

**Opening Remarks for the First Sombath Somphone Lecture
at the Closing of the Chulalongkorn University Right
Livelihood Study (CURLS) Program
2 August 2018**

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I am honoured to give a few introductory remarks for the First Sombath Somphone Lecture as part of the CURLS (Chula University Right Livelihood Summer School) Program. I am also honoured to be in the company of so many respected participants gathered together here for this event – I particularly want to thank the presence of Ajarn Sulak, Ajarn Pracha, our keynote speaker Ms Seng Raw Lahpai, Ajarn Chanthana Wungaeo, and many others.

Personally it would have been much better if Sombath is here today just as a participant among you sharing and learning with you. But unfortunately he was disappeared nearly 6 years ago. Many of you would have already seen the footages on You-tube how he was taken away by the police in front of a police post in Vientiane on 15 December 2012, and has never been seen again since.

For me, today's lecture is an expression of the support and solidarity of his many friends and associates that have in the past decades worked with Sombath, and want the world not to forget Sombath, and to seek truth and justice for him.

But there are also many young people in the audience today who do not know about Sombath. So allow me to use this opportunity to say a few words about Sombath, the man, his life and his work.

Sombath grew up as a poor farm boy in a small poor village in Central Laos. As a poor farm boy, he learned the true meaning of "poverty", as well as the true meaning "wealth". For him true "poverty" is not the absence of money, and true "wealth" is not the possession of money. True "wealth" for the poor is the ability to have a sustainable livelihood, working on the land and with access to the rich resources of nature, be it the forest, the rivers, the lakes and the ponds. Hence he always reminded the Lao that "money" alone cannot be the true measure of poverty and wealth among the poor.

He also learned from young and from experience that nature is a provider, but nature can also be a destroyer. As long as people work with nature and respect nature, nature can provide for the rural communities most of the products (water to grow rice, timber for housing, fish from the rivers, insects and animal products, fruits and vegetables, and medicinal herbs from the forest and the fields, etc) that they will need to live fairly decent and sustainable lives. The recent collapse of one of the saddle dams on the Xe Pian and Xe Nam-noi in Attapeu just 2 weeks ago on 23 July, is just one example of how destructive nature can be when people abuse the land and the laws of nature.

Sombath also experienced war growing up in Laos in the 1960s and 70s. Hence, he learned the value and meaning of peace, especially from the perspective of the poor and powerless. Sombath always said “Peace for the poor and the powerless is not only the absence of war and conflicts, important though these conditions may be, because the poor and the powerless are never the ones who start wars and conflicts – they are only the victims of wars and conflicts started by the powerful. For Sombath the meaning of peace is much greater and more comprehensive. Peace for him means harmony – harmony within the family, the community, and harmony with nature. And more importantly harmony for Sombath is that it must start with the self – one must be at peace with oneself, understands one’s true values and dignity that one can truly have harmony and peace.

Another aspect of Sombath’s life and work is that Sombath always emphasized the need to learn from one’s own elders for they are the holders and keepers of the community’s indigenous knowledge and wisdom. Sombath always believed that even though community elders and leaders might not have had any formal education, their education and understanding of the local environment and culture has come from real life experience and practice. Hence, he always consulted and also documented the stories and practices of the community elders and leaders (both men and women). And he incorporated such indigenous wisdom and knowledge into his work in education and community development.

Despite Sombath’s love for learning, Sombath is also not a development theoretician or an academic scholar. Sombath always said that what we learn from theories and textbooks must always be reflected, and tested and modified through real-life practice in the field. And it is this attitude of constant learning and practice, and listening to the community people that has shaped most of his adult life and work over the past 40 years, right until he was disappeared in 2012.

One would not be able to talk about Sombath’s life and work without referring to the role of Buddhism in shaping Sombath’s philosophy and vision. Like most Lao, Sombath is raised as a Buddhist, but like most Lao he did not quite understand the teachings of the Buddha very much. He only really learned and appreciated the teachings of Buddhism later in life – thanks to mentors and teachers like Ajarn Sulak, Ajarn Pracha, and other Buddhist scholars.

Ajarn Sulak and Pracha introduced Sombath to the concepts of Engaged Buddhism as an alternative to the current dominant and prevailing neo-liberal political and economic development model which has shaped the development agenda of most countries in the region. Sombath understood that Buddhist values of compassion, loving kindness and respect for nature and the environment will resonate well with the majority of the Lao Buddhist population.

So, based on years of work with communities, Sombath advocated that given Laos’ small population and rich natural resources, Laos could spearhead a development model that is ecologically sound, environmentally sustainable and put people’s social wellbeing and happiness at the center of development. He also believed that Laos did

not need to fall into the development traps which have been experienced by some other countries in the region, where the poor and marginalized groups have had to bear the worst development consequences of periodic economic crisis, natural disasters, and social turmoil.

So, drawing from his years of development practice, he proposed a development model whose base is grounded on good governance and education and shored up by the four pillars of: (1) sustainable economic development; (2) culture integrity; (3) spiritual values; and (4) environment resilience. He likened this Lao development model to a well-balanced, strong and stable house ensuring the well-being and happiness of its citizens as its ultimate goal. He also stressed the need for this model to be grounded on strong education, especially education of the heart.

Sombath's development vision resonated with many people in the development community, both in and outside Laos. In many communities and schools, his development philosophy and ideas have been put to practice and have shown to be very successful. And in recognition of his innovative and effective community development work, Sombath was awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership in 2005.

Unfortunately, Sombath's work was suddenly cut short by his enforced disappearance on 15 December 2012. Can Sombath's development vision and his philosophy of balanced and sustainable development continue? I believe it can and it will as many of Sombath's practical ideas and practices are still being used in different settings inside and outside Laos. For me, charting a more "humane" and "people-centered" vision of development is more than Sombath the man; it is the life-dream of Sombath and also of many of us gathered together here and elsewhere. Hence for me, this Sombath Somphone Lecture organized by CURLS today is very heart-warming and consoling. It is best tribute that we can pay to Sombath.

Sombath, the person may be Disappeared, but his dreams and his ideas and vision for a better future, especially for the poor, live on.

Thank you and bless you all.