

Concept Note
“*Buddhist Heritage Towards Inclusive Societies*”
International Network of Engaged Buddhists
Presents the 21st Biennial Conference
Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India
November 22 – December 1, 2024

Overview of the 2024 INEB Conference

The 21st INEB Biennial International Conference is being organized and hosted by The Foundation of His Sacred Majesty based in Tamil Nadu, India, in collaboration with the INEB Secretariat based in Bangkok. The Foundation’s location and focus brings a rich background to the conference theme - *Buddhist Heritage Towards Inclusive Societies*. We look forward to learning together through this immersive experience.

The Buddhist heritage carries within it a wealth of teachings and principles that can contribute significantly towards building inclusive societies. The Buddhist heritage of South India represents “Diversity in Unity,” a concept that emphasizes the value of embracing and celebrating diversity while working towards unity and harmony within a community or society. This recognises the diverse backgrounds, perspectives, cultures, and identities within a community that enriches the collective experience. Embracing such diversity requires creating an inclusive environment where individuals feel welcomed, respected, and valued for who they are. Such inclusivity promotes a sense of belonging and ensures that everyone has equal opportunities to participate and thrive. While diversity brings richness and variety to a community, unity provides strength and cohesion where social justice is paramount towards collective unity that creates positive societal transformation.

The conference promotes inclusivity through:

1. **Compassion and Loving-Kindness:** Cultivating compassion and loving-kindness towards all beings are central to Buddhist teachings. These qualities encourage individuals to empathize with others, show kindness and genuine care that contribute to the welfare and happiness of all members of society.
2. **Equality and Non-Discrimination:** Buddhism emphasizes the inherent equality of all beings, irrespective of differences in race, gender, social status, religion or belief and background. This principle of non-discrimination promotes a society where everyone is respected and valued equally.
3. **Interconnectedness and Interdependence:** The concept of interdependence in Buddhism teaches that all beings and phenomena are interconnected and interrelated. This understanding can foster a sense of unity and shared responsibility within society, encouraging cooperation and mutual support.
4. **Mindfulness and Awareness:** Buddhist practices such as mindfulness meditation help individuals develop self-awareness, emotional regulation, and a deeper understanding of their thoughts and actions. This heightened awareness can lead to more empathetic and understanding interactions with others.
5. **Social Engagement and Service:** Buddhist heritage encourages active engagement in social welfare and service activities. By volunteering, supporting charitable causes, and working towards the betterment of society, individuals can embody the spirit of generosity and compassion advocated by Buddhism.

These aspects of Buddhist heritage and integrating them into social structures and norms catalyses the possibility to create a more inclusive society where diversity is celebrated, empathy is cultivated, and all members feel a sense of belonging and respect. Drawing on such inspirations, we have developed different thematic for the INEB conference 2024.

Conference Aims and Objectives

INEB's Biennial Conference aims to achieve a variety of objectives centered on the promotion, understanding, and practice of Buddhism.

1. *Promoting Peace and Harmony*: Encouraging peaceful coexistence and understanding among diverse peoples, communities, cultures, and nations through Buddhist teachings.
2. *Archaeological and Cultural Exchange*: Promoting the cultural aspects of Buddhism to a broader audience through the arts, literature, and traditions
3. *Social Justice and Engagement*: Addressing contemporary social issues through the lens of Buddhist teachings, such as grassroots support for environmental sustainability, gender equality, children's wellbeing, social justice using nonviolent approaches.
4. *Spiritual Development and Practice*: Offering opportunities for collective practice, rituals, meditation, mindfulness practices, and spiritual growth.
5. *Ecological Responsibility and Building Community*: Offering hands-on experience, strengthening networks and relationships within the global Buddhist community.
6. *Youth Engagement*: Encouraging young people to explore and engage with Buddhist teachings and practices.

Significance of the Conference

- First International Buddhist Conference in Tamil Nadu:
 - ✓ Showcasing the Buddhist contributions of South India
 - ✓ To invite socially marginalised communities from across the globe
- First dialogue among Tamil Buddhists of Indonesia, Tamil Buddhists of India, and Sinhalese Buddhists in Sri Lanka
- Celebrating the 75th Anniversary of Indian Constitution & Centenary year of 1924 Resolution on Public Amenities
- Buddhist Archaeological site visits to Mahabalipuram UNESCO world heritage site and Kanchipuram HRIDAY heritage city
- Inaugurating the South Indian Buddhist Council, a fellowship council among socially engaged Buddhist organisations
- Buddhist Youth Conference – South Indian Buddhist Youth Conference and exploring the contributions of INEB's Young Bodhisattva alumni and SENS alumni
- Hands-on workshops of the Eco-Temple Community Development Network– Experiencing CSEB brick production, land revitalization, bi-cycle campaigns, tree planting, local solar and clean energy, etc.
- Cultural folk performances and music shows of South India by NEELAM
- Introducing South Indian food cuisines as a way of healthy eating and wellbeing
- Displaying and exhibiting the Buddhist Maritime Silk Route towards South East Asia.
- Release Buddhist books on maritime Buddhism, significance of full moon day
- Present awards of excellence to representatives of Buddhist communities including scholars, researchers, professionals, and activists

Generally, this wide-ranging conference will provide scope for networking and developing relationship with civil society activists, academicians, research scholars, Buddhist leaders, bureaucrats, lawyers and more.

Tentative INEB Conference Schedule

Date	Activities
Nov. 22-24	Eco Temple Study Tour Auroville Community (for Eco Village Core Group Only)
Nov. 25 - 27	Pre-Conference Eco Temple – Hands-on Workshop
Nov. 28 - 29	Conference Workshops on Engaged Buddhism ❖ Archaeological Justice and Community Participation ❖ Dialogue among Marginalized Communities on Gender, Social Justice and Inclusiveness ❖ Ecological Temple and Sustainability ❖ Youth Empowerment Evening of cultural events
Nov. 30	Archaeological Site Visits Mahabalipuram UNESCO Site and Kanchipuram HRIDAY Heritage City
Dec. 1	Public Symposium Buddhist Heritage Toward Inclusive Societies
Dec. 2 - 3	INEB EC / AC Meeting (by invitation only)

Conference Sub-Themes and Contextualising Their Significance

SUB THEME 1: *Archaeological Justice and Community Participation*

Buddhist Archaeological Justice refers to the ethical and equitable handling of Buddhist archaeological sites, artifacts, and heritage, ensuring that these cultural resources are respected, preserved, and appropriately managed.

The objectives of Buddhist Archaeological Justice include:

- *Protection and Preservation:* Safeguarding Buddhist archaeological sites and artifacts from looting, vandalism, and environmental degradation.
- *Equitable Access and Representation:* Ensuring that the narratives and interpretations of Buddhist heritage include voices from local communities, scholars, and practitioners, and are not dominated by any single perspective.
- *Addressing Historical Injustices:* Recognizing and addressing the ways in which archaeology has been used to perpetuate colonialism, racism, and other forms of discrimination. This includes critically examining past practices and working to rectify any harm done to communities and their heritage.
- *Ethical Excavation Practices:* Conducting archaeological excavations in a manner that is respectful to the cultural and religious significance of the sites, ensuring that any interventions are minimally invasive and reversible where possible.
- *Restitution and Repatriation:* Facilitating the return of illegally obtained or displaced Buddhist artifacts to their rightful countries, communities, or religious institutions.
- *Community Involvement:* Engaging local communities in decision-making processes regarding the management and conservation of Buddhist archaeological sites.
- *Education and Awareness:* Raising public awareness about the importance of preserving Buddhist heritage and the ethical issues surrounding archaeological practices.
- *Documentation and Research:* Ensuring thorough and accurate documentation of Buddhist archaeological sites and artifacts, and supporting research that enhances understanding and preservation.
- *Legal Frameworks:* Advocating for and supporting robust legal protections for Buddhist archaeological sites and artifacts at national and international levels.
- *Sustainable Tourism:* Promoting tourism practices that respect and preserve the integrity of Buddhist archaeological sites while benefiting local communities economically and culturally.

SUB-THEME 2: *Dialogue Interface Among Marginalised Communities on Gender, Social Justice and Inclusiveness*

The program will coincide with the celebration of 75th Anniversary of the Indian Constitution. It aims to foster understanding, cooperation, and unity among diverse Buddhist communities. Dialogues will be held among the Buddhist diaspora representing Tamil Buddhists of Indonesia, Sinhalese Buddhists, Tamil Buddhists of Sri Lanka, Tamil Buddhists of India, Nepal traditional Buddhists, Buraku community of Japan, and the Roma community of Hungary-Poland.

These dialogues serve multiple objectives which includes:

- *Cultural Exchange and Preservation:* Promoting the exchange of cultural practices and ensuring the preservation of unique traditions within the diaspora communities.
- *Strengthening Community Bonds:* Building and strengthening connections among different Buddhist communities, fostering a sense of unity and mutual support.
- *Promoting Understanding, Tolerance and Solidarity:* Encouraging mutual understanding and tolerance among various Buddhist traditions and between Buddhist and non-Buddhist communities.
- *Addressing Common Challenges:* Identifying and addressing common issues faced, such as gender discrimination toward female monastics, prejudice against lgbtiq+, cultural assimilation, maintaining religious practices, and supporting younger generations in their faith.
- *Sharing Resources and Networking:* Facilitating the sharing of resources, knowledge, and experiences to support the practice and growth of Buddhism within communities.
- *Enhancing Spiritual Growth:* Providing opportunities for collective spiritual practice, learning, and growth through retreats, meditation sessions, and religious ceremonies.
- *Supporting Social Engagement:* Encouraging diaspora communities to engage in social inclusiveness, gender and humanitarian activities, applying Buddhist principles to address societal issues.

SUB-THEME 3: *Ecological Temple and Sustainability*

Individual members in the INEB network are engaged in a wide variety of Buddhist and other/faith-based environmental activities. These activities came from our commitment as Buddhists to engage in the suffering we encounter in the world (1st Noble Truth). In this context, it has been the suffering throughout Asia brought about by environmental degradation from the modern industrial development process, such as deforestation and the destruction of numerous habitats. A critical aspect of this process has caused rural communities to become economically marginalized through the exploitation and destruction of their environments for the creation of massive energy projects that support high consumption urban lifestyles. For example, massive dam projects have relocated hundreds of thousands of people, and nuclear power plants have endangered the entire fabric of life in rural areas. As such, INEB members in their environmental activities have pushed deeper into the structural and cultural causes of environmental suffering in their regions (2nd Noble Truth) and have articulated alternative visions based on Buddhist teachings (3rd Noble Truth) with activities to realize these visions (4th Noble Truth).

The Eco-Temple Community Development Project is a plan to bring many of these activities in different countries and regions together to bolster the integrative efficiency of each individual project and support and advance a wider movement among Buddhists, other communities of faith, and wider civil society, business, and governmental initiatives to build sustainable and ecological societies.

Ecological temples, also known as eco-temples, are places of worship that incorporate sustainable practices which includes designing, construction, and daily operations. The significance of ecological temples lies in their ability to merge spiritual and environmental concerns, promoting a holistic approach to wellbeing and sustainability. They are significant in the areas of:

- *Environmental Fellowship:* Exemplifies the principles of environmental care and responsibility, showcasing how religious institutions can lead by example in sustainable practices.
- *Spiritual Connection to Nature:* Emphasizes the interconnectedness of all life and encourage a deep spiritual connection to nature, reflecting many Buddhist teachings about the natural world and its importance.
- *Educational Role:* Serves as educational hubs, teaching visitors and the community about sustainable living, environmental conservation, and the importance of protecting the earth.
- *Sustainable Practices:* Incorporating sustainable practices such as using renewable energy, conserving water, reducing waste, and promoting biodiversity through green landscaping and organic gardening.
- *Model for Future Construction:* Integrating eco-friendly architecture and construction techniques, ecological temples provide a model for future religious and secular buildings aiming to reduce their environmental footprint.
- *Community Engagement:* These temples often engage the local community in environmental initiatives, fostering a collective sense of responsibility towards nature and promoting volunteerism in conservation projects.
- *Health and Well-being:* The use of natural materials and the focus on green spaces can enhance the physical and mental well-being of visitors and residents, creating a serene and healthy environment.
- *Promoting Ethical Living:* Embodying the ethical teachings of Buddhism, such as compassion and mindfulness, extending these principles to encompass care for the environment.
- *Symbol of Harmony:* Symbolizing harmony between human activities and the natural world, reinforcing the idea that sustainable living is not only possible but also spiritually fulfilling.

SUB-THEME 4: *Youth Empowerment*

Integrating the youth's concerns consistently into INEB's other program areas is a necessary step toward inclusiveness that will connect across generations. Youth are also encouraged to participate in sessions offered under the other sub-themes. They will share their workshop experiences during the afternoon breakout sessions of the public symposium.

The youth will use the Four Noble Truths in the breakout sessions as a framework for further developing themselves - mind, body and spirit.

- Youth concern and analysis – Identify the suffering, thematic issues by participating in group processes, including dialogue
- Envision a harmonious society – By using the knowledge gained through the youth concern and analysis, develop strategies uniquely suited to local community contexts
- Share success stories – how the youth engagements on various issues and contexts have been successful or impactful, and what else can be done to expand their work.