



Key concepts

- Two contemporary Buddhist teachers: HH Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama (1935-) and Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-).
- The Dalai Lama is seen as the most important leader within Tibetan Buddhism: he is the leader of one of the four schools in Tibet, the Gelugpa which is also known as Kadampa and as the Yellow Hat tradition.
- The Dalai Lama is recognised as the earthly embodiment of Avalokitesvara – known as Chenrezig in Tibet – and is the physical embodiment in human form of the compassion and wisdom of that bodhisattva.
- Lhamo Thondup – his birth name – was recognised as the new Dalai Lama following the death of the 13th Dalai Lama and, aged 15, took on political leadership of Tibet in 1950.
- The Chinese invasion of Tibet took place in 1949 and, having tried to negotiate on behalf of Buddhists in Tibet with the anti-religious Communist government in Beijing, in 1959 the Dalai Lama fled into exile in Dharmasala in Northern India.
- The Dalai Lama stepped down as head of state in 2011 and since then has encouraged the development of a secular democratic government for the Tibetan government-in-exile.
- Having been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, the Dalai Lama has made three main commitments: (a) Promotion of human values – compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, contentment and self-discipline; (b) Promotion of religious harmony among the world’s major religions; (c) Preservation of Tibet’s Buddhist culture of peace and non-violence.
- The Dalai Lama has become worldwide the most widely-recognised Buddhist - particularly in the West - through writing books, being the subject of films and visits around the world.
- He has used this high-profile position to promote: Tibetan Buddhism, the principle of ahimsa (non-violence), Socially Engaged Buddhism and the relationship between science and Buddhism via the Mind and Life Institute.
- Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh is Vietnamese and in 1949 took full ordination as a monk in the Zen tradition. He was involved in numerous peaceful protests against the Vietnam War and left the country in 1966. He did not return until 2005.
- He became known in the USA for his opposition to the Vietnam War, for his friendship with the Civil Rights activist Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jnr (1929-1968) and the Catholic monk and author Thomas Merton (1915-1968).
- Thich Nhat Hanh established Plum Village in Southern France in 1982 as a base for his Buddhist beliefs and practice, which he developed through a combination of Zen, Theravada and Mahayana elements.
- Thich Nhat Hanh is one of the best known Buddhist teachers in the West. He is a prolific author, the subject of films and has given many interviews.
- Thich Nhat Hanh’s Order of Interbeing – founded 1966 – follows his Fourteen Mindfulness Trainings. It upholds the importance of Socially Engaged Buddhism along with mindful walking, smiling and breathing.

Key quotes

‘My religion is simple. My religion is kindness.’ (Dalai Lama).

‘I am convinced that everyone can develop a good heart and a sense of universal responsibility with or without religion.’ (Dalai Lama).

‘To be mindful is to be truly alive, present and at one with those around you and with what you are doing.’ (Thich Nhat Hanh)

‘To change the world we need to begin with ourselves and awaken that eternal part of us where true peace resides, our own Buddha nature.’ (Thich Nhat Hanh)

Key words

- Tulku
- Prasangika
- Gelugpa
- Lama
- Plum Village
- Ahimsa
- Order of Interbeing
- Mind and Life Institute

Key arguments/debates

Some focus on the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh as exemplars of Buddhism.

Others focus instead on them as humanitarians teaching peace and compassion.

Key questions

If the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh are mainly concerned with teaching peace and compassion, to what extent is this a new form of Buddhism? Are the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh expert exponents of upaya (skillful means) and thus following the ancient traditions of Mahayana Buddhism?

In addressing the problem of individual and general dukkha (suffering), are the Dalai Lama and Thich Nhat Hanh following the essential dhamma of the Buddha?

Issues for analysis and evaluation