

# **Engaged Spirituality**

# Engaged Spirituality

## Three Wikipedia Articles

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# Engaged Spirituality

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**Engaged Spirituality** refers to religious or spiritual people who actively engage in the world in order to transform it in positive ways while finding nurturance, inspiration and guidance in their spiritual beliefs and practices.<sup>[1]</sup> The term was inspired by Engaged Buddhism a concept and set of values developed by the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Engaged Spirituality encompasses people committed to social change from all the major faith traditions as well as people who refer to themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” It has numerous iterations in practice yet common themes unite the many forms it takes. For some in the Catholic tradition, Liberation Theology guides their form of engaged spirituality.

## Common characteristics

Individuals who practice this mode of spirituality tend to hold progressive values that, supported by their spiritual practices galvanize their efforts for social change.<sup>[2]</sup> They see a deep connection between personal and social transformation such that they feel compelled to engage in organized causes or service activities.<sup>[3]</sup> Their activities are infused with their spiritual sensibilities regarding how matters of ultimate concern – the overarching context delineated by their faith tradition – are related to daily living, habits and practices. Examples of activities are: peace activism, civil rights and human rights activism for minority groups, environmental activism, and service on behalf of the poor and homeless.<sup>[4]</sup>

Unlike much of the pop spirituality that is promoted in countless books, audio programs, and internet sites, engaged spirituality maintains a focus on societal transformation. Pop spirituality on the other hand, despite its politically liberal leanings, tends to concern itself primarily with personal, psychological betterment that lacks a deep commitment to social change and activism.<sup>[5]</sup>

Engaged spirituality involves a synthesis of individual, subjective experiences and outer, collective activities. The individual and the collective mutually support, shape and transform each other. For example, prayer or meditation may serve as a way for an individual to gather strength and gain insight that will guide and enhance the efficacy of their social change efforts. Their experiences gathered in their outer activities – which involve relating to and learning from others – may influence the texture of their prayer or meditation experiences. Thus there is a continual, interwoven process of spiritual growth and reaffirmation to improving one’s local/global community.<sup>[6]</sup>

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## External links

- Engaging Spirituality (<http://www.justfaith.org/programs/engagingspirituality.html>) Christian spiritual-deepening process for small groups

# Thich Nhat Hanh

<b>Thích Nhất Hạnh</b> 釋一行	
<b>Religion</b>	Zen ( <i>Thiền</i> ) Buddhist
<b>School</b>	Lâm Tế Dhyana (Línjì chán) Founder of the Order of Interbeing
<b>Lineage</b>	42nd generation (Lâm Tế) 8th generation (Liễu Quán)
<b>Other name(s)</b>	Thầy ( <i>teacher</i> )
Personal	
<b>Born</b>	October 11, 1926 Tha Tien, Quang Ngai province, Vietnam (then in French Indochina)
Senior posting	
<b>Based in</b>	Plum Village (Lang Mai)
<b>Title</b>	Thiền Sư (Zen master)
Religious career	
<b>Teacher</b>	Thích Chân Thật

**Thích Nhất Hạnh** “釋一行” (/ˈtɪkˈnjɑːˈhʌn/; Vietnamese: [tʰɪk nʌt hɛːŋ] ( ( listen)); born October 11, 1926) is a Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, teacher, author, poet and peace activist. He lives in the Plum Village Monastery in the Dordogne region in the South of France,<sup>[1]</sup> travelling internationally to give retreats and talks. He coined the term Engaged Buddhism in his book *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire*.<sup>[2]</sup> A long-term exile, he was given permission to make his first return trip to Vietnam in 2005.<sup>[3]</sup>

Nhất Hạnh has published more than 100 books, including more than 40 in English. Nhat Hanh is active in the peace movement, promoting non-violent solutions to conflict.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Biography



Buddha hall of the Từ Hiếu Temple

Born as Nguyễn Xuân Bảo, Nhất Hạnh was born in the city of Quảng Ngãi in Central Vietnam (Thừa Thiên) in 1926. At the age of 16 he entered the monastery at Từ Hiếu Temple near Huế, Vietnam, where his primary teacher was Dhyana (meditation Zen) Master Thanh Quý Chân Thật.<sup>[5][6][7]</sup> A graduate of Bao Quoc Buddhist Academy in Central Vietnam, Thich Nhat Hanh received training in Zen and the Mahayana school of Buddhism and was ordained as a monk in 1949.<sup>[2]</sup>

In 1956, he was named editor-in-chief of *Vietnamese Buddhism*, the periodical of the Unified Vietnam Buddhist Association (Giáo Hội Phật Giáo Việt Nam

Thống Nhất). In the following years he founded Lá Bối Press, the Van Hanh Buddhist University in Saigon, and the School of Youth for Social Service (SYSS), a neutral corps of Buddhist peaceworkers who went into rural areas to establish schools, build healthcare clinics, and help re-build villages.<sup>[1]</sup>

Nhat Hanh is now recognized as a Dharmacharya and as the spiritual head of the Từ Hiếu Temple and associated monasteries.<sup>[5][8]</sup> On May 1, 1966 at Từ Hiếu Temple, Thich Nhat Hanh received the "lamp transmission", making him a Dharmacharya or Dharma Teacher, from Master Chân Thật.<sup>[5]</sup>

### During the Vietnam War

In 1960, Nhat Hanh came to the U.S. to study comparative religion at Princeton University, subsequently being appointed lecturer in Buddhism at Columbia University. By then he had gained fluency in French, Chinese, Sanskrit, Pali, Japanese and English, in addition to his native Vietnamese. In 1963, he returned to Vietnam to aid his fellow monks in their non-violent peace efforts.

Nhat Hanh taught Buddhist psychology and *Prajnaparamita* literature at the Van Hanh Buddhist University, a private institution that focused on Buddhist studies, Vietnamese culture, and languages. At a meeting in April 1965 Van Hanh Union students issued a *Call for Peace* statement. It declared: "It is time for North and South Vietnam to find a way to stop the war and help all Vietnamese people live peacefully and with mutual respect." Nhat Hanh left for the U.S. shortly afterwards, leaving Sister Chan Khong in charge of the SYSS. Van Hanh University was taken over by one of the Chancellors who wished to sever ties with Thich Nhat Hanh and the SYSS, accusing Chan Khong of being a communist. From that point the SYSS struggled to raise funds and faced attacks on its members. The SYSS persisted in their relief efforts without taking sides in the conflict.<sup>[2]</sup>

Nhat Hanh returned to the US in 1966 to lead a symposium in Vietnamese Buddhism at Cornell University and to continue his work for peace. He had written a letter to Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1965 entitled: "In Search of the Enemy of Man". It was during his 1966 stay in the U.S. that Thich Nhat Hanh met with Martin Luther King, Jr. and urged him to publicly denounce the Vietnam War.<sup>[9]</sup> In 1967, Dr. King gave a famous speech at the Riverside Church in New York City, his first to publicly question the U.S. involvement in Vietnam.<sup>[10]</sup> Later that year Dr. King nominated Thich Nhat Hanh for the 1967 Nobel Peace Prize. In his nomination Dr. King said, "I do not personally know of anyone more worthy of [this prize] than this gentle monk from Vietnam. His ideas for peace, if applied, would build a monument to ecumenism, to world brotherhood, to humanity."<sup>[11]</sup> The fact that King had revealed the candidate he had chosen to nominate and had made a "strong request" to the prize committee, was in sharp violation of the Nobel traditions and protocol.<sup>[12][13]</sup> The committee did not make an award that year.

In 1969, Nhat Hanh was the delegate for the Buddhist Peace Delegation at the Paris Peace talks. When the Paris Peace Accords were signed in 1973, Thich Nhat Hanh was denied permission to return to Vietnam and he went into exile in France. From 1976-1977 he led efforts to help rescue Vietnamese Vietnamese boat people in the Gulf of Siam, eventually stopping under pressure from the governments of Thailand and Singapore.<sup>[14]</sup>



Thich Nhat Hanh in Vught, the Netherlands, 2006

## Establishing the Order of Interbeing

Nhat Hanh created the Order of Inter-Being in 1966. He heads this monastic and lay group, teaching Five Mindfulness Trainings and Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings. In 1969, Nhat Hanh established the Unified Buddhist Church (Église Bouddhique Unifiée) in France (not a part of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam). In 1975, he formed the Sweet Potatoes Meditation Center. The center grew and in 1982 he and his colleague Sister Chân Không founded Plum Village Buddhist Center (Làng Mai), a monastery and Practice Center in the Dordogne in the south of France.<sup>[1]</sup> The Unified Buddhist Church is the legally recognized governing body for Plum Village (Làng Mai) in France, for Blue Cliff Monastery in Pine Bush, New York, the Community of Mindful Living, Parallax Press, Deer Park Monastery in California, and the Magnolia Village in Batesville, Mississippi.<sup>[15]</sup>



Deer Park Monastery in California

He established two monasteries in Vietnam, at the original Từ Hiếu Temple near Huế and at Prajna Temple in the central highlands. Thich Nhat Hanh and the Order of Interbeing have established monasteries and Dharma centers in the United States at Deer Park Monastery (Tu Viện Lộc Uyển) in Escondido, California, Maple Forest Monastery (Tu Viện Rừng Phong) and Green Mountain Dharma Center (Đạo Tràng Thanh Sơn) in Vermont both of which closed in 2007 and moved to the Blue Cliff Monastery in Pine Bush, New York, and Magnolia Village Practice Center (Đạo Tràng Mộc Lan) in Mississippi. These monasteries are open to the public during much of the year and provide on-going retreats for lay people. The Order of Interbeing also holds retreats for specific groups of lay people, such as families, teenagers, veterans, the entertainment industry, members of Congress, law enforcement officers and people of color.<sup>[16][17][18][19][20]</sup> He conducted a peace walk in Los Angeles in 2005, and again in 2007.<sup>[21]</sup>

Notable students of Thich Nhat Hanh include: Skip Ewing founder of the Nashville Mindfulness Center, Natalie Goldberg author and teacher, Joan Halifax founder of the Upaya Institute, Stephanie Kaza environmentalist, Sister Chan Khong Dharma teacher, Noah Levine author, Albert Low Zen teacher and author, Joanna Macy environmentalist and author, Caitriona Reed Dharma teacher and co-founder of Manzanita Village Retreat Center, Leila Seth author and Chief Justice of the Delhi High Court, and Pritam Singh real estate developer and editor of several of Nhat Hanh's books.

## Return to Vietnam

In 2005, following lengthy negotiations, Nhat Hanh was given permission from the Vietnamese government to return for a visit. He was also allowed to teach there, publish four of his books in Vietnamese, and travel the country with monastic and lay members of his Order, including a return to his root temple, Tu Hieu Temple in Huế.<sup>[3][22]</sup> The trip was not without controversy. Thich Vien Dinh, writing on behalf of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (considered illegal by the Vietnamese government), called for Nhat Hanh to make a statement against the Vietnam government's poor record on religious freedom. Thich Vien Dinh feared that the trip would be used as propaganda by the Vietnamese government, suggesting to the world that religious freedom is improving there, while abuses continue.<sup>[23][24][25]</sup>



Nhat Hanh during a ceremony in Da Nang on his 2007 trip to Vietnam

Despite the controversy, Nhat Hanh again returned to Vietnam in 2007, while two senior officials of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) remained under house arrest. The Unified Buddhist Church called Nhat Hanh's visit a betrayal, symbolizing Nhat Hanh's willingness to work with his co-religionists' oppressors. Vo Van Ai, a spokesman for the UBCV said "I believe Thich Nhat Hanh's trip is manipulated by the Hanoi government to hide its repression of the Unified Buddhist Church and create a false impression of religious freedom in Vietnam."<sup>[26]</sup> The Plum Village Website states that the three goals of his 2007 trip back to Vietnam were to support new monastics in his Order; to organize and conduct "Great Chanting Ceremonies" intended to help heal remaining wounds from the Vietnam War; and to lead retreats for monastics and lay people. The chanting ceremonies were originally called "Grand Requiem for Praying Equally for All to Untie the Knots of Unjust Suffering", but Vietnamese officials objected, saying it was unacceptable for the government to "equally" pray for soldiers in the South Vietnamese army or U.S. soldiers. Nhat Hanh agreed to change the name to "Grand Requiem For Praying".<sup>[26]</sup>

## Approach

Nhat Hanh's approach has been to combine a variety of traditional Zen teachings with insights from other Mahayana Buddhist traditions, methods from Theravada Buddhism, and ideas from Western psychology—to offer a modern light on meditation practice. Hanh's presentation of the *Prajñāpāramitā* in terms of "interbeing" has doctrinal antecedents in the Huayan school of thought,<sup>[27]</sup> which "is often said to provide a philosophical foundation" for Zen.<sup>[28]</sup>

Nhat Hanh has also been a leader in the Engaged Buddhism movement (he coined the term), promoting the individual's active role in creating change. He cites the 13th-century Vietnamese King Trần Nhân Tông with the origination of the concept. Trần Nhân Tông abdicated his throne to become a monk, and founded the Vietnamese Buddhist school in the Bamboo Forest tradition.



## Names applied to him

The Vietnamese name *Thích* (釋) is from "Thích Ca" or "Thích Già" (釋迦), means "of the Shakyas (Shakyamuni Buddha) clan."<sup>[5]</sup> All Buddhist monks and nuns within the East Asian tradition of Mahayana and Zen adopt this name as their "family" name or surname implying that their first family is the Buddhist community. In many Buddhist traditions, there are a progression of names that a person can receive. The first, the lineage name, is given when a person takes refuge in the Three Jewels. Thich Nhat Hanh's lineage name is Trùng Quang. The next is a Dharma name, given when a person, lay or monastic, takes additional vows or when one is ordained as a monastic. Thich Nhat Hanh's Dharma name is Phung Xuan. Additionally, Dharma titles are sometimes given, and Thich Nhat Hanh's Dharma title is "Nhat Hanh".<sup>[5]</sup>



Nhat Hanh at Hue City airport on his 2007 trip to Vietnam (aged 80)

Neither *Nhất* (一) nor *Hạnh* (行)—which approximate the roles of middle name or intercalary name and given name, respectively, when referring to him in English—was part of his name at birth. *Nhất* (一) means "one", implying "first-class", or "of best quality", in English; *Hạnh* (行) means "move", implying "right conduct" or "good nature." Thích Nhất Hạnh has translated his Dharma names as Nhất = One, and Hạnh = Action. Vietnamese names follow this naming convention, placing the family or surname first, then the middle or intercalary name which often refers to the person's position in the family or generation, followed by the given name.<sup>[29]</sup>

Thich Nhat Hanh is often referred to as "Thay" (Vietnamese: *Thầy*, "master; teacher") or Thay Nhat Hanh by his followers. On the Vietnamese version of the Plum Village website, he is also referred to as Thiền Sư Nhất Hạnh which can be translated as "Zen Master", or "Dhyana Master".<sup>[30]</sup> Any Vietnamese monk or nun in the Mahayana tradition can be addressed as "Thầy" ("teacher"). Vietnamese Buddhist monks are addressed "Thầy tu" ("monk") and nuns are addressed "Sư Cô" ("Sister") or "Sư Bà" ("Elder Sister").

## Awards and honors

Nobel laureate Martin Luther King, Jr. nominated Nhat Hanh for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967.<sup>[11]</sup> Nhat Hanh did not win it (as of 2012, the peace prize was not awarded 19 times including that year<sup>[31]</sup>). He was awarded the Courage of Conscience award in 1991.<sup>[32]</sup> He has been featured in many films, including *The Power of Forgiveness* showcased at the Dawn Breakers International Film Festival.<sup>[33]</sup>

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- Works by or about Thich Nhat Hanh (<http://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n50-6399>) in libraries (WorldCat catalog)

## External links

### Official websites

- Plum Village (<http://www.plumvillage.org/>) - Thich Nhat Hanh's main monastery and practice center, located about 85 km east of Bordeaux, France
- Vietnamese website of Plum Village (<http://www.langmai.org/>)
- French website of Plum Village (<http://www.villagedespruniers.org/>)
- Deer Park Monastery (<http://www.deerparkmonastery.org/>) - located in Escondido, California
- Blue Cliff Monastery (<http://www.bluecliffmonastery.org/>) - located in Pine Bush, New York
- European Institute of Applied Buddhism (<http://eiab.eu>) - located in Waldbröl, Germany
- Order of Interbeing (<http://www.orderofinterbeing.org/>) - more information about the Order of Interbeing, including the OI wiki pages
- I Am Home (<http://www.iamhome.org/>) - Community of Mindful Living; home of the "Mindfulness Bell" magazine with news, articles, and talks by Thich Nhat Hanh and other Order of Interbeing members

### Other

- Biography of Thich Nhat Hanh (<http://www.seaox.com/thich.html>)
- Buddhist Masters and their Organizations (<http://www.buddhanet.net/masters/thich.htm>) - Thich Nhat Hanh
- SpiritSight.com (<http://www.spiritsite.com/writing/thihan/>) - Excerpts from selected Thich Nhat Hanh books
- Shambhala Sun Magazine Spotlight Page ([http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=29&Itemid=226](http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=29&Itemid=226))

### Media

- Speaking of Faith (<http://speakingoffaith.publicradio.org/programs/thichnhathanh/>) - Downloadable Public Radio broadcast about the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh
- Deer Park DharmaCast (<http://thichnhathahn.net/>) - podcasts of Thich Nhat Hanh's lectures and dharma talks.
- Google Video (<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=1278029198357001946&q=thich+nhat+hanh&hl=en>) - Thich Nhat Hanh — Social Change at the Base (1 hr 30 min 27 sec, recorded on Mar 27, 2004 at Plum Village)
- From Vietnam to Iraq, this Zen Master has seen it all (<http://www.dnaindia.com/report.asp?NewsID=1096334>) - Venkatesan Vembu, Daily News & Analysis
- Thich Nhat Hanh audio ([http://diydharma.org/audio/by/artist/thich\\_nhat\\_hanh](http://diydharma.org/audio/by/artist/thich_nhat_hanh)) from the DIYDharma website (<http://diydharma.org/>)
- Onetheproject.com (<http://www.onetheproject.com>) interviewed in ONE: The Movie
- Humankind ([http://www.humanmedia.org/catalog/program.php?cPath=30&products\\_id=86](http://www.humanmedia.org/catalog/program.php?cPath=30&products_id=86)) -Interview in Vermont monastery on public radio program
- Thich Nhat Hanh honored as Interfaith Hero on ReadTheSpirit.com ([http://www.readthespirit.com/interfaith\\_heroes/2009/01/2nd-annual-interfaith-heroes-month-no-27-thich-nhat-hanh.html](http://www.readthespirit.com/interfaith_heroes/2009/01/2nd-annual-interfaith-heroes-month-no-27-thich-nhat-hanh.html))

# Engaged Buddhism

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**Engaged Buddhism** refers to Buddhists who are seeking ways to apply the insights from meditation practice and dharma teachings to situations of social, political, environmental, and economic suffering and injustice. Finding its roots in Vietnam through the Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, Engaged Buddhism has grown in popularity in the West.<sup>[1]</sup>

## Asian Origins

The term was coined by Vietnamese Zen Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh (known as Thay to his students), inspired by the Humanistic Buddhism reform movement in China by Taixu and Yinshun, and later propagated in Taiwan by Cheng Yen and Hsing Yun.<sup>[2]</sup> At first, he used Chinese characters (a scriptural language of Vietnamese Mahayana Buddhism), 入世佛教 (lit: Worldly Buddhism, 入世 = enter + world). During the Vietnam War, he and his sangha (spiritual community) made efforts to respond to the suffering they saw around them.<sup>[3]</sup> They saw this work as part of their meditation and mindfulness practice, not apart from it.<sup>[3]</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh outlined fourteen precepts of Engaged Buddhism<sup>[4]</sup> which explained his philosophy.

This term has since been re-translated back into Chinese as "Left-wing Buddhism" (左翼佛教) to denote the liberal emphasis held by this type of Buddhism. The term has also been used as a translation for what is commonly understood in China and Taiwan as "Humanistic Buddhism" (人間佛教).

## Western Socially Engaged Buddhism

In the West, like the East, Engaged Buddhism is a way of attempting to link authentic Buddhist meditation with social action.<sup>[5][6]</sup> The current Dalai Lama has voiced a need for Buddhists to be more involved in the social and political realm.

In 1998, while on retreat in Bodhi, Gaya, India, ...the Dalai Lama told those of us who were participating in a Buddhist-Christian dialogue that sometimes, Buddhists have not acted vigorously to address social and political problems. He told our group, "In this, we have much to learn from the Christians."<sup>[5]</sup>

Organizations such as the Buddhist Peace Fellowship, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists and the Zen Peacemakers, led by Roshi Bernard Glassman are devoted to building the movement of engaged Buddhists. Other engaged Buddhist groups include the Benevolent Organisation for Development, Health and Insight, Gaden Relief Projects, the UK's Network of Buddhist Organisations, Fo Guang Shan and Tzu Chi.

Prominent figures in the movement include Robert Aitken Roshi,<sup>[7]</sup> Joanna Macy,<sup>[7]</sup> Gary Snyder, Alan Senauke, Sulak Sivaraksa, Maha Ghosananda, Sylvia Wetzell, Joan Halifax, Tara Brach, Taigen Dan Leighton, Ken Jones, and Bhikkhu Bodhi.

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- [1] Queen, Chris; King, Sallie (1996). *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia*. New York: Albany State University Press. p. 2. ISBN 0-7914-2843-5.
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- [3] In Engaged Buddhism, Peace Begins with You (<http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=1579>)
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- [5] Engaged Buddhism (<http://www.emptybell.org/articles/engaged-buddhism.html>)
- [6] What's Buddhist about Socially Engaged Buddhism (<http://www.zen-occidental.net/articles/1/loy12-english.html>)
- [7] Justify Your Love: Finding Authority for Socially Engaged Buddhism (<http://www.urbandharma.org/udharma7/engaged.html>)

## Further reading

- Phra Paisal Visalo: *Buddhists Engaged in Social Development* (<http://www.visalo.org/englishArticles/BuddhistsEngaged.htm>)
- Phra Paisal Visalo: *The path to social and inner happiness* ([http://www.visalo.org/englishArticles/BkkPost\\_Sriburapa.htm](http://www.visalo.org/englishArticles/BkkPost_Sriburapa.htm))

## External links

- Dana Wiki: Helping Buddhist Organizations Get Involved in Social Service (<http://www.danawiki.org>)
- Engaged Practice (<http://www.dharmanet.org/lcengaged.htm>)
- Buddhist Peace Fellowship (<http://www.bpf.org>)
- Zen Peacemakers (<http://www.zenpeacemakers.org>)
- International Network of Engaged Buddhists (<http://www.inebnetwork.org/>)
- UK Network of Engaged Buddhists (<http://www.engagedbuddhists.org.uk/>)
- Network of Buddhist Organisations (UK) (<http://www.nbo.org.uk>)
- Amida Trust Home Page (<http://www.amidatrust.com/>)
- Sulak Sivaraksa: A Socially Engaged Buddhism (<http://www.sulak-sivaraksa.org/en/>)
- The Engaged Zen Foundation (<http://www.engaged-zen.org>)
- Buddhist Global Relief (<http://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org/main.html>)
- The Maitri School, Non Sectarian Engaged Buddhism. (<http://www.Maitri-School.org>)
- Benevolent Organisation for Development, Health and Insight (<http://www.bodhi.net.au>)
- Gaden Relief Projects (<http://www.gadenrelief.org/aboutus.html>)
- Sakyadhita International Association of Buddhist Women (<http://www.sakyadhita.org>)

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## ENGAGED SPIRITUALITY

# ENGAGED BUDDHISM IN INDIA: A conversation with Ven. Sanghasena

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**SPIRITUAL WARRIORS: Mahabodhi grooms tomorrow's spiritual leaders**

March 29, 2012

The Mahabodhi International Meditation Center stands out as a model of socially engaged Buddhism in India. Perched high in the Himalayas, this vibrant spiritual

community consists of a residential school for more than 400 poor children drawn from surrounding villages, an institute for the blind, a home for the aged, a monastery, a nunnery and more. The vision to form a community based on socially engaged Buddhist principles belongs to Venerable Bhikkhu Sanghasena, a Buddhist monk and spiritual leader from India's northernmost region of Ladakh. He kindly sat down with me to answer some questions about the community.



**Who inspired you towards this vision of socially engaged Buddhism?**

The Lord Buddha is the main teacher who inspired me. Not exactly in terms of socially engaged Buddhism, but the Buddha inspired me. He was full of compassion. I think many Buddhists do not properly understand the Buddha's teachings. Many people keep on reciting the Buddha's teachings of "love compassion," "love compassion," but those ideals must be brought into action. This is what we are trying to do. One of our slogans is "Compassion in action, meditation in action." Not just simply going around sitting in the high seat and talking about compassion without action. We don't believe that. The Buddha's teaching is compassion in action. It is meditation in action. That is what we are trying to do.

Then, while visiting several countries, I got inspired by some other great people in India like Sathya Sai Baba. He is another wonderful role model. He built the best hospital offering free treatment for the poor. He also offers the best free education for the people, as well as meditation teachings for foreigners. I also met some great masters in Taiwan and Thailand. I got inspiration from many others, but mainly the Buddha.



**Mahabodhi's motto states: "We make the very best use of our time and seize every opportunity to work with diligence for the welfare and happiness of all beings through spiritual and humanitarian services and activities. Thus we consider ourselves to be truly non-sectarian socially engaged Buddhists." How is socially engaged Buddhism being practiced at Mahabodhi?**



The Buddha's teachings are very much socially engaged, but slowly, over the course of time, camps dividing the monastic orders and society developed. With the monks living in monasteries far away from society, lay people didn't have much contact with them except when going to the temple to seek some blessings, or occasionally when hearing sermons. I feel they have to come closer and work together. Monastics have a distinct role to play, but they have to work together. Unless they come together and work together, the Buddha's message cannot be spirited effectively among the people. So I saw that clearly, and felt that there is a need for a Buddhist organization where we can reduce the gap. I'm very glad that Mahabodhi has been able to bring these two worlds together. Today, our monks and nuns living on this campus are working very closely with the people while not losing their own distinct identity or their own role as a monk or a nun.

**How do they work closely with the people?**

About 400 or 500 are living at Mahabodhi, including monks and nuns. Of course, the number of monks and nuns is very small, but for every activity we come together. For the morning prayer, meditation, or whenever we have activities, we come together and share our experience and ideas together. So this is how we work.

**When I think of socially engaged Buddhism and Mahabodhi, I tend to think more about the community helping poor villagers by giving them a home, food and schooling than bringing everyone together and living according to the dharma.**

Helping the poor in the remote villages is one part of socially engaged Buddhism. Socially engaged means engaged in society. Poor people in the village are also part of society. People in the city are also part of society. And here what you are thinking is not wrong; you are right. The children and other underprivileged people—the elderly, the visually handicapped—they come from the villages. The people who live on the campus are from more than 65 different villages scattered throughout the mountains. Most come from remote, far-flung areas on the China and Pakistan borders. But we

cannot build a school and a campus in every village, nor is it necessary. Our focus right from the beginning has been the poorest of the poor people. The underprivileged people. And then, afterwards, offering yoga and meditation for foreign visitors. Yoga and meditation is not a priority for the poor children. For them the best dharma, the best religion is food. The best dharma for the thirsty is water. The best dharma for the sick is medicine and doctor, not philosophy and guru. The best dharma for the homeless is a home.

**The Mahabodhi Residential School opened its doors in 1992 with 25 female students and no males. Can you tell me about Mahabodhi's emphasis on educating women?**

Right from the beginning, Mahabodhi has been emphasizing educating girls. The main reason is that in the history of the world, women have been discriminated against and did not enjoy equal opportunity for education or work. They are always left behind, even today in many parts of the world. Every religion has this kind of belief. Even in Buddhism there is discrimination between monks and nuns. It feels very strange. Even if I find something to that effect in the holy scriptures, I don't agree. I'm sure the Buddha would agree with me.



**What role do youth play in the world?**

Youth are a very important part of society and the world. Today's youth require proper guidance and inspiration. Many youths are lacking this. Unfortunately, our education system is terrible. Our schools, colleges and universities are not giving the correct guidance to youth. They go to colleges and universities and learn how to develop greed in the name of knowledge and wisdom. We are taught how to go into space and how to work in space without knowing how to live here on this Earth. They do not use the word greed, but they teach greed. So the youth do not have proper guidance, and they get caught up. They don't know. That's why so many young people get addicted to drugs and commit suicide. You need guidance, and this guidance comes from spiritual education, not from universities and colleges.

**Can you tell me about the spiritual education here at Mahabodhi?**

Unavoidably, children have to acquire the general education, which I personally am not in much favor of, but it cannot be avoided. The whole society is based on this education system. After finishing their studies, students have to get a job and earn something. They will be asked, what's your qualification, what's your certificate. For

that reason they have to get the general education. Along with that aspect of education, we very much emphasize the moral education, the spiritual education, the meaning and purpose of life.

The most important thing is to realize the true nature of existence. The true nature of existence is that we are all temporarily here. We are like visitors, we are like guests. We are not going to live thousands of years. During your visit you cannot afford to spend your time fighting and quarrelling and accumulating more than you need. Once we realize this, then the unnecessary greed, desire, and ego, which are the sources of all problems, will disappear, and our life will be different. We will learn to live a contented life.

**What are some of the specific differences between the spiritual education a student receives at Mahabodhi and a general education?**

Spiritual education comes from the teachings of the enlightened one. So we emphasize, we inspire and encourage the students to study the teachings. Through the spiritual teachings, children learn how to grow in love, compassion and goodwill. Every morning they meditate, pray and attend regular dharma lessons, which other schools do not do. Other schools emphasize getting higher and higher 100 per cent marks and then announce to people: “Children from our school are first ranked.”  
[claps]

Through spiritual education, students here learn how to open their hearts toward all of humanity — not just Buddhists, Indians, and Asians, but open up to all brothers and sisters. We are all sharing the same planet, living under one sun, one moon and one sky.

***For more information on Mahabodhi visit [www.mahabodhi-ladakh.org](http://www.mahabodhi-ladakh.org).***

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