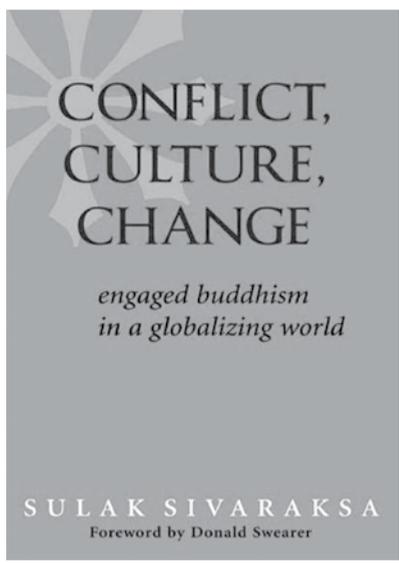


Conflict, Culture, Change: Engaged Buddhism in a Globalizing World

Lei Xiaoli

Graduate School, Mahachulalongkorntajavidyalaya University, Thailand.

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Author : Sulak Sivaraksa
Foreword : Donald Swearer
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Introduction

The book Conflict, Culture, Change—Engaged Buddhism in a Globalizing World was written by Sulak Sivaraksa, a world famous Thai intellectual and social activist. This book was published by Wisdom Publications, Boston, in the year 2005. It was a collection of essays, in which Sulak Sivaraksa touched on many of the basic aspects of Engaged Buddhism in order to figure out some ideas or methods to response to global conflicts, cultural problems and social changes in modern Western and Eastern society.

This book was made up of three parts: “Peace, Nonviolence, and Social Justice”, “Simplicity, Compassion” and “Culture and Change”. Part I revealed Sulak Sivaraksa’s proposals on two concepts: individual violence and structural violence. The individual violence was linked directly or indirectly with greed, hatreds, and delusions, and how we were able to eliminate them with Buddhist practices. Sulak Sivaraksa paid more attention to structural violence, which was inherent in the very structures of our cultures and societies and which many people ignored. Sulak Sivaraksa thought it was the roots of many global conflicts, and proposed some methods to solve. First, nonviolence could provide three types of response: peacemaking, peace building and peacekeeping. However, in Sulak Sivaraksa’s opinion, all of these three were problematic and a true nonviolent response was based on Metta Karuna, or loving-kindness and compassion. Second, reconciliation which kept aware of interconnectedness with others and transcended our prides and delusion helped construct social justice. Third, simplicity, which resulted in freedom from attachment to physical and sensual pleasure and humility and which implied the respect for all beings, could lead to better harmoniously coexisting with one another.

In Part II, Sulak Sivaraksa discussed four topics. What was put at the first place was the “Interreligious Dialogue”. He argued that all religions should appreciate the unique strength of each other, and should be generously enough to accept criticism objectively from others as it might become a driving force for reform or reinterpretation. Second, being aware of breathing was a very simple magic that helped us be tranquil and encourage us to look for peace and justice in the world. Third, the motivation in conducting our business ought to be reshaped, by combining compassion and competition. At last, Buddhist education was supposed to be promoted so that Buddhist teaching would be widely understood and applied in solving social problems and working on national development.

In Part III, Sulak Sivaraksa mainly reviewed and also rethought the role Buddhism played in culture and social change in Thai history. He thought that in modern times, Buddhism should not limit itself in the monasteries, but devote more on spiritual training. And in response to social problems, Buddhism should find the roots of structural violence and eliminate them with nonviolence.

In this book

Sulak Sivaraksa expressed his opinion about how Buddhism response to the global conflicts, cultural and social changes. It enlightened us in several realms of thought.

1. Sulak Sivaraksa showed great interest in Buddhist issues, but also kept an open mind to other religions. Sulak Sivaraksa was born in Thailand and ordained as a monk for two years, so he was concerned with the history and present situation of Thai Buddhism so much. He advocated Buddhist reforms in response to the social changes and globalization. He also argued that Buddhism should be applied to solve social problems. What was interesting, not being limited in Thai Buddhism or even Theravada Buddhism, was he had also absorbed some intellectual resources from Mahayana Buddhism and even other religions. For example, he used the concept of “Indra’s Net” from the Avatamsaka Sutra to describe the Thai social system. (p.71) On the other hand, he was interested in interreligious dialogue. He conceded that religions such as Christianity exerting a great influence on his thoughts. Interreligious dialogue, in his idea, never meant selectively extracting thoughts from religious teachings in order to show their similarities, but understanding the teachings within a large context of faith. We should fully respect the teachings and practices of each religion, and cooperate with each other to solve social problems.

2. Sulak Sivaraksa appealed to the adjustment in Thai Buddhism to cater to modern society. This was a big issue containing numerous aspects, like the relationship between Buddhism and technology, entertainment, economy, politics, education and so on. What Sulak Sivaraksa especially focused on was how to use Thai Buddhism to solve social problems. The globalization brought us a lot of serious social problems. Buddhism, as an important factor of society, should make self-adjustment to response to these new changes on the one hand, and try to figure out some methods on the other hand, both of which were unable to be functional separately. In Sulak Sivaraksa's idea, Buddhism should actively be engaged in social issues, social enlightenment, attend social activities and apply its thoughts into real practice. This also had positive inspiration and referential significance for Chinese Buddhism. For example, now there are more and more Chinese Buddhists engaging in social activities, such as preservation of local traditions, foundations to support Buddhist education or researches, etc. However, Sulak Sivaraksa thinks, though it could change the motivation of Buddhism, it still could not help Buddhism be a social force which was isolated from global politics and economic organizations.

3. Sulak Sivaraksa found out that structural violence was the roots of social problems. The danger of individual violence was limited and obvious, while the structural violence was more damaging and easier to dismiss. In the age of globalization, transnational corporations and institutions provided a breeding ground for structural violence. They neglected or denied intentionally the differences in nationalities, and also social, cultural and economic diversities in different regions or countries, which always led to various social contradictions. In other words, social problems originated from structural violence were just the problems from global modernization. More attentions were paid to keep in line with international practices, rather than domestic problems in some particular nationality, economy and ecology. Like Sulak Sivaraksa set as the example his own government's harsh treatment of villages displaced by the Pak Moon Dam. Meanwhile, China also had similar problems,

like the anthropological research, *Passage to Manhood: Youth Migration, Heroin, and AIDS in Southwest China*, (Liu, Shaohua : 2011) all of which showed us that the Chinese government forced modernization in southwest China, and caused Yi People, one of the national minorities in Liangshan Mountain in Sichuan Province, suffer from the heroin-addiction and AIDS because of effective government regulation.

Though Sulak Sivaraksa's ideas are very innovative, there are several problems existing. First, his ideas are romantic and ideal, and difficult to be put into practice. He thought, by spirit training and cultivation of compassion, it was not difficult for us to eliminate greed, hatreds and delusions. To handle the global structural violence, Sulak Sivaraksa's answer was also quite simple: focusing on our mind. In his mind, based upon the Engaged Buddhism, Buddhist thoughts and practice were used to change mind; different cultural and religious resource were developed to negotiate with other international forces in order to solve conflicts in the way of nonviolence. Thus compassion or love-kindness would be cultivated and justice would come up soon. He brought up changes from one single person to a country, and also placed hopes on everyone's mind, but not any reform by the government. He didn't advise the government to formulate relevant laws and policies but only bet on the people's difficult-to-control mind. Obviously, it was difficult to come true and his romantic perspectives and idealism cannot really save the social problems.

Second, it is problematic for Sulak Sivaraksa to reject the modernity of Thai society. Sulak Sivaraksa pointed out some problems originated from modernity: monks becoming politically powerful and being lax in keeping disciplines, people becoming selfish, and so on. He criticized the modernity happened in different areas. For example, he thought the western education system eradicated the threefold training and cultivated the brain at the expense of the heart. He thought technology and modernity uprooted and destroyed the traditional way of living and insisted on returning to the old

traditions. This idea is problematic, in my opinion, as the technology and modernity is only the instrument of life, proper application of which will bring us great benefits. What we should do is to learn how to utilize technology and modernity properly, but not completely deny them.

Third, some of Sulak Sivaraksa's ideas are biased. For example, he thought the early Chinese immigrants wanted wealth more than anything else, due to the lacking of the Buddhist knowledge. (pp.115-116) However, the situation was much more complicated. When the new immigrants went to this foreign country, they were homeless without any properties, so it is reasonable for them to accumulate some to feel safe and assured.

From all above

We found Sulak Sivaraksa had keen insight into Thai and international situations, as well as social, political and economic problems in the age of globalization. Based on Buddhist teaching (not only Theravada Buddhism), he assimilated ideas from other religions and cultures, and synergized the essence of Eastern and Western cultures. However, he turned to Buddhism and people's mind for help to solve all the problems is not realistic.

References

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