

## **"How does Buddhism help build Peace and Happiness in Cambodia thought, local ritual ceremonies, lifestyle, beliefs and tradition?"**

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### **Introduction**

Buddhism was founded well over two thousand years ago in the 5th or 6th century BCE. Its ideas and practices are still evident in societies throughout the world today. Buddhism is the world's fourth largest religion, with about 350 million living adherents. Besides impacting those who study and practice Buddhism as their primary religion, Buddhism shapes modern philosophical outlooks, psychological conditions and political landscapes.

According to the Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia in article 42 states that "Buddhism shall be a state religion." 95 percent of Cambodians are Buddhists. In the present day, there are 70,853 monks among 15 million Cambodian people and 4,984 monasteries throughout the whole country.

In the year 238 B.C Emperor Asoka King sent two learned Bhikkhus, namely Sona Thera and Utara Thera, to propagate Buddhism in Suwanaphumi or Southeast Asia in the present time.

Cambodian ways of life have been connected to what the Buddha taught more than 2558 years ago. Buddhist monks and monasteries have played key roles in Cambodian society from generation to generation. Here we may know how Buddhism Influences Cambodian ways of life.

#### **Impact of Buddhism to Cambodian Culture**

Today Buddhism remains an influential force in Cambodia religion and in everyday life, but it is still rebuilding from the loss of so many leaders and teachers during the Khmer Rouge period. Moreover, in the countryside, Buddhist practice often embraces a synergetic blend of

animism and indigenous spirit worship. Over the years, Buddhism has played a central role in Cambodian Society, serving as a blueprint for everyday life, a moral structure, a guide for family life, a basis for national holidays and cultural events, and a foundation for social policy.

The Khmer Rouge believed they could kill Buddhism. They tried to stamp it out, but Buddhism cannot die. Buddhism lives in Cambodian life, language and love for ancestors. Most of all, Buddhism lives deeply in Cambodian hearts. So, the Buddhist way of life and Cambodian culture are inseparable.

### **The Role of Buddhist Monks**

Buddhist monks traditionally were called upon to perform a number of functions in Cambodian life. They participated in all formal village festivals, ceremonies, marriages and funerals. They also might have participated in ceremonies to name infants and in other minor ceremonies or rites of passage. Monks did not lead the ceremonies, however, because that role was given to the *Achar*, or master of ceremonies. The monk's major function was to say prayers of blessing. They were often healers and, in traditional Khmer culture, they were the practitioners whose role was closest to that of modern psychiatrists. They might also have been skilled in astrology.

Monks traditionally occupied a unique position in the transmission of Khmer culture and values. By his way of life, he provided a living model of the most meritorious behavior a Buddhist could follow. He provided the laity with many opportunities for gaining merit. For centuries monks were the only literate people residing in rural communities. They acted as teachers to temple servants, to novices, and to newly ordained monks. Until the 1970s, most literate Cambodian males gained literacy solely through the instruction of the *Sangha*.

### **The Role of Buddhist Monasteries (Wat)**

Monasteries perform most of the major Cambodian annual festivals which are connected with Buddhist observances. The Khmer New Year Festival takes place in mid- April. The Pchum Ben, celebrated in September or in October, is a memorial day for deceased ancestors and for close friends. Magha Puja, in January or February, commemorates the

last sermon of the Buddha. Visakh Puja, in April or in May, is the triple anniversary of the birth, death and enlightenment of the Buddha. The Rainy Retreat takes place in June or in July. It marks the beginning of a penitential season during which the monks must remain within the temple compounds. The Kathina marks the end of this season. Celebrated in September, it features offerings, especially of robes, to the monks.

In Cambodia, monasteries are like the hospitals where people come and get cured of physical and mental diseases. Monasteries are also schools where people come and learn several skills of living. Monasteries are the courts of Cambodian people too. People get counsel to resolve their problems while they are in the monasteries.

The monastery (wat) was not only the moral-religious center of a village community, but served important educational, cultural and social functions as well. Until recent times, the monasteries (wats) were the main centers of learning with schools and libraries where the Khmer culture and language was preserved and transmitted from generation to generation. They served as culturally- and environmentally-sensitive foci for people-centered development that included, indeed featured, social safety nets for the poor and needy. Until the most recent time of troubles that began with civil war in 1970, it was still common for all men to ordain as monks at least once in their lives; an act most commonly accomplished as rite of passage for young men entering adulthood and society.

Unity among multicultural Buddhist cultures in Mekong and Asia Community

Each country in the region has its own unique history, trials and tribulations as a people, a community, a Kingdom, a nation. While the essence and wisdom of the Lord Buddha's message is universal, Buddhism adapts itself to the needs of each people in every time and place.

Suffering can divide or unite a people. For example, there is no country in the Mekong community that doesn't bear the scars of war. War is the antithesis; war is the enemy of unity. Landmines remain buried in the earth, long after the war is over. UXOS and cluster bombs remain scattered on the ground in the region.

On the Dhammayietra s (peace walks) which the Venerable Maha Ghosananda led across war-torn Cambodia, he would explain the mother of the landmines in the ground is the landmines of the heart:

Greed, Hatred and Ignorance. If people desired peace, if people wanted to come together again as sisters and brothers, they must demine their own heart first.

The hot wars are over presently in the Mekong community. Yet the landmines of the heart remain. They are the cause of ongoing conflict and suffering among the people within each country as well as in the region.

Buddhism offers the path overcome these landmines; overcome greed with Generosity, hatred with Loving Kindness and ignorance with Wisdom. Overcoming the landmines of the heart is an essential step on the path to unity in the Mekong community.

Maha Ghosananda spoke of his vision of this unity simply in this way: "The world is our house. All human beings are our brothers and sisters. To help them, to serve them, to love them is our duty and our religion."

At a time in our world where religion seems to be being used as the source or cause of conflict, the Vietnamese Zen Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us: "No single tradition monopolizes the truth. We must glean the best values of all traditions and work together to remove the tensions between traditions in order to give peace a chance."

## Conclusion

In short, Buddhism has been the thread in the Cambodian fabric of life, a shining star in our darkest night, a welcomed guide throughout the milestones of life, a word of truth to overcome and prevent suffering, a pathway of peace within ourselves, our neighbors, our region, our world. Slowly step by step, the Dhammayietra (Peace walk) continues.

## References

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