



## **School of English for Engaged Social Service (SENS)**

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Dear Friends and Partners of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB),

The 4<sup>th</sup> annual School of English for Engaged Social Service (SENS) program in early 2019 will have the special theme of “Interfaith Understanding towards Peace and Sustainability.” I am writing to you about the significance of this theme for us, our approach to it in SENS, and various ways that you could support or benefit from this project. The SENS program is one of two key programs initiated since 2016 by INEB’s institute for transformative learning, which we call INEB Institute.

### **Bringing People Together – A Longstanding INEB Approach**

A core insight within the leadership circles of INEB is that simply bringing people together to meet face-to-face can be remarkably productive. It can lead to new friendships, rapid and enjoyable learning, higher levels of mutual understanding, and the healing of pre-existing rifts. It can also energize those who began as strangers to become allies and to work together enthusiastically on common projects.

This wisdom was present when spiritually inspired activists met in Siam<sup>1</sup> (Thailand) in 1989 to rest and to talk. Their meeting took place against a backdrop of turbulent conflicts in Siam, Southeast Asia, and beyond, over different paths to economic and social development, destruction of ecosystems, and sometimes violent confrontation over political ideologies. Their meeting resulted in the birth of INEB, because those present saw the value of this kind of face-to-face reflection and sanctuary. The same wisdom was behind the biennial INEB meetings that emerged after 1989 and have continued up to the present. And it has been present in the recent efforts of INEB leaders to sit down and talk with partisans in the sometimes very violent conflicts between Buddhists and Muslims, especially in Myanmar and Sri Lanka. Working with these individuals has sometimes meant inviting them on study tours to meet co-religionists and to see a wider world with broader possibilities of living out their tradition. The face-to-face contacts have remained important.

### **Holistic Higher Learning – The INEB Institute**

When Sulak Sivaraksa called together educators and activists in 2014 to work towards new forms of Buddhist-inspired higher learning, our meetings took place against the backdrop of looming civilizational crises that have only become more pressing since that time. Prominent among them are climate change, worsening social inequality, challenges to democracy, and the use of violence by state and non-state actors to achieve political ends. The meetings aimed to bring to fruition in the arena of adult and higher education the many years of experience of educators in INEB, the Spirit in Education Movement (SEM), and elsewhere.

These educators had long argued for and worked to realize, in company with Sulak, a holistic education that engaged the head, heart, and hands. This holistic education aimed to give an equal place to: a) rigorous intellectual inquiry, b) the cultivation of personal and interpersonal wholeness through contemplation, ethical commitment, and building mutually supportive relationships with others; and c) applying knowledge and skills acquired to alleviating suffering, both personal and structural. The product of the 2014 meetings was the INEB Institute, and the two key programs developed within the INEB Institute since 2016 have been the School of English for Engaged Social Service (SENS) and Awakening Leadership Training (ALT).

After three years of successful development of the SENS program, Somboon Chungprampree (Moo), General Secretary of INEB, proposed that we should take up the theme of Interfaith Understanding towards Peace and Sustainability in our 2019 program. This proposal was made in part on the basis of the extraordinary brutality that only recently led to the forced emigration of some 700,000 Rohingya

from Rakhine State in Myanmar, and the disturbing realization that many Myanmar Buddhists have been complicit in or openly supportive of this violence. We saw taking up this theme as a way for the INEB Institute to support one of INEB's key strategic initiatives for the next 10 years: namely, to involve Buddhists constructively in Conflict Transformation and Peacebuilding. More specifically, we saw it as a way to support the work of the Buddhist Muslim Forum.

### **The Strengths SENS Brings to the Work of Interfaith Understanding**

SENS was designed to be a place for learning English as a tool for leadership, self-cultivation, and social transformation. It is now a three-month course that takes place annually from January to April at the Wongsanit Ashram near Bangkok. It is aimed primarily at young adults in Asia who have demonstrated a commitment to work for the wider common good, and who would benefit from having higher English language skills. The SENS curriculum is built around the following core elements that frame, animate, and give a practical real-world context and deeper meaning to the English learning process<sup>2</sup>:

- Appreciating What is Already Good and Admirable in Self and Other
- Affirming the Vast Inherent Intelligence and Learning Potential of All Humans
- Studying and Engaging in Contemplative Practices
- Listening and Mutual Support for Self-Knowledge, Healing, and Understanding
- Cultivating Awareness of the Beauty as Well as the Challenges of Relating Across Lines of Difference – Especially Gender, Race, Ethnicity, Class, and Religious Tradition
- Studying the Sources of Inequality in the Contemporary World
- Studying Climate Change and Developing Constructive Responses
- Cultivating Leadership Responsive to Current Crises, and the Skills of Personal Goal-Setting
- Studying Signs of Hopeful, Constructive, and Non-Violent Change in the World

We approach these elements through classroom study, small-group tutoring, workshops, fieldtrips, and cultural events.

Our student cohorts are quite diverse. They include male and female monastics and lay men and women, students from marginalized communities across Asia as well as those from dominant national ethnic groups, and the sons and daughters of poor farming families as well as a few from middle-class or well-to-do families. Our students speak a wide array of mother tongues including the languages of minority indigenous and tribal groups, and while many identify as Buddhists, we also have had Muslims, Christians, and Hindus attend our courses.

In spite of this diversity, we find that with each year the new student cohort leaves the program with a stronger sense of connection and mutual commitment. This is in part a testament to the power of face-to-face encounters and of studying together over three months, such that the SENS community becomes a new reference group for the students, indicating what is possible in cross-boundary relationships. We think it is also due to the following approaches that experience has helped us refine to some extent:

- We start from the inherent goodness and vast potential of each human being, as human being, and recognize that this is expressed in particular, often unique and unexpected ways.
- We give importance to the students' having a chance to tell their own stories, and to sharing what is important to them. This is combined with training students to listen with genuine attention and respect and to provide support in appropriate ways. These listening practices provide a foundation for self-reflection, overcoming of personal obstacles, constructive encounter with difference, and mutual respect.
- We recognize that the particularity of each participant also includes the traditions that play a key role in giving the students a sense of what is important, of what is to be valued in life and the

world, and of what is possible for human beings at their best. We regard these traditions as the founding sources of the students' moral imagination, and we encourage students to reflect on their own orienting traditions and to be open to learning about the traditions of others. We also expose students to gems of literature from various traditions.

- We focus the students' attention on practices and perspectives that are useful for anyone, regardless of their orienting traditions. These include contemplative practices, practices of listening and mutual support, and ethical perspectives that are common to a number of spiritual traditions.
- Perhaps most importantly, the entire course engages the students' attention fully on a series of challenging but worthy collective tasks. These include a) learning English; b) learning to articulate appreciations of others; c) learning to support each other in the learning process, and in articulating and achieving goals; d) understanding key features of the contemporary world such as the heritage of colonialism, the role of power differentials and oppression in keeping people apart, distrustful and subdued, the origins and mechanisms of inequality, and climate change; and finally e) devising constructive responses to the various crises we face at this time in history, responses that are chosen by the students as appropriate to their life projects and social milieu.

### **What We Will Do to Fully Engage the Theme of Interfaith Understanding**

Working from these strengths, we realize that effectively incorporating this important theme for the first time into our course next year will require additional work and learning on our part. A few of the things we will do to ensure the successful focus on this theme include:

**Greater Diversity.** We will take extra care to create a diverse cohort, with strong representation from each of the major traditions present in Asia and Southeast Asia, including Buddhists, Muslims, Christians, and Hindus, while also welcoming those who follow indigenous, secular, or minority ethical traditions of different kinds.

**New Field Excursions.** We take students to meet with leaders who are outstanding models of integrity in Siam. Understandably given the Thai context, these have been predominantly Buddhist leaders, with only occasional lectures or visits with Muslims or Christians. For the 2019 season we will make certain to take students to meet Muslim, Christian, and Hindu leaders that are engaged in transformational work on behalf of their communities and/or the larger society. This will require new work in identifying appropriate visits and leaders.

**Interrogating Traditions.** We will heighten and expand the attention we give to the nature of religious and other ethical traditions, in order to counter misunderstandings and easy assumptions. Anthropologists and educators in religious literacy have emphasized, for example, that such traditions are normally highly internally diverse, that they are inescapably intertwined with the social, cultural, economic, and political forms of a given time and place, that they are constantly evolving, and that they often involve energetic debates internally about what practices and ideas best fulfill the promise and values of the tradition. They suggest, furthermore, that many individuals in the contemporary world may turn to more than one tradition to find a reliable reference and direction for life choices.

**Expand the Literature.** Identify new gems that extend our readings from ethical traditions.

**Case Studies of Conflict and Harmony.** We will also need to prepare case studies of interreligious conflict, conflict transformation, and interreligious harmony or solidarity. These would help to demonstrate the many social, political, economic, or cultural factors that enter into conflicts, the factors that lead to successful transformation of conflict, and the many hopeful examples of cross-tradition cooperation and peaceful coexistence.

**Consultation with Experienced Leaders.** Finally, we will need to consult with experienced leaders and experts in the areas of conflict transformation, religious literacy, and inquiry into ethical traditions.

### **How You Can Help and/or Benefit from this Program**

Should you wish to support this project, there is much that you could do.

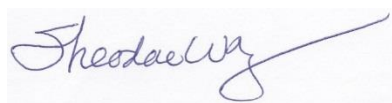
**Nominate Students or Tutors.** It would be a great help in building a diverse cohort if you could nominate students from your tradition or community. They should have at least a high beginning level of English, and they should have some demonstrable record of work and commitment to wider social goals. Alternatively, you may know of someone with excellent English and a friendly and open disposition who would like to assist us in this course as a volunteer tutor. We would very much appreciate such recommendations.

**Sponsor a Student, Donate, or Help Raise Scholarship Funds.** Due to the fact that so many of our students come from marginalized or poor communities, very few of them are able to offer any tuition. For this reason we rely to a large extent on sponsorship from individuals or groups as well as on individual donations. You could help by contributing in any of these ways. Your organization also stands to gain by sponsoring one of your staff members, as they will return with stronger English and a genuinely intercultural and interreligious experience. Metta Development Foundation in Myanmar and the Participatory Development Training Center (PADETC) in Laos are a few of the organizations that have been very pleased with the changes they see in the staff they have sent to our course.

For donations, please visit this link and consider offering a monthly donation, which requires a minimum of \$10: <https://www.globalgiving.org/projects/english-for-engaged-social-service-empowerment-program/> If you do not have the resources to donate, inviting your friends or members of your networks to support us would also be of great assistance.

**Sharing Your Expertise or Suggesting Resources.** If you have experience in teaching religious literacy, or in working for conflict transformation that involves religious traditions, we would appreciate the chance to consult with you in person or through online interviews or email exchanges. If you are familiar with religious leaders and socially engaged religious communities in or near Bangkok, we would appreciate hearing your recommendations for helpful contacts. Similarly, if you can suggest resources, including texts on the nature of religious traditions, stories, films, songs, and poetry, we would be very grateful!

Thank you very much for your kind attention and consideration of our project,



Ted Mayer  
Academic Director, The INEB Institute

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<sup>1</sup> Here we are following Sulak Sivaraksa in using the earlier non-ethnically identified name for what is now known as Thailand

<sup>2</sup> For more in-depth materials on our curriculum, please contact Ted Mayer at: [director@inebinstitute.org](mailto:director@inebinstitute.org)