

What can I do for you today?

Receiving a gift of dharma from Sulak Sivaraksa

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From behind me, an old Thai man wearing a white worn-out cloth appeared and walked to his position in a circle composed of thirty Burmese people. He slowly sat down and crossed his legs. After a few minutes, he put his hands together and smiled, putting at ease those who were looking at him so seriously and intently. I shouted in my heart, "He was the one, my hero! Yes, I came to Thailand to see him!" My excited heart gave me goose bumps on my whole body. He was Sulak Sivaraksa, the founder of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists.

In 2006, I went to Thailand for one month to participate in an intensive summer program on Engaged Buddhism at Webster University in Hua Hin. After I completed the program, I asked Prof. Theodore Mayer, the American scholar who was in charge of running this summer program, if he could accompany me to Bangkok so I could visit major Buddhist sites before I left Thailand. The program had been very intensive, so I had hardly been outside the Hua Hin area except during two field trips to visit forest monks (see "Note," below). Prof. Mayer very kindly agreed to take me on a two-day trip to visit popular sightseeing spots and major Buddhist temples in Bangkok. Because he had been living in Thailand for about eight years, he was fluent in the Thai language and knew the city of Bangkok very well.

The first day, we went by bus to various sightseeing spots. What surprised me was that when the bus passed by a Buddhist temple, the bus driver, even while driving, put his hands together and bowed toward the temple. I was impressed by the Thai people's devout attitude, but, at the same time, I prayed that the bus driver would not get into a traffic accident. When we took boat rides, I noticed that there were reserved seats for Buddhist monks. When I was on board, I saw many young monks -- still children -- chatting together animatedly.

While sightseeing in Bangkok, it started to rain, so we ducked into a Buddhist temple to take shelter. There we met two monks who came to talk to us in Thai. One of them was holding a thick fortunetelling book, and the other had an animal-like tattoo covering his whole body so that even his robe could not completely hide the picture. The fortunetelling monk asked us our ages and our nationalities and began to tell us our fortunes. I was not interested in such "superstitious" practice at all, so I ignored him.

Then the other monk became curious about me because I was Japanese and began asking me questions using his not-so-perfect English. When I told him I was Japanese and studying in the U.S., he smiled and put his right hand into his robe and took out some Japanese currency. He had somehow obtained sixty thousand yen (about \$550) and was showing off the money to me. Although the two monks were wearing the same robes as those living in the forests faraway from Bangkok, I felt that the temple monks were very different from forest monks. Prof. Mayer quickly noticed my complicated feelings, and we politely left the temple and the two monks behind us.

On the second day, although I had to go back to Japan from Bangkok International Airport, my flight was very late so I had enough time to visit one more place. We took a taxi from our hotel and went to a bookstore built next to a white, two-story building in the suburbs of

Bangkok. Because of the bookstore's location, our taxi driver could not pull over directly in front of the store. We left the taxi, and Prof. Mayer took me to a side street, where we walked toward a shed-like building. I followed him and soon saw a big, yellow flag adorned with the words "Ajaha Sulak Sivaraksa" and "International Network of Engaged Buddhism."

Now I remembered that, when I asked Prof. Mayer to take me to Bangkok, I had told him that one of the reasons I came to Thailand was that I really wanted to go to Sulak Sivaraksa's bookstore and office, with the hope of meeting him. To be honest, sightseeing in Bangkok was not what I really wanted to do. However, I felt like I could not leave Thailand without visiting Sulak Sivaraksa's bookstore.

Fortunately, Prof. Mayer has a very good relationship with Sulak and was able to arrange for us to meet him at his office. We were invited to the second day of the three-week special training session on nonviolence held at his office for the Burmese Christian Association. My greatest and last agenda for coming to Thailand would now be fulfilled.

As soon as we arrived at the bookstore, we were invited to the first floor of Sulak's office, which was adjacent to his bookstore. In his office, some Burmese people had already gathered and the meeting was under way. I was told that Sulak was supposed to be there but he was not because of some undisclosed reason. After we joined their circle and exchanged simple greetings in English, I learned that they had come to meet Sulak to learn about the Buddhist nonviolent revolution in Burma.

About an hour later, I heard someone outside speak some words in Thai. Then everybody looked outside and saw an old man coming toward the meeting room. It was Sulak. He came into his office and looked very relaxed. He apologized to the Burmese people about being late. He was supposed to have arrived the day before. Although he did not tell them the reason why he was late, everybody knew why.

The reason he was late was because he was being harassed by the police for an essay he wrote, for a certain magazine, expressing critical opinions about the current situation of Thai society. The military considered the essay to be disrespectful of the king of Thailand. However, Sulak has never criticized the king, and the incident was probably fabricated by the military to suppress opinions considered to be socially disobedient. Before I came to Bangkok, Prof. Mayer had told me that Sulak was moving from place to place, running away from the police who were trying to arrest him.

Despite this stressful situation, Sulak did not reveal any anxiety or emotional disturbance at all. Instead he welcomed us with a kind and heartfelt smile. During the session discussing the very dire situation in Burma, he was even able to make us laugh. He talked about the Buddhist way of nonviolent social movement that might help improve Burmese society. I was impressed by his very wide vision encompassing religion, economics, and politics, as well as his profound knowledge of the world.

After the session, I was given an opportunity to talk to Sulak personally in his office. I was very nervous at the time, and I blurted out something like, "You are my hero and an ideal Buddhist! I want to be like you!" He smiled at me and patted me on the shoulder. When I introduced my background, he even said that he knew the names of a few Buddhist scholars at Ryukoku University, from which I had graduated a few years ago. But he told me that he would have to leave this building soon because the police would be here anytime. He started to pack his belongings, getting ready to go home. So I asked him if I could ask one question before leaving. Our conversation went like this:

Ogi: "You were involved in a big incident recently; are you all right?"

Sulak: "This is the third or fourth time this year, ha ha ..."

Ogi: "Why you are so strong? Why can you stand up against such a big power?"

Sulak: "Well, my understanding of Dharma makes me do something for others."

When I heard his answers, I felt that he had very strong confidence in Buddhism and had lived with Buddhism his whole life. I thought that Buddhism was, for him, his life itself. He left me a big gift of Dharma with his last words: "Next time!"

After Sulak left his office, Prof. Mayer and I decided to leave, too. Just as we were leaving, we met five young Indonesian people, who had also had a meeting with Sulak and were also about to leave. When we exchanged greetings, at first I could not follow what they were saying because they all talked to me at once. But soon I understood that they were very interested in me because they had found out that I was a Japanese Buddhist priest who had come to meet Sulak. They even asked me if I could come to Indonesia someday to visit them. As we talked, I found out that they had created an organization promoting a peace movement focusing particularly on young people in Indonesia. This brief meeting with Indonesian youth activists was very encouraging to me because I learned that these young people were seriously making an effort to construct a good society going beyond the man-made borders of nation, religion, and race. Someday, as a Buddhist priest, I also want to participate in such a movement.

During the last two days of my visit to Thailand, I came to realize that, for me, Buddhism can no longer simply be a subject of academic study. But now, I realize that Buddhism starts living in my life. And depending on the conditions we live in, many different Buddhist ways of life would be produced. A Buddhist way of life might require courage and perseverance. And, as Sulak has experienced for many years in Thailand, such a Buddhist way of life may have many clashes with existing social orders and authoritative powers. But such powers are only temporary rulers of a small part of the world. Sulak understands that Buddhism can go beyond such transient rules of secular authority and we can live according to the timeless truth of Dharma. This is what Sulak shows us through his Buddhist way of life.

Sulak reminds me of Shinran (1173–1262), the founder of Jodo Shinshu, who lived during the Kamakura period in medieval Japan. At that time, Japanese society was devastated by natural disasters, famines, and wars, and people lived in despair. People's daily lives often seemed like the depictions of hell within the six realms of samsara. Buddhism, however, offered them no path of liberation from such suffering: Buddhist priests, officially ordained by the state, performed religious services only for the well-being of small numbers of politically powerful people in order to sustain their version of an ideal society. However, their ideal society was an unrealistic illusion and did not help the majority of people, who lived in a painful reality. The activities of Buddhist priests were not intended for the common people, but were limited only to the people running state politics.

Shinran challenged this socially disengaged practice of Buddhism and tried to create a new awareness that everyone can be illuminated by the working of Amida Buddha, in one's very life, through the simple practice of nembutsu, reciting the name of Amida Buddha. However, because of his promotion of the nembutsu practice, he was persecuted and exiled to a remote province by state authorities, who could decide what was moral and immoral in society. While in exile, Shinran declared that he was "neither a monk nor one in worldly life." By declaring this, he tried to be a true human who could not be put down by unfair political powers and could not be silenced by them.

For me, the Buddhist ways of life of Sulak Sivaraksa and Shinran seem very similar in that they both try to live as true humans and Buddhists. We will need strong perseverance to be such Buddhists because we may have to stand up against authorities that punish or discriminate against us for living in accordance with what we believe. We should not forget, however, that two Buddhists, Sulak and Shinran, have struggled to promote human dignity without yielding to the unfair treatment inflicted by the political powers.

When more Buddhists realize the necessity of embodying Dharma in their own Buddhist ways of life, as human beings striving towards a society based on dignity, I believe that each Buddhist has the potential to make a contribution to world peace, even if it is a very small contribution. As a priest, I myself would like to live in such a way, as a Buddhist who never stops asking, "What can I do for you today?"

NOTE: For my brief accounts of these field trips to visit forest monks, see my essay, "Meeting with Forest Monks: Re-Visioning Engaged Shin Buddhism," *Turning Wheel: The Journal of Socially Engaged Buddhism* (Fall- Winter, 2007): pp. 23–24.