

Socially Engaged Buddhism in Cambodia: Social Value and welfare

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Abstract

With its vitality in regions around the world, world peace and social harmony begin with the Buddha's teaching in which we train our inner world and our outer world for *positive peace*. By positive peace, we mean addressing the underlying root-causes of human suffering and conflict. It was during the tumultuous times in Cambodia when the Venerable Maha Ghosananda (1927 -2007) encouraged the *Sangha* (Buddhist monkhood) to find the courage to "leave [their] temples (pagoda, wat) and enter the temples of human experience, temples that are filled with human suffering." Maha Ghasananda was referencing the need to preserve an over 2560-year-old Buddhist tradition of investing in humanity in order to develop a peaceful and harmonious world.

As such, the term "Socially Engaged Buddhism" refers to the active involvement of Buddhist monks in society in order to reverse the scourge of direct, structural and cultural violence in society. It urges Buddhist leaders to strengthen their ongoing noble missions to cultivate mindfulness and promote a path of non-violence, equanimity and sustainable social development programs as a valued and morally correct roadmap to positive peace.

With its increasing vitality in regions around the world, Buddhism and the *Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path* offer valuable relief and guidance at a time when peace and social harmony seems to be a deferred dream for the marginalized and rejected segments of society. As Buddhism and the *Sangha* recover from near expungement, socially engaged Buddhist in Cambodia are heeding to Maha Ghosananda's advice to find the courage to enter the temples of human experience and suffering. This has been best illustrated in the creation of various Theravada Buddhist-led peace building organizations, most notably Buddhism for Education of Cambodia (BEC).

Therefore, by promoting the morally and ethically right use of the *Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path* in post-conflict Cambodia, BEC is recognized as a valuable carrier of positive peace through its five peace building programs: Youth Education, Prisoner Education, Media Dharma Talks, Children Sponsorship, and Caring for the Poor and Aging. It is through socially engaged Buddhism where non-governmental peace building organizations like Buddhism for Education of Cambodia aim to address the underlying root-cause of direct, structural and cultural violence.

Introduction

While the vicious cycle of structural and cultural violence appears difficult to reverse, there are those who continue to embrace the Buddhist practice of walking among the people of everyday life to gain a face-to-face encounter with common people. As conveyed by the Venerable MahaGhosananda, peace begins with peace education (*Dhamma or the truth taught by Buddha*) in which we train our inner world and our outer world for positive peace. This is important inasmuch as the *Dhamma* and *middle way* go beyond all duality and all opposites as illustrated in the divisive nature of social identity groups. Often referred to as equanimity, *the middle path* of Buddhism serves to harmonize all extremism. "The middle way between indulgence and asceticism is the principle informing all the *Sangha's* rules of life". It is worth mentioning here, that during a fearful and dangerous period in Cambodia's history, the Venerable Maha Ghosananda encouraged Buddhist monks to find the courage to leave their temples and enter the temples of human experience, temples that are filled with human suffering.

Many years later, Maha Ghosananda's encouragement and profound words of wisdom would inspire the creation of a few Buddhist-led non-governmental organizations (NGOS). Truly aiming to transform individual minds, one of these upstart NGOs is Buddhism for Education of Cambodia (BEC). Founded on July 4, 2012, with its headquarters located in Battambang, BEC's mission is to support monastic and ethical education and vocational training primarily to the young generation. BEC also provides humanitarian assistance to those in greatest need through five peace building (peace education) programs: *Youth Education*,

Prisoner Meditation, Media Dhamma Talks, Children Sponsorship, and Caring for the Poor and Aging.

The *Youth Education Program* offers Buddhist morality training to communities and educational institutions throughout the country. Morality is not a ritualistic obedience to a code of behavior imposed by an external authority, it is rather a healthy habit pattern that you have consciously and voluntarily chosen to impose upon yourself because you recognize its superiority to your present behavior. Just as *vipassana* meditation is a form of mental cultivation, the purpose of this program is to cultivate in Cambodia's youth how to live their lives with both understanding and compassion. Hence, with greater understanding, you will be more flexible and tolerant towards others. You are ready to forgive and forget. When you have learned to demonstrate compassion for yourself, compassion for others becomes automatic. By achieving profound understanding and compassion will inevitably relate to the world with a deep and uncritical love.

The *Prisoner Meditation Program* offers Dhamma Talks and meditation to inmates at the Battambang Prison compound on a voluntary basis. Each Friday, Buddhist Monks from BEC teach mindfulness through the *vipassana* system of meditation for approximately 30 inmates. Often referred to as the *Great Teacher*, these meditation sessions intend to purify the mind of psychic irritates like greed, ill-will (hatred), and delusion. The purpose of the *vipassana* meditation sessions is to achieve personal transformation, which serves to restore broken relationships and to teach criminals how to live non-violently with radical differences. From a Western perspective, this can be interpreted as the ultimate goal of conflict prevention and resolution by addressing negative attitudes and violent behavior.

Media Dhamma Talks Program follows the Buddha's path towards enlightenment and serves as a guide to the cessation of *Dukkha* or the cause of our individual suffering. Conducted live on the radio every day and on the television twice weekly, this program shares Buddhist ideals, values, and emphasizes mindfulness to transform the three roots of evil into their positive counterparts: greed into generosity, ill-will (hatred) into loving-kindness (compassion), and delusion into wisdom. By socially engaging Cambodia society, the *Media Dhamma* talks program attempts to

dispel the notion that happiness can be gained by satisfying desire. As the *dhamma* talks further stress, happiness can be achieved only by transforming desire.

The *Children Sponsorship Program* is focused on education for orphans and poor children who are mostly deprived of basic human needs. The emphasis of this program is to extend assistance in the form of school supplies, bicycles, or in some cases homes. By supporting these marginalized and disadvantaged children, some of their basic human needs are met. As the paramount importance of the *Sangha* or monastic community was to preserve the Buddha's path towards enlightenment or truth, generosity is not optional for Buddhist; they are obligated to respond compassionately to those in need. And while it may be agreeable for certain people to live in isolation for a while to improve the mind and character, it is exceptionally praiseworthy and courageous to be socially engaged by living among the suffering, helping them and being of service to them.

The *Caring for the Poor and Aging Program* focuses on a large abandoned population mostly in rural Cambodia. Through this program, BEC offers humanitarian assistance to address unmet basic human needs for the most marginalized citizens in Cambodia. The Buddhist emphasis on karma implies a different way of understanding and addressing social problems. As followed by BEC, the traditional Buddhist solution to poverty is *Dana* (giving or generosity). *Dana* is considered the most important concept in Buddhist thinking, and those walking the Buddhist path are called upon to show compassion to those who are in need help.

Additionally, BEC strongly promotes monastic education through its close cooperation with the Buddhist University in Battambang, Eoung Thoung Buddhist High School and WatSlaket Buddhist Primary School. Again, through these programs, Buddhism for Education of Cambodia is actively preserving an over 2560 year old Buddhist tradition as carriers of positive peace. There is no Buddhism. The future of Buddhism lies not only in the purity or strength of *Sangha* life, but in the strength of the bonds which link the *Sangha* and the wider community through social engagement. Where these bonds or social engagement are weak, there is always a danger of the *Sangha* becoming isolated and decaying. Where they are strong, Buddhism's influence on a community is strong.

It remains to be seen whether the erosions of the secular society will so weaken the *Sangha's* links with the community that Buddhism as a morally, ethically and socially engaging philosophy disappears as we know it today, or whether the *Sangha* will become the self-conscious instrument for a new expansion of socially engaged Buddhists. In either case, the future of Cambodia will remain intimately bound up with the future of the *Sangha* and its capacity to exist not merely for its own members but for the happiness and welfare of all human beings.

Theravada Buddhism remains an important part of the social fabric of everyday life in Cambodia, and forms the core of idealized moral and ethical standards. A *Sangha* is a community of friends practicing the *Dhamma* together in order to bring about and maintain peace and social harmony. As carriers of positive peace, the essence of a *Sangha* is awareness, understanding, acceptance, harmony and love. When you do not see these in a community, it is not a true *Sangha*, and you should have the courage to act and seek transformational change. But when you find these elements are present in a community, you know that you have the happiness and fortune of being in a real *Sangha*." This has indeed been the purpose of Buddhism for education of Cambodia.

Conclusion.

The history of Theravada Buddhism bears out the observation that without a socially engaged *Sangha* (the Buddhist community of monks, nuns, novices, and laity)

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Biography:

Venerable HakSienghai has ordained in 1996 when he was 111 years old. He finished Buddhist High School in Battambang province and in 2006-2009. He did his B.A. in Buddha Dhamma at International Theravada Buddhist Missionary University known as ITBMU. He got Master Degree in Buddhist Studies from Kalaniya University in Sri Lanka. Now he is a founder and executive director of Buddhism for Education of Cambodia (BEC) based in Battambang, western part of Cambodia in which it is founded on the 4th July of 2012.