

Ven. Maha Ghosananda's Contributions to Social Well-Being in Cambodia

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1. Introduction

Cambodia is a Theravada country, which estimates to be 95 percent of its population are the follower of the Buddha; and where the monks hold an important place in the society at large. Buddhism is a part of the development in the social order, and it's strongly played as social well-being in Cambodia. However, presently, social well-being is very important to the Cambodian Society and its people. But unfortunately, from April 17, 1975 to January 1979, social well-being in Cambodia was entirely destroyed by the Khmer Rouge. Due to the fact that the Khmer Rouge starved people to death and isolated the country from other countries, Cambodia and its population were suffering beyond one's imagination; millions of people died from this civil war. Many monasteries were destroyed, and monks were killed and forced to lay lives. In addition, both public and private schoolings were impasses. After the Khmer Rouge Regime, Buddhism was re-established, and slowly began to increase with the re-ordination of Buddhist Monks who ran away from monasteries during the purges. They came back to monasteries re-establish and re-build monasteries with the supporting of lay Buddhist. Buddhism in Cambodia has deeply flourished after the Khmer Rouge era through the hard work of the Buddhist monks, especially Ven. Maha Ghosananda. Buddhism in Cambodia is divided into two sects: Mahānikaya and Dhammayutanikaya.

Cambodian Buddhism has been growing and developing in the country under the leadership of Buddhist monks and lay Buddhists.

Nowadays, Cambodian Buddhist monks are helping people in the areas of education, physical health, mental health, and moral development. Both of Cambodian Scholar Monks, Great Supreme Patriarch Choun Nath and His Holiness Maha Ghosananda had participated in the important roles of re-building Buddhist Saṅgha and engaged Buddhism in the Cambodian Society. Especially, their contributions were much concerned for the development of the Cambodian Society to present day. In addition, Ven. Maha Ghosananda, from 1929 to 2007, was the founder of peace and social movement in Cambodia. His contributions were engaged to Buddhism throughout, such as the series of Dhammayietra and other attempts to utilize the influences of Saṅgha to revolutionize the social aspects in the Cambodian Society. Furthermore, He taught people how to cure of physical and mental sufferings that brought Cambodia to a form of Engagement in Buddhism, which not previously seen among Cambodian Religious Institutions.¹

Ven. Maha Ghosananda was a Cambodian Buddhist monk who survived the dark ages of the Khmer Rouge regime. He served as the Patriarch (*Samdech*) in Cambodia under the Former Majesty King Narodom Sihanouk. Ven. Maha Ghosananda served as a representative of the Cambodian nation-in-exile to the United Nations and was influential in peace talks throughout the 1980s. In the 1990s, he led a series of dangerous journeys called Dhammayietra, “Pilgrimages of Truth” throughout many areas of Cambodia. He propagated Buddhism in the Cambodian society by his famous Dhammayietras. He taught Dhamma, and built a bridge of peace.

¹ Ian Harris, “Saṅgha Groupings in Cambodia”, *Buddhist Studies Review*, (UK Association for Buddhist Studies, 2001), 18 (I): 65–72, pp. 79-83.

He was nominated for Nobel Peace Prizes four times. He was known as *Samdech Sang Santipeap* and was seen as the spiritual leader for the Cambodian people and the rest of the Buddhist world.

2. Engaged Buddhism

Ven. Maha Ghosananda was a great social worker who followed in the footsteps of the Buddha. Ven. Maha Ghosananda devoted his entire life to assist Cambodians and all other people in the world with his teachings of compassion and loving-kindness. Ven. Maha Ghosananda educated many Cambodians, including the young, the old, the rich and the poor, as well as sick and healthy people. He taught Cambodians how to live and how to share in their society. He taught Cambodians that with meditation practice and mindfulness, they could avoid anger, and thereby not harm others. Ven. Maha Ghosananda used Dhammayietra in the place of social workers to cure the pain of the Cambodian people.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Venerable Maha Ghosananda developed the existing form of Buddhism in Cambodia, into the engaged Buddhist movement. He re-built and established engaged Buddhism in Cambodia and helped the Cambodians survive. His activism began with the re-building of Cambodian Buddhism, teaching *Dharma*, teaching peace through example, and being completely non-partisan, successfully offering his peace ministry even to members of the Khmer Rouge.

Many Buddhist leaders in Cambodia knew about the engagement Buddhism of Ven. Maha Ghosananda. Ven. Maha Ghosananda's works were deeply involved with peace and the reconciliation of the Cambodian society. He made few attempts to justify his work or explain how it had been effective. He did not acknowledge differences between traditional Buddhist practice and social action. For him, a meditation retreat, rebuilding the

saṅgha, and leading national peace walks were all activities for peace. Finally, he and his followers agreed that his service served as an example: a genuinely peaceful, non-partisan present in a volatile setting – that was his valuable role as an activist.²

For Ven. Maha Ghosananda, consciousness was the starting point for social ethics because one’s mental state generates all one’s verbal and physical activities.³ Everyone is personally responsible for the health of their society. Therefore, Ven. Maha Ghosananda unfailingly started and returned to one’s mental state when discussing social action. For example, when discussing the land mine crisis, he asserted that to remove land mines, the metaphorical land mines in greed, anger, and delusion must first be removed.⁴ Ven. Maha Ghosananda’s social teachings were the framework for the education and experiences in Cambodian society today. He worked predominantly for social interaction and peace for everyone. His traditional Buddhist education likely provided his focus on non-violence and internal transformation. He trained meditation in the way in which he himself was trained as a forest monk. It taught him the central value of inner peace as a basis for social peace.⁵ His training with social thinkers led him to perform an effective form of social work in the camps and other activities such as the peace walk. His training as a Buddhist monk was complementary to the Buddhist practice and social harmony. Buddhist narratives familiar to

² Christopher Queen, *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*, Damien Keown, Charles Prebish (eds.), (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 111.

³ Thera, V. N. (trans.), *The Dhammapada Verse 1*, (1971).

⁴ Speech by Samdej Preah Maha Ghosananda on the occasion of “International Peace Day, and Cambodian Festival Pchum Ben”, in the Dammayietra Center for Peace and Non-violence, (1995).

⁵ Susan Green, “Calm in Chaos: Monk Keeps His Peace Through Terrors of Cambodia”, (The Burlington Free Press, 1 October 1981): p. 11.

Cambodians provided a model for Buddhism to serve as a healing force for individuals and society at large.⁶ Ven. Maha Ghosananda's approach was relevant to the Cambodians by virtue of being both immediate and long term, accessible to all, and totally inclusive. The great peace walk throughout various parts of the country, was his incentive. By following the teachings of Buddha, his teachings were of benefit to all human beings. Ven. Maha Ghosananda worked tirelessly for Buddhism and Cambodian society. He established temples and refugee camps on the Thai-border and attended religious conferences. Ven. Maha Ghosananda did much for the Khmer society, such as building monasteries, refugee camps on the borders, the setting up of Dhammayietra Centers and other Buddhist education places. He also founded other Buddhist organizations which still influences society up to the present day. Moreover, Engaged Buddhism has become a most powerful action in the Cambodian society at the present day. Buddhist monks are a part of the society which has important roles to rebuild Buddhism and to establish the Cambodian society with activists of the Dharma. Thus, Engaged Buddhism almost work with the society and it can affect to the social harmony and social well-being as well.

3. Contributions to Social Well-Being

3.1 Peace Activities

Peace is the way of the social well-being. Ven. Maha Ghosananda's peace activities were well-known: the Dhammayietra that he organised, where Cambodian monks and lay people walked together through parts of the country that were still dangerous and disturbed. The pilgrimage had its origins in the traditions that the Buddha led his followers on many different

⁶ Charles Hallisey, Anne Hansen, "Narrative, Sub-Ethics, and the Moral Life", *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, (1999): 305-327.

places, including battlefields, to preach the Dharma. Dhammayietra was the local method of peace-building in Cambodia.

According to Khemacaro (1998), Dharma is a path to build a peace. And then he pointed out that Dharma was a process of social activists, and social change to create more peace and harmony for the people and the society. He also mentioned that the activities of Ven. Maha Ghosananda in Dhamma teachings and peace walk which those processes to solve the problem of the Cambodian society and it could bring peace to Cambodia. Cambodians must actively contribute to achievement on loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom for the better living in the society.⁷

The Dhammayietra movement of Ven. Maha Ghosananda grew out of an experience of profound suffering. He frequently prayed – the suffering of Cambodia has been deep with this suffering came great compassion. He believed that suffering of such magnitude as the Cambodian Holocaust lead to gut-level revulsion from violence that cut through all other considerations. In a Cambodia still enveloped into warring camps, Ven. Maha Ghosananda called the Dhammayietra - that army of the Buddha, and an army for peace that would shoot the people with bullets of loving kindness. He declared that non-violence is the primary precept of Cambodian history, culture, and religion.⁸

The suffering of Cambodia has been deep.
From this suffering comes Great Compassion.
Great compassion makes a peaceful heart.
A peaceful heart makes a peaceful person.
A peaceful person makes a peaceful family.
A peaceful family makes a peaceful community.

⁷ Yos Hut Khemacaro, “Steering the Middle Path: Buddhism, Non-Violence and Political Change in Cambodia”, *Safeguarding Peace: Cambodia’s Constitutional Challenge*, (Special Issue, Accord 5, 1998): 73.

⁸ Sallie King, *Being Benevolence: The Social Ethics of Engaged Buddhism*, (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2005), p. 164.

A peaceful community makes a peaceful nation.
A peaceful nation makes a peaceful world.
May all beings live in happiness and peace.⁹

3. 2 Mental Health

After the Cambodia deliverance from the civil war and genocide, the mental suffering of the Khmer people and their mental depression have occurred until present day. These historical tragedies made Ven. Maha Ghosananda started leading a group of people to walk, Dhammayietra, for mind-training and mind-strengthening. Ven. Maha Ghosananda built up a small camp with a Buddha statue to help the Cambodian people who lived in a long the Cambodia-Thai border. They came to pray and chant the Dhamma of the Buddha. He taught the Dhamma of the Buddha to the people on how to train the mind from step by step in meditation every morning and evening. This training of the mind could affect the peace and harmony of Cambodians as well. When Cambodian people practiced deeply on mind concentration, then their mind rose up, fresh and calm for the living in the peace and harmony.

3. 3 Physical Health

After the defeat of the Khmer Rouge, those people who suffered these effects from body tortures became disabled with dilapidated bodies. Ven. Maha Ghosananda taught Cambodian people to concentrate their minds and to train their mind bodies by doing meditation and walking meditation slowly. Dhammayietra was not only walking for peace and reconciliation, but it also formed part of training the mind and body to be in good health and reduced stress. The body action is a very important thing in daily life. The body is the elements of attachment to the mind. If the body

⁹ Maha Ghosnanda, *Step by Step: Meditation on Wisdom and Compassion*, Mahoney J.S., Edmonds P. (eds), (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1992).

is broken, then mind become scattered. When the mind scatters, then the body also separated.

Ven. Maha Ghosananda taught Cambodian people how to train the mind and body by breathing in and breathing out. Breathing is not the past, and not the future, but the present moment. He also said the future is not coming, the past has gone, and we must try to live in the present moment. We must do the work properly by being just and with the righteous living. We must live to help our society to be safe, developed and stable, and not let it fall down into the dark society or to war, like they endured for many years before. If we can lead our mind and body going smoothly with mindful living and then happiness, harmony and peace will be with us and affect our society as well. All Khmer people now are more understanding, living with Buddhist Supremes using their life living in the most precious society.¹⁰

3. 4 Compassion

Ven. Maha Ghosananda offered his unlimited compassion to all people, whether Cambodians or not. His warm personality and great compassion won the battlefield of Cambodian suffering since the civil war until the present day. He taught the Cambodian people in a Buddhist meditative way to create more compassion. Meditation is the way to train the mind and make the mind concentrate deeply on sharing the love and compassion to others. He taught Cambodian people how to love oneself and love others. He said that when we make love we share that love to others. Then the happiness and peace will be with us all times. So we have to fight

¹⁰ Ven. Nan Sarith, Interviewed by Ven. Sarun Pov, Wat Sompov Meas, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, April 27, 2016.

back with the war of hatred and delusion to get the benefits that come with successful living, in peace and happiness till the end of life.¹¹

Dhammayietras were a journey towards peace for people who walk along the road of mindfulness and compassion. The Dhammayietra movement believes that no other skill is as important as the development of compassion in personal preparation for the walk or social action because only compassion gives staying power in a protracted nonviolent struggle. Compassion is considered the key virtue in Buddhism with both a method and a result on the path of personal and social liberation.¹² If the Khmer Rouge should be shown once again the warmth of virtue and love, then they could again learn to differentiate between right and wrong, good and evil, and live in peace.¹³

4. Impact to the Cambodian society

As for the impact of Ven. Maha Ghosananda's contributions of peace, it could say that peace occurred whenever conflict and violence were reduced or ended. Ven. Maha Ghosananda stopped the war and looked for peace in Cambodia. He used the Dhammayietra way by walking through many dangerous paths to demand peace in Cambodia. However, the action of the Dhammayietra was not enough to bring peace in Cambodia; it needed the inclusion of compassion to bring peace. When all people and walkers on the path had compassion in both internal and external mind, then peace

¹¹ Odom Vann Sivorn, Interviewed by Ven. Sarun Pov, personal interview, Svay Srisophon, Poipet, Banteay Meanchey, April 23, 2016.

¹² Yeshua Moser Paungsuwan, "One Million Kilometres for Peace" and Liz Bernstein, "Buddhism and Conflict Resolution Seminar for Cambodians", (Phnom Penh: Unpublished papers, 1992), pp. 2-3.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 261-262.

and happiness occur. When the society is walking for the development of stability, that society will become more compassionate.

The contributions of Ven. Maha Ghosananda in the way of peacebuilding and in the positive development of the Cambodian society. Eventually the Cambodian society's outlook was influenced by the understanding of peacebuilding and the development of a national identity after the Khmer Rouge era. Before and after the Khmer Rouge era, Buddhist monks had an important role to play in promoting peace and development in the Cambodian society. Ven. Maha Ghosananda was a Buddhist scholar who created peace and rebuilt Buddhism after it was decimated by a brutal civil war and later suffered national genocide. The most popular of Ven. Maha Ghosananda's activities were Dhammayietras, also called Engaged Buddhism, used to promote peace and reconciliation in the Cambodian society. The method used was based on non-violence, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. This became his way to positively influence the Cambodian society. The contributions of Ven. Maha Ghosananda have greatly benefitted the people of Cambodia.

Today, Cambodian Buddhist Saṅgha has been providing the Buddha's Teachings which includes the Five Precepts, Eight Precept, Ten Precepts, general educations, etc. to devout/lay students as well as others. Besides the aforementioned aspects, one of the most important roles for the Buddhist monks is to educate moral values, such as truthfulness, forbearance, and filial piety to both the devotees and lay people. In addition, they help in distributing human resources and assist the Cambodian society by establishing schools, Buddhist Centers, Buddhist Organizations, and disseminate Dhammas. Furthermore, the monastic education has been provided in many tasks, such as training the monks to be teachers and guardians in the moral and social values to the society. Therefore, monastic

education is not just training Buddhist monks to perform life-cycle ceremonies, but also to fix exemplary standards for the education of young men and women of a Buddhist society. Monastic education is including the popular and traditional Buddhist education, such as preaching, Dhamma talks, Dhamma broadcasting through social media (Facebook, Radio, and TV).¹⁴

5. Conclusion

The contributions of Ven. Maha Ghosananda are very widespread for social well-being and its people. His contributions have taken a stronghold within the country and its people in order to achieve this. His teachings had a great effect on Cambodian society and promoted peace to the worldwide. In particular, he played a major role in various non-violent activities to promote peace and reconciliation among the Cambodian people, following the their civil strife, offering support to refugees and encouraging the rebuilding of the nation. His warm personality and great compassion have won him accolades as Gandhi of Cambodia. His contributions to social well-being were peace walk, Buddhist education, preaching Dhamma, Dhamma talks, activities of compassion, mental and physical health, and moral development. His contributions are a fruitful result for the social well-being in Cambodia, and for the worldwide. The contributions of Ven. Maha Ghosananda are strong influences to the development and social well-being in the modern Cambodian society.

¹⁴ Khy Sovanratana, *Contours of the Reconstruction of Buddhist Education in Cambodia after the fall of the Khmer Rouge*, Ph.D Thesis, (University of Delhi, India, 2016), pp. 1-2.

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