

## Regional Dynamism and Global Concerns

ASEAN or Association of Southeast Asian Nations is the official regional organization in this part of the globe. This year it celebrates its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. The Thai prime minister happens to be the chairman of ASEAN too, and its Secretary General is a Thai Muslim. The Thai government plans to hold an international symposium in the middle of December to pave the way for the future of ASEAN, which is in fact under American as well as Chinese imperialism and is linked directly with transnational corporations. I don't think we can expect anything positive to come out of that symposium, certainly not for the grassroots or the majority of the peoples in the region. Since the politicians of every ASEAN member state serve the interests of big money and big power, they are not really aware of global concerns.

Up to the 1940s, Southeast Asia was directly under western imperialism. Although Siam claimed to be independent, she too lost her extra territorial rights to the great powers.

During the Second World War Japan claimed to be liberating every country in Southeast Asia from the yoke of colonialism. Yet Japan became the new master. The Japanese imperial army controlled every country in Southeast Asia. Although it stated that it respected Siam's independence, its troops were stationed here citing the pretext of being en route to Burma, Malaya, Singapore and Indonesia. Thailand even sided wholeheartedly with Japan in declaring war against the Allies. Luckily for this country, Mr. Pridi Banomyong, the regent of King Rama VIII, refused to sign the declaration of war and organized the Free Thai Movement in collaboration with the Allies, against the Japanese occupation.

When Japan was defeated on 15 August 1945, Siam could announce her peace proclamation on 16 August, with the approval of the Allies.

The proclamation can be considered as achieving peace in Siam, at least politically. Independence was restored to the kingdom, both *de facto* and *de jure*. To an extent, democracy was also restored. Elements of dictatorship disappeared, and the once powerful armed forces—a state within a state—lost political influence.

In achieving ideal peace, both politics and education have to be utilised so that each and every one of us would be able to treasure the value of peace, and that the country would enjoy peace and independence concurrently.

Let us, however, not forget that at the time of the peace proclamation, the Siamese Kingdom was surrounded by British, French, Dutch, and American colonies. During the Second World War, these colonial dependencies were invaded by Japanese troops, who claimed to be liberating them from the yoke of the Western empires. Yet, in reality, the Japanese Empire seized control and re-colonized these lands, be they the Philippines from the United States; Indochina from France; Singapore, Malaya and Burma from the United Kingdom; and Indonesia from the Netherlands.

Though peace was returned to this Kingdom, all our neighbours were not in the position to enjoy peace and independence. In the wake of WWII, all the territories invaded by Japan had liberation movements fighting against the return of the Western powers.

In this regard, Pridi Banomyong was instrumental in assisting these movements, particularly in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Indonesia.

As much as we would want peace and independence, so do our neighbours. If they need our assistance and we are in the position to do so, we should help them as much as possible.

Pridi Banomyong also led discussions with their leaders with the goal of establishing a regional grouping, the League of Southeast Asian Nations, which would help create solidarity within the region despite the different political systems. A unified and peaceful regional community would certainly have more bargaining power with the great powers or other regional groupings than a small, individual country. Pridi had the vision to realize that once India regained her independence, she would be as great as China. And China would re-emerge as a great power once she was free from the warring factions that were plaguing the country. Moreover, the United States would also exert influence over this region rather than the United Kingdom. Needless to say, the Soviet Union would also attempt to extend its sphere of influence to this part of the world.

It should be noted that every member of the League would need independence and peace, both internally and intra-regionally. In addition, they would be democratic and more inclined towards socialism rather than capitalism.

In a democracy, the voices of the majority must be heard without neglecting the voices of the minority. If a country consists of different ethnic groups, religions, languages, and culture, the independence of a country implies that each and every region of that country can also be free. Each independent country should be interdependent. This was the initial conception of the League, which was the precursor to ASEAN.

What I have just mentioned may recall Gandhi's Village Republic, which he elaborated thus: "In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening, never ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. It will be an oceanic circle whose center will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the village ready to perish for the circle of villages till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive in their arrogance, but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are an integral part."

Burma, a member of the League of Southeast Nations, proclaimed that once it was independent, every ethnic group within the sovereign country would be free and autonomous. In other words, the central government would only be responsible for defence, foreign affairs and finance.

Therefore, the policy of the government of Siam over 60 years ago was that of decentralization to cultivate regional autonomy—in the Northeast, the North and the South. Had this policy been fully implemented, democracy and independence would have been established concurrently with peace in every region.

In this scenario, Laos might have joined Siam under an autonomous and democratic rule. Of course, peace should be the key for all the countries in the region.

Likewise, the 18 Shan States or at least Kengtung, might have joined the Siamese Kingdom. Unfortunately, Siamese troops under the leadership of Phin Choonhavan, with

the aid of the Japanese, marched into Kengtung during the Second World War. This convinced the Prince of Kengtung that his state should not join military-ruled Siam and instead take part in the Union of Burma despite existing linguistic and ethnic differences. Why? The Burmese constitution stipulated that any autonomous region had the rights of secession from the Union after a decade of independence. However, General Ne Win seized power in 1962, resulting in the deprivation of peace and freedom for every ethnic group in the country.

Concerning Siam, the central government was considering the demands for the autonomy of the four Muslim-dominated southernmost provinces within the Kingdom....

It was unfortunate that the development of peace, within Siam herself and among her neighbours, ended abruptly on 8 November 1947 as a result of the military coup d'état led by Plaek Pibulsonggram and Phin Choonhavan. Democracy in form might have been in place until 1958, but its essence was gradually lost. What happened was that the people's freedom drastically eroded: freedom of speech was greatly jeopardized, autonomous rule in the outer regions was undermined by the junta, resulting in many false charges against secessionist movements in the Northeast and the South, liberal-minded politicians and journalists were purged, prosecuted and ultimately executed. Even Buddhist monks were not exempted. Ultimately, peace lost ground.

More unfortunate was that truth also gradually faded away. Anyone of integrity found it more and more difficult to survive politically. This was a time when characters with doubtful morals and opportunists subservient to the powers-that-be grew exponentially. These Machiavellian souls low on integrity were even highly admired by the society of that time.

Education intoxicated the masses with half-truths instead of guiding them in the quest for truth, beauty or virtue. As a matter of fact, every educational institution here has become deferential to money, power, and Western mainstream thinking characterized by fragmentary, rather than holistic perspectives, with the brain separated from the heart. The goal of education was to prepare for a career that would match the time and effort spent. Whether or not the career in question was a right livelihood, it did not seem to matter at all.

The present ASEAN has none of the vital elements of its precursor. At present it is very difficult to revive the ideas behind the League and to pave the way for regional dynamism that is concerned about the contemporary global condition because of the constellations of power—ne imperialism, neocolonialism, neoliberalism, etc.—that are controlling most of us, knowingly or unknowingly.

Now let me quote John Cobb, a leading American theologian, who said

If our traditional religious communities are so alienated from the teachings of their founders that they cannot see that American imperialism in the service of global capitalism stands in sharp contradiction to all they have taught, their ability in the future to address any issue of public importance is radically compromised. Actually, this may be a challenge of apocalyptic dimensions. If the United States proceeds as its leaders now desire, it will lead the world into ecological catastrophe. Since the United States has the military power to suppress all national military opposition, the only effective resistance will be moral,

intellectual, and spiritual. To be effective this will, no doubt, have to express itself in nonviolent civil disobedience. If our traditional religious communities do not generate, or at least support, such opposition, it is doubtful that resistance can achieve sufficient strength to block the implementation of disastrous American policies.

I may add that our traditional educational institutions are no better either. Many of us have come to realize that whatever that goes by the name of “Western modernity,” often called “development” or “globalization” is in fact neoimperialism—something that unjustly reaps the benefits away from the people. The Industrial Revolution spread the capitalist system through violence, conquests, ethnic cleansings, and slavery. Even within the heart of the empire the poor are taken advantage of through various means. The more the few of the upper class exploit the many of the lower class, the more violent the present condition will become. This violence multiplies the more modern technology is introduced, the more power is vested in multinationals, and the more the superpower loses its moral conscience.

Economic, social and political inequalities, not to mention the exploitation that comes in various guises, form the roots of violence: Violence that is inflicted on those from a different class background, those believing in a different religious creed, and those practicing a different custom. These differences are linked to the unjust social structure, which, in turn, depends on the world economic order operating under neoliberalism.

The stark differences existing in society result in one side enjoying privileges, making the other find various ways of opposition, even perhaps not through the normal means of justice, since the law serves the rich and powerful.

Once one side abuses the other, it is natural that the other would retaliate, hence exacerbating violence. This corresponds with a Buddhist saying: “Bad deeds cannot be ended through retribution.” If “bad deeds” keep persisting in our world, then our economies would continue to produce arms, including the most destructive weapons that profit the superpowers and their defence-related industries, at least in the short run. Eventually, such investments would yield no value to society but would only create losses.

How then do we find a way out of violence and for egalitarianism? The answer lies of course in the pursuit of non-violent means. That is, we need to swim against the mainstream currents of thought. We have to cease developing technologies of mass destruction. We have to set limits to modern technological developments. We have to make the existing free trade fair, transparent and bounded.

From a Buddhist perspective, all forms of suffering in this world are directly or indirectly derived from three root causes; that is, greed, hatred and delusion.

At present, greed is expressed through capitalism, entrepreneurialism, and consumerism. People come to believe in money and worldly sciences, including modern technology which leaves us little time to search for our true capabilities or the miracles of life. We should realize that the basis of Western philosophy lies in the Cartesian dictum “*cogito ergo sum*” or “I think, therefore I am.” We learned that Descartes is the Father of Modern Philosophy, but have we ever contemplated where the roots of individualism are? Individualism, expressed by oneself, is in fact a duality: If there exists a “one”, there also

exists an “other.” This essence is contrary to the Buddhist principle of interdependence of all beings. In fact, we inter-are.

Today’s world has transformed “I think, therefore I am” to “I buy, therefore I am”, the essence of consumerism. The reason why we study is to be able to get a job and make money. Money for buying goods which we don’t need. It follows that if we lose the power to buy, we lose the purpose of our lives. And if we don’t consume, at least we have to compete with one another: we are all entrepreneurs of our lives.

Have we ever realized that we have been misguided by something that is the cause of violence? To achieve peace, Buddhism proposes the dictum “I breathe therefore I am.”

Our humanity is not about our thoughts. Thoughts may make us more intelligent, but they certainly do not make us into good persons. Even without thinking, we might be good. But without breathing, we die.

We constantly breathe, without stopping. Yet we do not seem to give any importance to breathing. We take our first breath when we are conceived and our last when our bodies are dead. With Western education, however, we ignore the importance of breathing. We breathe in anger, hatred, stress, vengeance, greed, and delusion almost all the time.

Buddhists call the mindfulness of breathing *ānāpānasati*, and it works as follows:

When you inhale a long breath, know that you are inhaling a long breath.  
When you exhale a long breath, know that you are exhaling a long breath.  
When you inhale a short breath, know that you are inhaling a short breath.  
When you exhale a short breath, know that you are exhaling a short breath.

From these simple exercises, we may want to try breathing in love instead of anger. We may be able to overcome the scourges of greed, anger and delusion through our conscious breathing.

When we are conscious, we are able to understand the essence of mindfulness, which is the key to life. To understand life means more than knowing the sum of its mechanical parts—however this is what we have been taught by scientific materialism. At least we should come to realize that we should not be living our lives for personal glorification, for climbing the social ladder—which is abound with injustices, but we should rather recognize that the downtrodden and the exploited members of our society are no less important than us. We should also realize that we share a responsibility in protecting our natural environment, which is being incessantly destroyed. We should also learn how not to hate even those who are exploiting us, but we should instead overcome the unjust and violent social structure.

The core teachings of Buddhism are the Four Noble Truths and the first is the Truth of Suffering. If we do not confront suffering, we do not know the essence of suffering. Suffering that is both individual and social.

What we call globalization or modern development does not have an understanding of the essence of suffering. One escapes from suffering using intoxicating means of consumerism and globalization as the civilization of the new generation.

However, globalization does not acknowledge the essence and meaning of life at all. Arguably, globalization may improve the livelihood of the people, but it also denies the path towards true happiness, which is peace.

From a Buddhist perspective, man can enjoy happiness when man has three levels of freedom: (1) Freedom to have a decent livelihood, which is conditioned by the material and the natural environments. In other words, man should not be taken advantage of in the pursuit of a good life. His environment should not be destroyed so that it drifts away from its natural equilibrium. Man should also be aware of the dangers lurking in nature and hence adapt himself to such dangers. (2) Freedom to enjoy a good life with others. This means freedom from being exploited by fellow men, be it from the state, theft, or dangers from capitalism and consumerism. Both freedoms are factors which foster man to achieve freedom of the mind, which is supreme happiness. Man would be content in living simply, be compassionate towards others and should safeguard the environment. From a theological perspective, man must be able to experience God.

Once man is able to be with God, or recognize the supreme Dhamma, his ego would diminish and peace would consequently be an important basis of his life and his society.

In order to achieve peace in society, contemporaries who already have seeds of peace embedded in them need to analyze the structure of society in order to understand how greed, anger, and delusion are expressed. It is fortunate that this idea is gaining some currency, beginning from Schumacher's writings on Buddhist Economics some 35 years ago to the works of the Venerable Bhikkhu Buddhādāsa in Siam. Cobb and Daly also wrote a wonderful book on Christian economics which is really challenging neoliberalism, which promotes greed at the expense of humans. There is even a school of political science that denounces violence; i.e. Glenn Paige's, and it has gained considerable interests in various educational establishments. Not to mention David Loy and his Buddhist approach to the social science.

With the Buddhist perspectives on greed and hatred, true understanding of delusion becomes even more important. At last, there are some in institutions of learning who are yearning for contemplative education, which is closely associated with the study of morals. In doing so, society would return to normalcy and peace would be achieved, ultimately resulting in mindfulness to achieve the highest freedom—wisdom, the essence of peace.

I sincerely hope that what I have said would enable you to contemplate clearly on the present global condition and perhaps would even make you act by challenging the *status quo*—the intellectual subservience to the mainstream Western domination which people in other parts of the world have been naively following far too long. Perhaps you could achieve peace in society and in the world through achieving peace within yourselves. Perhaps you could spread your individual state of peace through a culture of awakening and non-violence, replacing the evil and violence existing in today's societies.

We may be a small group of people. However, as a leading Western sociologist, Margaret Meade, put it beautifully, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, dedicated citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." To put it stronger, let me end my talk by quoting Gandhi who said, "A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history."

Keynote address by Sulak Sivaraksa to the Master of Arts in International  
Development Studies Conference *Regional Dynamism and Global Concerns* at Faculty of  
Political Sciences, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok ,1<sup>st</sup> October 2008