearheaded by Ajarn Sulak and the fourth, which Sulak has greatly supported over the years, is the grassroots movement Assembly of the Poor that has metamorphosed from a protest organisation to take on the characteristics of engaged spirituality.

Thai Inter-religious commission for development (TICD) - Traditionally, the Buddhist monastery was the centre of the Thai community. Monks were teachers, counsellors, artists, healers etc. The most important activities of the community happened in the monastery. Most monks were sons, uncles and brothers of people in the same community and they played vital roles in community life. The modernisation process with the introduction of schools, hospitals, theatres, etc. has robbed these roles from the monks. Most monks are at loss, although their influence is still strong especially in rural areas. At the same time the modernisation process creates new problems in rural communities. With roads passing through, consumer goods such as TVs, motorcycles and refrigerators reach villages as well as middlemen who come in to sell other expensive products and buy cheap agricultural products.

Soon after, villagers become indebted and the vicious cycle starts to destroy the fabric of rural village life, as alcoholism, drugs, ill health, prostitution, HIV, loss of hope and what not move in. Some monks with natural leadership stood up to try and work with village leaders to cope with such change.

TICD staff would identify and visit these monks who have natural leadership and bring them together for exchanges of experiences and draw lessons learnt. At the same time they would provide them with a deeper analysis of the modern structures of violence that effect their community as well as other skills needed for community development work that are more empowering than the relief type of work. New community initiatives such rice banks, buffalo banks, saving groups, village coop shops, natural farming, etc. are introduced to reduce the debt and poverty created by modernisation.

When TICD started 18 years ago, there were around 20 monks involved, now the network of monks and nuns active in community empowerment work number around 500 all over the country. Many have accomplished a certain level of sustainability in their communities and become learning centres for both laity and clergy interested in holistic community development work.

Luang Pho Nan is a typical inspiring case. Once his village was a self-reliant village with an abundance of natural resources. Villagers knew next to nothing about the cash economy. When modern development and consumerism came to the countryside around Luang Pho Nan's monastery, in Surin Province, the villagers gradually became the victims of middlemen and shark loaners and got into heavy debt. Some even lost their land. He started his campaign with community meditation raising awareness of the dangers of consumerism and the cash crop economy where villagers have no control over the markets. He also encouraged the villagers to form rice banks, community co-operative shops and community savings groups all based on the Buddhist principles of participatory democracy (*vajji-aparihayadhamma*) summarised below:

- 1) to hold regular and frequent meetings to make decisions together
- 2) to meet together in harmony, disperse in harmony, do business duties in harmony
- 3) not to break the agreed principles
- 4) to honor and respect the wise elders
- 5) to respect and treat women well
- 6) to perform proper rituals and spiritual practice
- 7) to support those who practice for enlightenment

Not long after he started it in his monastery the work quickly spread to near-by districts and provinces. It has shown a way for people to get out of poverty by working together. The meditation aspect of this development work also made sure that wealth gained would not be used for unnecessary consumer goods. Villagers can gradually get themselves out of debt and aim for a self-reliant community life rather than joining the cash crop economy completely.

International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) - After a few decades of working internationally and regionally, Sulak heard of and felt the need for an international network of Buddhists who are actively engaged in different social change work. In 1989, INEB was formed after an international meeting of around 30 Buddhist participants from more than 15 countries. In the initial five years INEB held several international meetings that clarified complex issues that modern Buddhists are facing such as consumerism, Buddhism and the environment, meditation and social action, diversity and unity among different Buddhist denominations, etc.

The INEB secretariat acts as a clearing-house for information about active Buddhist groups around the world and aids needy Buddhist communities with international and other support. These include the Chakma and other ethnic Buddhists in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh, the Sinhalese-Tamil conflicts in Sri Lanka, the peace walk in Cambodia, the Asian sex-related workers in Japan and Buddhist monks who are active in forest preservation in Siam. They are also active members of the Tibetan campaign. Later on the secretariat expanded into the areas of empowering Buddhist women in different countries in Asia including promoting and supporting the higher ordination of women (Bhikkhuni).

Again the approach is decentralised to build a network, rather than another hierarchical institute. So each of the above-mentioned activities might be initiated from a country group, or from the international meeting organised by the secretariat. Once each initiative began the secretariat would encourage concerned country groups, or other like-minded NGOs to take over as active co-ordinators. The Chakma case was initiated from the yearly international meeting and later on INEB-Japan became very active in this campaign. The peace walk through Cambodia (*Dhammayatra*) was inspired by Maha Gosananda, a Cambodian spiritual leader at one of the international meetings. The Thai NGO, Santi Pracha Dhamma Institute, worked closely with the INEB secretariat in organising the first meeting of Cambodian Buddhist monks from all factions of the Cambodian conflict. There was a symbolic peace walk led by Maha Ghosananda that actually started around the main hall at Wongsanit Ashram one of the venues for the meeting. The Coalition for Peace and Reconciliation, a grassroots peace organisation from the Thai-Cambodia border, took over as a main co-ordinator once the real walk started inside Cambodia.

INEB also encourages like-minded members to get together and initiate activities of common interest. An offshoot of this was the Thinksangha, a group of INEB members and friends who like to think deeply to clarify complicated contemporary issues Buddhists are facing. They have done some good research and have several publications in these areas.

Wongsanit Ashram -In the mid 1970's, in the heat of fierce conflict between left-wing and right-wing political forces in Siam, a group called Ahimsa (roughly equivalent to non-violence) was formed by young activists around Sulak. They were hated by the left and misunderstood by the right as they did not subscribe to the view of either. They studied Gandhi, Thich Naht Hanh and other non-violent thinkers. They were inspired by the Gandhian ashrams formed as a base for freedom fighters during the struggle for independence of India. Mostly, ashrams are spiritual communities concerned exclusively with spiritual practice without anything to do with politics. Gandhi reinterpreted this and gave them a new meaning by integrating spiritual practice and political action, so his ashram model was a community of resistance to something wrong in the world.

The Ahimsa group and Sulak were dreaming about this sort of alternative community. The vision was a place where activists can live a simple, contemplative life being active in society rather than following the usual commercial paths of the middle classes. In the 1980's a piece of about fifteen acres of land seventy kilometers from Bangkok was donated for this purpose. The land was desolate overused paddy fields. It has been dramatically transformed by planting hundreds of trees. There are simply constructed traditional houses built for around 25 residents and up to 50 visitors who come as volunteers or to join a variety of workshops. There is a large organic garden that supplies vegetables. Many people have been drawn to the ashram, all with a will to live simply, develop spiritually and cultivate a keen social conscience. Ashram residents and guests respect the five Buddhist precepts of not killing, stealing, committing sexual misconduct, lying or indulging in toxic substances whilst encouraging inter-cultural and inter-religious dialogue. The traditional five precepts have been reinterpreted by engaged Buddhist thinkers like Nhat Hanh and Sulak to make them relevant to contemporary issues.

Traditional Precept	Contemporary version must consider
I vow to abstain from taking life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • harming any living creature harms oneself • taking life includes the arms industry, racial conflict, breeding animals to serve human markets, using harmful insecticides
I vow to abstain from stealing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ensuring meaningful work for everyone • challenging economic power structures and understanding that theft is implicit in our economic system and over consumption is theft from society • renouncing fame, profit and power as a way of life
I vow to abstain from sexual misconduct	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hurting or exploiting others in sexual relationships • understanding the implications of the global structures of male dominance and working towards developing full and balanced human beings free from socially learned 'masculine' and 'feminine' patterns of thought and behaviour
I vow to abstain from false speech	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understanding that one should be grounded in a deep and critical doubt about all beliefs and prejudices and hold all views more loosely • ecumenical tolerance • being critical of the patterns of information in modern media • speaking truth to power • overcoming lies and exaggerations perpetuated in the name of national security and material well-being • developing alternative media and education
I vow to abstain from intoxicants that cloud the mind	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • overturning the forces that encourage the use of drugs, alcohol and other intoxicants • understanding that an unequal distribution of wealth, unemployment and alienation from work are the causes of addiction

Typical courses at the Ashram include conflict resolution, mud house building, yoga and meditation. Since 1996 a Grassroots Leadership Training programme with an empowerment approach to sustainable community development has been run from the ashram, training hundreds of grassroots leaders particularly from marginalised groups in Burma and Siam but also Cambodia, Laos and further afield. (see more details under SEM)

Besides simple living in terms of material consumption, the Ashram seriously experiments with participatory decision making so that all members have the same opportunity to grow together. It was, at the beginning, a painful process and took a lot of time and energy of the members, but eventually a new culture was established and members feel empowered and enjoy living with this collective decision making process.

Spirit in Education Movement(SEM) - Spirit in Education Movement is another Thai NGO under the leadership of Sulak Sivaraksa running the Grassroots Leadership Training Programmes (GLT). The GLT initiative has been ongoing for nearly ten years and its efforts have underpinned a larger movement working for social justice in South East Asia. Working with marginalised communities in Siam, Burma, Laos and Cambodia, the GLT initiative runs three month courses and follow up sessions to empower communities to be self-reliant in terms of basic needs whilst maintaining their cultural integrity and sustaining a healthy environment.

There are study tours visiting innovative projects and introductions to appropriate solutions such as sustainable technology and micro-credit with an emphasis on complimenting the indigenous wisdom rather than overpowering it. The communities start to recognise the oppressive forces in society and how they are mirrored within themselves and move beyond these trends as they find renewed belief in traditional wisdom and regain their self-confidence and community confidence. The outcome of these courses is to facilitate traditional communities not yet marred by the consumer monoculture to move towards protecting themselves from the negative forces and critically to negotiate and make use of the positive elements of modernization in order to revitalise a healthy community life.

GLT works with participants of several faiths and encourages spiritual practice according to their own beliefs. However, if the content and process of the training is analysed we can see the basic essence of buddhist education (note the small 'b') according to the Noble Eight-fold Path permeates throughout. This Path encourages Right View, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Energy, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. An explanation of how this applies follows.

A large part of the training is to cultivate a right view and right thought of what internal and external development is. **Right view** here means the understanding of the four noble truths in terms of the structure of the human mind, the structure of the human society and the structure of the natural environment. The first three basic GLT modules are to Know Oneself, to Know Society and to Know Nature. **Right thought** is unselfish, non-violent and free of hatred and excessive desire. In order for individuals and communities to develop properly, generosity or sharing of wealth, power and recognition is crucial. Once conflict arises both within and without a compassionate and non-violent approach is encouraged. This right view and right thought can happen only when one sees the nature of the inter-relatedness of the universe.

The next three aspects of the Eightfold Path **right speech, right action and right livelihood**, are not dissimilar to the application of the five precepts mentioned under Wongsanit Ashram.

The last three of the Eightfold Path **right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration** are related to meditation. In order to encourage these aspects, the GLT courses include a seven-day retreat and every effort made to integrate meditation, prayer or puja practice according to the faith of participants into the daily schedule. In addition alumni are encouraged to do regular retreats and daily practice when they go back to their communities. In the long-term SEM aspires to establish a residential college of sustainable communities for South East Asia. It is planned that courses will then devote around one third of the time to learning and practising meditation, contemplation, yoga, tai chi and other serious spiritual practices.

Assembly of the Poor -Assembly of the Poor is a wonderful example of a non-violent grassroots movement challenging the mindset of modernisation and consumerism. Tens of thousands of ordinary people have worked together to confront the negative impacts on their lives caused by dams, the loss of land rights for hill tribe people, large-scale farming and fishing and the dire conditions for the workers in factories etc.

A high profile initiative is Pak Moon Dam in North East Siam where for many years thousands of Assembly members have gathered on a rotational basis latterly forming a large protest village. Up against the huge institutions of the World Bank and the Thai Government whose policies have wreaked havoc on the lives of the rural poor this is a real story of hope. Initially they protested the building of the dam to gain fair recompense as it would drastically impact on their traditional way of life, however the dam went ahead and many times the government reneged on their promises. The lives of the local people who were largely dependent on fishing and riverside gardens, changed beyond measure as more than two thirds

of the migratory fish, many indigenous to the Mon and Mekong rivers disappeared from the waters. Undaunted they campaigned to open the dam gates and return the river to its previous ecological state to allow the fish to spawn and the local fishing communities to thrive. The gates were ceremoniously opened in June 2001 and very quickly the species began to return and the people returned to their traditional occupations. However, once again the government reneged and now plan to close the gates for eight months of the year. With support from local universities and the Thai NGO movement the villagers continue their protests.

These villages are traditionally Buddhist but in Siam protests are seen as the act of the left. Indeed some of the protest organisers are from the left movement. Initially these left elements did not care about Buddhism. However after they had invited Sulak to dialogue a few times, they saw some relevance to Engaged Buddhism. Moreover, SEM workers introduced engaged Buddhist monks and nuns to support the movement as educators. As well as bringing in a new understanding of the Eightfold Path along the lines mentioned above they also introduced chanting and meditation practice whilst in the protest situations and this worked miraculously. It became much more difficult for the police (also Buddhist) to beat or arrest the people when they were chanting on the protest site. Once the monks and nuns had become involved, the Assembly seriously adopted the Buddhist principles of non-violent action and this reduced the legitimacy of the government to use violent oppression. Even the left-oriented leaders of the Assembly now appreciate meditation and take it seriously. The persistent and extremely difficult protests for many years have helped the authorities to rethink and delay building other dams around the country.

The Results

Buddhadasa and Sulak Sivaraksa are visionaries who saw the perils of modernisation coming decades ago. They are lone voices among the elites of Siam and are often seen as eccentrics as they warn that unrelenting modernisation and consumer monoculture will destroy the traditional society where Buddhism has taught contentment and simple living. However those suffering from the perils of modernisation have begun to embrace their message.

Some of the engaged Buddhist intelligentsia have moved to work for empowering the poor under the TICD and SEM-GLT programmes in order to strengthen traditional community life and critically negotiate their development path to avoid being totally submerged by the pressures and influences of modernity and globalisation.

It is three-quarters of a century since Buddhadasa started Suan Mokh in 1932. The influence of Engaged Buddhism in Thai society is still limited although it seems to be increasing gradually. One conclusion is that the Buddhist approach is a gradual approach: like ripples in a pond it starts small and slowly increases. Both Buddhadasa and Sulak use a decentralised approach when building a movement. People who agree with the ideas outside their inner circles take up initiatives by themselves rather than branching out from the centre. In terms of working for the poor they have helped create an example of good practice in community development where, without policy change from above, people at the grassroots can create a sustainable village free from debt and poverty. Due to the anti-consumerism aspect of the work, these villages have the tools to avoid being sucked into the cash crop economy and have a better chance to negotiate their own development path within the mainstream modernisation.

Intellectually, these two distinguished thinkers are very different from other well known Buddhist thinkers over the past hundred years since Buddhism encountered the modernisation process. Instead of using modernisation as a criteria and trying to explain Buddhism to fit into the modernisation ethos, Buddhadasa and Sulak use authentic Buddhist values as a criteria. Though adapting some aspects of modernisation they are very critical of its process and values from a Buddhist perspective. However, there is a lot of work to be done to make their vision more concrete and relevant to the future. They have provided an important base for the articulation of a Buddhist vision for the future of society. There have been other

human searches for an ideal society in the 20th century including the expensive experiment of the left movement. In comparison Buddhadasa's and Sulak's approach of gentle and non-violent anarchism that bypasses state power and creates self-reliant communities seems to be increasingly relevant in a world of rapid globalisation where more and more people will be pushed out from the mainstream.

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