

Why the 28th Niwano Peace Prize is being awarded to Mr. Sulak Sivaraksa

The Niwano Peace Prize International Selection Committee decided to award the 28th Niwano Peace Prize to Sulak Sivaraksa, a remarkable and multifaceted Buddhist leader whose work for peace is exemplified by courage, determination, imagination, and the constant inspiration of the core principles of his Buddhist faith. Sulak has helped to change the views of political leaders, scholars, and young people, in Thailand, Asia, and the world, encouraging a new understanding of peace, democracy, and development. He challenges accepted approaches that fail to give priority to poor citizens, men and women alike. He has, over a lifetime of dedicated service and unflinching commitment, given new life to ancient Buddhist teachings about nonviolence and about peace and justice.

Sulak Sivaraksa was born 1933 in Siam (as he prefers to call his country), to a family of Chinese ancestry. Educated in Thailand, England, and Wales, in law and other disciplines, he returned to Bangkok in 1961. Sulak's long career has seen him using his intellectual gifts to propel the concept and movement of Engaged Buddhism.

Sulak has worked as a teacher, scholar, publisher, activist, and founder of many organizations. He has authored more than a hundred books and monographs, in Thai and English. A teacher throughout his adult life, he promotes a spiritual education movement grounded in traditional culture and values. It is a mark of Sulak's approach that he has nurtured and supported younger leaders over the years. Many today are leaders of a wide range of organizations.

Sulak has always been an activist and never hesitates to speak truth to those in power. To serve society truly, Sulak contends, one must stay in touch with poor people and the grass roots. Working to bring about change has embroiled him in many controversial issues. He approaches advocacy with a combination of knowledge, courage, and absolute commitment to nonviolence. He is widely credited with having mobilized Thai civil society, creating many social welfare and development organizations. All embody two central themes of his work: rejection of consumerist development, and pursuit of development rooted in indigenous culture and socially-engaged religious traditions and beliefs. His organizations reflect an indigenous, sustainable, and spiritual model for change. Today, these organizations are active far beyond Thailand.

Sulak combines his insights into politics and spirituality, well aware of the importance of politics for Buddhism, but never straying from the central role of spirituality. He has been in jail many times, due to his critical approach to numerous political and social issues and protests. He appreciates that political and institutional change are needed to achieve peace and justice.

Sulak's intelligent advocacy for the environment is another important reason to honor Sulak. He speaks forcefully against environmental destruction, promoting environmental preservation and environmental justice. *Sekhiyadhamma* (Students of the Dhamma), a network of Buddhist monks, works in their communities to preserve local environments, principally forests that are so essential to village economies. Characteristic of Sulak's approach, the work combines education, teaching villagers better ways to conserve natural resources, and political action to protect local social, cultural, and natural environments from the encroachment of commercial, industrial, and urban development. Sulak's environmental ethic is grounded in a holistic understanding of the Buddhist principle of interdependence and a deep respect for nature. Knowledge of inter-becoming (a term he borrows from Thich Nhat Hanh), is achieved by developing mindful awareness. In contrast to more reflective and contemplative styles, he aggressively fights in the trenches for the cause of human and environmental justice.

Sulak uses the principles and practices of Buddhism as a personal and political resource. His life shows that the interior life of spiritual contemplation, and the exterior life of political action, need not be seen as

opposites or hostile to each other. On the contrary each can be used to illuminate and inform and encourage the other. He is a living example of simplicity, loving kindness, and compassion. Selflessness is at the heart of Sulak's universal vision.

Sulak extends the Buddhist Five Precepts into ethical guidelines that can forge a more sustainable, compassionate, and just global society. To refrain from killing today means an end to all modern forms of violence. To refrain from stealing is a call for global economic justice. Not engaging in sexual misconduct calls us to examine all systems of male dominance which exploit women. Prohibiting false speech is a call for honesty at the international level. Avoiding intoxication is a call for global responsibility for drug and alcohol use and an examination of its causes. In Sulak's Buddhist vision of society, the individual is understood as a starting point for change: through individual spiritual growth, social justice is eventually achieved.

Sulak is a leading voice in global inter-religious dialogue and engagement, an acknowledged global leader for peace. Sulak always argues that interdependence is an essential, living concept. His is a voice of reason and ethics, speaking truth to power and highlighting tangible issues that touch on human dignity. He was one of the early leaders who brought the ethical challenges of caring for the environment into global discourse. His voice carries far and has influenced thinking at many levels. This is reflected in admiration and recognition of his work, including the 1995 award of the Right Livelihood Award, also known as the alternative Nobel Prize.

Sulak sees Buddhism as a questioning process. Question everything, including oneself, look deeply, and then act from that insight. He is among a handful of leaders world-wide working to revive the socially engaged aspects of spirituality. Whatever he does, however he does it, at the core of his work is a mission to build a new leadership for change at all levels, within his country and beyond.