

## ***Spirituality and Ecology from a Buddhist Perspective: Engaged Buddhism Across Asia***

**By Somboon Chungprampree (with Jane Rasbash and Fletcher Harper)**

Over the past four decades, Sulak Sivaraksa, a Thai social critic, and friends have spearheaded an Engaged Buddhist approach that is actively addressing planetary issues like climate change and environmental devastation, and human ecology concerns like social justice and ecology and inter-religious conflict. Engaged Buddhism refers to the practice of those Buddhists who apply the insights gained from meditation practice and dharma teachings to situations of social, political, environmental, and economic justice.

Sivaraksa is one of the founding leaders of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB), which was established in 1989 with support from high-level Buddhist leaders including the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, and the Theravada Bhikkhu Maha Ghosananda. INEB has members in 20 countries around the world, mostly in Asia, but also in the USA, Australia, and Europe. Its members include monks, nuns, activists, and academics. While it is a Buddhist organization, some of its members come from other spiritual traditions, and interfaith activities are part of its program through its Inter-religious Climate and Ecology Network (ICE). Sivaraksa also played a key role in creating the Spirit in Education Movement (SEM), another important pan-Asian initiative whose members seek to “understand the ways in which prevailing economic, social and political systems contribute to suffering, and to violence and the culture of violence that surrounds us, in order to provide a countervailing force of non-violence, compassion and understanding.”<sup>1</sup>

Buddhism inherently has an ecological approach within its emphasis on the interconnection of all beings, harmony with nature, reduction of suffering, and contentment as central tenets in teachings. This article looks at some of the influences on and a few of the activities of the Engaged Buddhist movement, illustrating how Buddhist wisdom serves to bring together spirituality and environmentalism while also building strong interfaith relations.

### **INEB's Beginnings**

INEB draws upon the experience and early mentorship of two key figures who were vital in setting the scene for social and ecological engagement in the early days of the Engaged Buddhism movement. Two key figures were Maha Ghosananda and Buddhadasa Bhikkhu.

Maha Ghosananda (1929-2007), a Cambodian peacemaker and Niwano Peace Laureate (1988), was considered the “Cambodian Gandhi.” *Step by Step*, his only book, is a well-known guide for Buddhist practitioners. The chapter entitled “The Present Is Mother of the Future” discusses how we cannot talk about the future without taking care of the present. A new, long-term paradigm for the future must also focus on changing our societies now to be more peaceful, just, and harmonious with nature.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.sem-edu.org/>

Bhikkhu Buddhadasa (1906-1993), perhaps the best known Siamese Buddhist monk, taught that to follow the teaching of the Buddha, to become awake, one must practice transforming greed into generosity, hatred into lovingkindness, and delusion into wisdom or real understanding—and learn to be less selfish and care more for other sentient beings. He argued that the essence of other religions is similar in encouraging their followers to work for personal liberation as well as for social justice and environmental balance.

Each of them held that we should not regard other religions as inferior to ours but live harmoniously together. Each religion is unique with its own characteristics; we should respect all scriptures, such as the Bible or the Koran, as their purpose is to guide us to be better human beings and serve others more than ourselves. Those of different religions should also work together with those of no religious tradition, for the betterment of humankind.

The wisdom of these renowned Buddhist scholars has great relevance in modern society where the ecology is greatly impacted by consumerism, pollution, climate change, and social disorder. When the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) was founded more than 20 years ago, it provided a space for *kalyanamitra* (spiritual friends) to share experience and address these kind of contemporary issues drawing on Buddhist teachings. In recent years, INEB has been developing more collaborative programs that bring together members around issues of common concern like climate change and inter-ethnic conflict.

Another important individual in raising awareness of Buddhist teachings in relation to planetary ecology challenges was Phra Prachak, who created a movement against deforestation in Thailand. He was a Thai Buddhist monk who, beginning in his 50s, wandered barefoot from forest to forest and jungle to jungle for more than ten years. One day in 1991, he came across a beautiful forest called Dongyai where villagers were cutting down the trees. Because of his deep love of forests, he used his cultural influence as a highly respected forest monk to beg from the villagers for Dongyai Forest, in the manner that a monk might beg for food every morning. The villagers agreed to donate that forest as a forest monastery.

Phra Prachak initiated a tree-ordination ceremony, with Buddhist chanting and Buddhist monks tying the saffron monk's robes around the large trees. This creative use of the traditional Buddhist ordination ceremony made the forest a sacred palace in the villager's eyes. The local people greatly respected the orange robes; once they adorned the trees they would not cut them down. Since then, tree ordination ceremonies have been widely used in Thailand by environmental groups to protect forests. Phra Prachak also led forest walks, taking people deep into the jungle to meditate and build relationships with nature, resulting in personal growth as well as deepening care for the environment.

Unfortunately, while effective in raising awareness of the urgency of saving tropical forests, Phra Prachak was politically naïve and his well-meant actions got him into trouble. Various parties had vested economic interests in Dongyai Forest: local organized crime, corrupt police, and greedy forestry officials. Consequently, he was attacked from various levels of the state machinery and by the local "mafia." His temple

was dismantled and he was arrested several times, with criminal cases going on for many years. However, the movement he initiated continued, and tree ordinations to protect the forest and forest walks--combining the teachings and practices of traditional Thai *tudong* (wandering forest monks) and Deep Ecology--are regular, inspirational occurrences in Thailand and beyond.

### **The Inter-religious Climate and Ecology (ICE) Network**

In 2012, INEB organized an interfaith dialogue on religion and climate change. More than 150 people representing Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, Islamic, Baha'i, and animist faith traditions gathered together at the Islander Center in Sri Lanka. An outcome of this event was the formation of the Inter-religious Climate and Ecology (ICE) Network, a pan-Asian, local-to-local, collaborative network of diverse spiritual communities seeking to share experiences, learning, and wisdom to build resilience and empowerment in the face of climate change.

ICE also works to wisely influence national public policy within Asia, and to stimulate and strengthen diplomatic discussions around climate change at the international level. ICE aims to do this in cooperation with various stakeholders, such as faith-based and civil society organizations, gender- and age-based groups, and business networks, always seeking to encourage healing in a world struggling with inequality and vulnerability, both intensified by climate change.

### **The Missing Moral Element**

ICE members have consistently noticed that international negotiations and forums on climate change tend to focus on legal arrangements and technical considerations. In all of these discussions, an important point is often ignored: The climate crisis is rooted in human behavior. It is driven by ever increasing consumption, the belief that more material possessions will lead to greater happiness, and a lack of mindfulness about the consequences of our actions. Our current systems reflect unarticulated values and beliefs about our relationship with the living world. Climate change is a moral issue, and the climate crisis, which we have created together, requires a shared ethical response.

On a practical level, ICE has recognized that religious leaders in its network have been teaching about the causes of climate change, the resulting suffering, and the responsibilities of religious practitioners, but need additional technical information to be able to effectively communicate on this subject. ICE develops curricular and resource materials that integrate religious teachings and available information on climate change drivers, expected impacts, strategies for mitigation, adaptation and response, and current political debates, translating and adapting these materials into local languages and cultural contexts. In this way, ICE seeks to empower religious leaders to conduct effective awareness and climate education programs in their own arenas.

ICE also recognizes that religious leaders and institutions are well-positioned to model climate action and respond to local needs. Consequently, ICE seeks to catalyze religious leaders, institutions, and communities towards collective action and local initiatives for climate change mitigation, adaptation, and response, such as carbon-neutral temples, churches and mosques; home gardening and food security programs; community

resilience programs (e.g. disaster plans and savings systems), disaster mitigation (e.g. reforestation, canals, rainwater harvesting); emergency response to climate disaster, documenting indigenous knowledge and local change, and more.

On the level of policy advocacy, more and more Asian religious leaders and organizations are becoming more actively engaged in climate responses, and are beginning to work together to influence local and national policies. ICE both provides basic training on local policy and on culturally appropriate advocacy techniques, and seeks to support networks that link policy advocates of different faiths across Asia.

## **Response to Buddhist-Muslim Violence**

Another recent sociopolitical development in Asia to which there has been an Engaged Buddhist response has been the emergence of Buddhist-Muslim violence, particularly in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. INEB has worked with other international groups, including International Movement for a Just World (JUST), to hold a series of discussions on how to address the roots of these violent conflicts. In 2015, INEB and core partners of the International Forum on Buddhist-Muslim Relations (BMF) issued a Jogjakarta Statement on shared values and commitments to overcome extremism and advance peace with justice. This statement drew on common values shared by our respective scriptures and included, as part of its substance, a section of canonical texts from both traditions on Living in Harmony with the Environment. Examples drawn from both traditions follow:

*As the bee derives honey from the flower without harming its colour or fragrance --  
- So should the wise interact with their surroundings.*

*(Dhammapada 49)*

*One day a deity asked the Buddha, "Whose merit grows day and night, who is the righteous, virtuous person that goes to the realm of bliss?" Answered the Buddha, "the merit of those people who plant groves, parks, build bridges, make ponds, dwelling places, etc. grows day and night, and such religious persons go to heaven"  
(Discourse on the Merit Gained in Planting Groves, Vanaropa Sutta)*

*For the true servants of the Most Gracious are only those who walk gently on earth.  
(The Qur'an 25:63)*

*And there are on earth many tracts of land close by one another (and yet widely differing from one another); and (there are on it) vineyards, and fields of grain, and date-palms growing in clusters from one root or standing alone, (all) watered with the same water: and yet, some of them have we favoured above others by way of the food (which they provide for man and beast). Verily, in all this there are messages indeed for people who use their reason.*

*(The Qur'an 13:4)*

The statement named a number of core principles that serve as the framework for peaceful interreligious relations: the importance of religious diversity and peaceful co-existence; universal mercy and compassion; universal justice, human dignity, and non-violence; pluralism, tolerance and religious freedom; rejection of hate, hate speech, and

retaliation; and the importance of self-introspection; and living in harmony with the environment.<sup>2</sup>

## **Gross National Happiness**

Around the world, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Product (GNP) are the standard, widely accepted measurements of social well being and development for nations. However, the shortcomings of these metrics are both evident and dangerous, as they only measure certain kinds of economic activity and fail to reflect aspects of human and ecological well-being that are fundamental to life. In response, Bhutan held its first international conference on Gross National Happiness (GNH) in 2004. The key concept comes from Bhutanese Buddhist wisdom, and implies that sustainable development should take a holistic approach towards notions of progress, give equal importance to non-economic aspects of wellbeing, and balance human development with the conservation and protection of the natural world.

INEB, SEM, and Suan Nguen Mee Ma (an Asian social enterprise initiative that has created a Green Market Network across Asia) actively joined the “GNH Movement” in 2005 and continued to search for a holistic development paradigm. After some initial follow-up activities, a small-scale but permanent organization was created: the School for Wellbeing Studies and Research. The three founding partners of the School for Wellbeing are Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok; the Centre for Bhutan Studies based in Thimphu; and the Sathirakoses Nagapradipa Foundation, a Siamese umbrella for independent civil society initiatives, founded by Sulak Sivarastra in 1968. Apart from research on “the well-being of society” and organizing a public debate on happiness, “limits to growth,” and sustainable development (with experts including Nobel laureate Joseph E. Stiglitz, Vandana Shiva, Helena Norberg-Hodge, Matthieu Ricard, David Loy, and Arthur Zajonc), the School for Wellbeing (inspired by Shiva) started the Towards Organic Asia program, together with partners in the Mekong region. Its major achievement is the start of a Young Organic Farmers’ (YOF) network.

Initiatives like ordaining trees, Gross National Happiness, and the Inter-religious Climate and Ecology network have all drawn deeply from Buddhist wisdom. Interconnection, respect for all beings, and acknowledging and addressing suffering are integral to their ability to inspire as well as their effectiveness. Through SEM and INEB, Buddhist leaders have reached out to share with, influence, and learn from other spiritual traditions across Asia and beyond. Engaged Buddhism offers a vision of thinking about social, ecological, cultural, and spiritual issues in conjunction with economic activity, which is surely a way forward to both a more harmonious and a more balanced planet.

### References:

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.inebnetwork.org/bmf-home/621-a-high-level-summit-of-buddhist-and-muslim-leaders>

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