

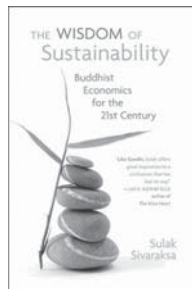
Fearless Press: Koa Books

Reviewed by Zenju Earthlyn Manuel

Koa Books was founded in 2005 by Arnie Kotler, who previously founded and directed Parallax Press and was the creator of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship newsletter that later became *Turning Wheel* magazine. Koa Books, headquartered on Maui, publishes works on progressive politics, personal transformation, and native cultures.

Koa is the largest native Hawaiian forest tree, whose beautiful hardwood was traditionally used for making canoes and surfboards. *Koa* in Hawaiian means “fearless,” or “warrior.”

We present three fearless books of note:



The Wisdom of Sustainability: Buddhist Economics for the 21st Century

By Sulak Sivaraksa
Koa Books, 2009
101 pages, \$12.50, paperback

Shuffling through the family home of Rev. Hozan Alan and Laurie Senauke, Sulak Sivaraksa is not concerned with a stranger—oh, that would be me—sitting at a table hoping to speak with him. Sulak takes his time to come over after changing his clothes. We are about to journey to UC Berkeley to hear His Holiness the Dalai Lama. The only hope I have that he will come over to me is that I am in the kitchen and he is very hungry. I have quickly toasted several bagels as the first course. He is not interested, but he finally sits down next to me. I have decided not to say a word but wait until he speaks. This way, if he is not feeling like having a conversation, at least I will not have forced it on him.

There is great silence when finally he says, “Where is your temple?” He is searching for my dharma home, wondering what training I might have had, maybe wondering whether my dharma home taught me anything about transforming suffering in the world. I’m thinking he is asking this because in Asia the temples and monasteries are geared toward cultivating the highest spiritual human potential. We end up having a polite conversation, at least until the brown rice and vegetables are on the table.

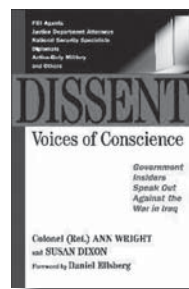
Although he was educated in England and Wales, is considered one of Thailand’s foremost intellectuals, and is a

good friend of the Dalai Lama, he does not walk around as someone who thinks he is more important than another. He is ordinary; ordinary enough that one feels comfortable sitting in the kitchen with him to talk.

I speak of Ajahn Sulak’s being because knowing him is to know what one might expect from his writings. Simple, ordinary, to the point, profound, and so obvious are the lessons on peace and engaged dharma that you wonder why you didn’t think of them.

Ajahn Sulak has waged a long and enduring campaign to educate others about peacekeeping, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. He is an educator who espouses the objective of education as liberation from ignorance and not as a means of gaining knowledge, skills, or earning a living. In *The Wisdom of Sustainability* he covers the crisis of change concerning the world today. He is talking not about sustaining the path of meeting our individual needs but rather about finding our way back to simplicity.

Take this book and sit at your kitchen table with some brown rice and veggies. Let Sulak’s voice speak to you.



Dissent: Voices of Conscience

By Ann Wright and Susan Dixon

Foreword by Daniel Ellsberg
Koa Books, 2008
278 pages, \$17.95, paperback

Living in a world in which speaking out against the government could have you labeled as a terrorist, Wright’s last words in the book are “Do not be silent!” Does liberty in the U.S. still allow us to speak our minds? Or better yet, do we feel we can speak our minds whether the government says so or not? These are the questions that arise when reading *Dissent*, a book written after Army Colonel (Ret.) and diplomat Ann Wright resigned her State Department post and became one of the insider active-duty military personnel who spoke out about illegal government actions that were leading the U.S. into the Iraq War.

While Wright was busy with speaking engagements, Susan Dixon, who was teaching a university course and working on her doctoral dissertation, must have realized the potency of the material Wright had in her possession and decided to help write this book.

Dissent. The title is taboo. Is it OK to be a dissenter and still be considered an American today? Yet here we are contemplating our silence and wondering how much of that silence moved us into a war in which Senator Barbara Lee (a congresswoman at the onset of the Iraq war), in essence said, “Stop!”

In the foreword, Daniel Ellsberg says it all: “This book in the hands of current, future, or recently resigned officials, with its examples of moral courage in people like their own colleagues, like themselves, could awaken them to do likewise [speak out], to do better than they have done so far. This country will not escape further human, legal, and moral catastrophes, or preserve itself as a democratic, constitutional republic, if that does not happen.”

What one learns from *Dissent* is that in many circumstances silence furthers the harm. When we know that someone, a group of people, or a country is suffering deeply and we do not speak, our silence functions as an agreement to be an accomplice to the crime. The consciousness of Wright and other so-called whistle-blowers understood such an agreement and propelled them to follow the consciousness of their hearts.

Many whose voices are in this book have transformed themselves from believing in war to realizing the truth of it all. They serve as evidence that we all are on a continuous path of awakening.



Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace

By Maxine Hong Kingston
Koa Books, 2006
613 pages, \$20, paperback

Twenty years after the fall of Saigon, Thich Nhat Hanh (Thây) gathered war veterans and their family members in retreats for making peace. As part of those retreats Kingston, who had joined Thây in this work, added writing meditation to the program. This book includes the writings of those who participated.

Kingston said of this rare writing community, “Singing, hugging, dancing, we were a community. But it is in words that each individual reveals a unique mind. The veterans needed to write. They would write the unspeakable. Writing,

they keep track of their thinking; they leave a permanent record. Processing chaos through story and poem, the writer shapes and forms experience, and thereby, I believe, changes the past and remakes the existing world.”

She went on to say, “The veterans did their most dramatic writing when I presented the First Precept, which is a vow against killing. A moral ethic helps shape and form thoughts about the war chaos. The drama is not just in the battle scenes but in the moral conflict.”

The act of killing and the vow to refrain from it runs like a bloodline throughout the essays presented from the Veterans Writers Group, which met monthly from 1993–1996.

In reading some of the many essays—they are all significant stories—it is clear that most of us cannot even imagine the agony or complexity of war as it resides in the heart.

If you have never been to war, know no one who has been to war, or think you know what war is about without no experience of it, then this book will shake you out of your stupor and plant your feet squarely in the earth. Come down, touch the earth, and feel this.

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