

“Maha Ghosananda: The Engaged Buddhism in Cambodia”¹

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1. Introduction

Buddhism is an important part in solving social problems, especially during times of social crisis. People surely trouble all over the grass patches, such as the events of the past history of Cambodia. During the Khmer Rouge Era, in 1975 when Cambodia was controlled by the communist Khmer Rouge, every monks and religious intellectual had been either murdered or driven into exile while every single Buddhist temples and libraries had been destroyed. The Khmer Rouge policies towards Buddhism which included the forcible disrobing of the monks, the destruction of monasteries, and ultimately the execution of uncooperative monks effectively destroyed Cambodia's Buddhist institutions. Monks who did not flee and avoided execution lived among the laity, even sometimes secretly performing Buddhist rituals for the sick or afflicted. Estimates vary regarding the number of monks in Cambodia prior to the ascension of the Khmer Rouge, ranging between 65,000 and 80,000 and was drastically reduced to just 3,000. During that time, Buddhism in Cambodia was nearly completely destroyed. This crisis leads us to recognize “Maha Ghosananda”, the spiritual leader who strongly influences propagating Buddha's teaching with Socially Engaged Buddhism.

2. Maha Ghosananda

Samdech Preah Maha Ghosananda or “Maha Ghosananda” was a highly revered Cambodian Buddhist monk in the Theravada tradition, who served as the Patriarch (Sangharaja) of Cambodian Buddhism during the Khmer Rouge period and post-communist transition period of Cambodian history. Maha Ghosananda worked tirelessly for Buddhism and for human rights. He has established temples, partaken in UN delegations and attended religious conferences. Also, participant in peace negotiations, founder of cultural programs and anti land mine campaigner. He is famous for visiting Cambodian refugee camps at times of great danger and for leading “Dhamma Yietra” annual peace march² through the war-torn country.

While in Nalanda Buddhist University in Bihar, where he went to pursue a doctorate in Pali. He met Nichidatsu Fujii, founder of the Japanese Buddhist sect Nipponzan Myohoji, who had stayed in Mahatma Gandhi's ashram (or retreat). From Fujii Maha Ghosananda learned Gandhian methods of non-violent activism, and in

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² Susan Berfield and Dominic Faulder, “A Royal Influence”, **Asiaweek**, August 31, 1999. [online]. Source : http://edition.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/97/0912/nat1.html?_s=PM:ASIANOW [19 August 2013].

1965 he moved to Thailand to study with Buddhadasa Bhikkhu, the great Thai Buddhist exponent of contemplative social engagement.³

Maha Ghosananda, who has been designated as “Ghandi of Cambodia” and “Buddha of battlefield”⁴ is worldwide recognized through his serene, intellectual and compassionate attitude that these quality can be illustrated only by attainment in some level of Buddhist meditation.

3. Roles of Engaged Buddhism : Dharma Yatras for Peace

When the Pol Pot regime⁵ collapsed in 1979, Maha Ghosananda was one of only 3,000 Cambodian Buddhist monks alive, out of more than 60,000 at the start of the reign of terror in 1976. Throughout 1979 Maha Ghosananda established temples in refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border, ordaining monks against the orders of the Thai military.⁶ One of his activity which plays a crucial role in “engaged Buddhism” movement, the most significant were yearly Dharma Yatras, or “Pilgrimages of Truth”⁷ which commencing on the first walk in 1992⁸

Maha Ghosananda has a spectacular project, a nationwide campaign in Dharma Yatras for peace throughout Cambodian region after the Khmer Rouge era. With 9 important journeys⁹ during 7 years, from 1992 to 1998 total distance about 1 million kilometers. As follows:

The 1st Dharma Yatra

The first Dharma Yatra was held in 1992, the first year that United Nations (UN.) came to support the peace agreement. Maha Ghosananda led Dharma Yatra march around Cambodia. To restore the hope and encouragement to the Cambodian people. This march starts from the Thai border migrants campgrounds to Phnom Penh. There are a number of Cambodian migrants who travel together back up to 350, with joining participants increased up to 1,000 people.

³ Simon Blomfield (Vishvapani), “Maha Ghosananda”, **The Guardian**, Wednesday 28 March 2007. [online]. Source : <http://www.theguardian.com/news/2007/mar/28/guardianobituaries.religion> [19 August 2013].

⁴ Ker Munthit, “Nobel urged for Buddha of battlefield”, **The Phnom Penh Post**, (11 February 1994). [online]. Source : <http://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/nobel-urged-buddha-battlefield> [19 august 2013].

⁵ “An attempt by Khmer Rouge leader Pol Pot to form a Communist peasant farming society resulted in the deaths of 25 percent of the country's population from starvation, overwork and executions.” – The History Place, “**Genocide in the 20th Century**”, [online]. Source : <http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/genocide/pol-pot.htm> [21 August 2013].

⁶ John Amos Marston, Elizabeth Guthrie, **History Buddhism and new religious movements in Cambodia**, (Honolulu : University of Hawaii Press, 2004), p. 201.

⁷ Obituary, “Preah Maha Ghosananda”, **The Economist**, (22nd March 2007), [online]. Source : <http://www.economist.com/node/8881498> [19 August 2013].

⁸ Surya Das, **Awakening the Buddha Within: Tibetan Wisdom for the Western World**, (New York : Broadway Books, 1998), p. 230.

⁹ Phramaha Somboon Vutthikaro (Phanna), “**The Essence of Buddhist Engagement in Cambodia**”, (Graduate School : Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University), Lecture Note, (photocopy), pp. 3-5.

The 2nd Dharma Yatra

The second Dharma Yatra occurred in the 1993 prior to the elections, under the supervision of the United Nations. The march starts from Angkor Wat to Siem Reap under the stress between the Khmer Rouge and the Government forces.

The 3rd Dharma Yatra

The next Dharma Yatra occurred in 1994 on the West region of Cambodian war zones. There were 2 participants, priest and nun died from the shot between the Government troops firing on a group of Khmer Rouge. After the completion of march Maha Ghosananda said, “this violence is the reason we walk”, “our journey begins today and every day. Each step that goes slowly is to pray, each step is a Bhàvanà, and each step will build a bridge”.

The 4th Dharma Yatra

One year later, the fourth Dharma Yatra Occurred in 1995, started from Thai border to the city of Svay Rieng, next Vietnam frontier. Dharma Yatra, this time focused on the campaign against land mines in order to draw people’s attention about the 10 million land mines in Cambodia, which take the hundreds of lives of peasants and children each year. During march, there were up to 20,000 Buddhists signed the opposition land mines Maha Ghosananda has written a message to the Minister, “peace is often at the point we reached and where we left this is why we must always walk step by step, never frustrated. The wisdom will be our weapons, the mercy and compassion will be our bullets, the mindfulness will be our shield, we will keep on walking until Cambodia and world peace”.

The 5th Dharma Yatra

In 1996, the march focused on the deforestation. There were 700 participating people walking through some deforested provinces. During the trip, the participants helped each other afforest up to 2,000 trees and Maha Ghosananda was often Dharma discussion with villagers and encourage them to “Get rid of the bombs of anger out of mind”, “when we respect the environment the natural would be good for us. The tree is just like our mother and father, they nourished us, the branches and the trunk, the tree gave us everything, but if we still deforest, still cut the tree, the rains will be no longer fall, therefore, the Dharma Yatra was to propagate Dharma in order to defend ourselves and to defend our environment, that is, of Buddha's teachings”.

The 6th Dharma Yatra

The sixth Dharma Yatra occurred in 1997, with the roadmap to the reconciliation between the Khmer Rouge and the Government forces. Maha Ghosananda has blessed to senior Khmer Rouge, Mr. Iangsari and has forgiven him, he said “In Buddhism, if one realize of his crime and apologize Buddha will forgive him, we still do not know whether Mr. Iangsari speaks truth but Dhamma will forgive those who turn to the

light and stop the fight.” This movement allowed Maha Ghosananda met with leaders of the Khmer Rouge and forgive them. This journey takes 3 consecutive weeks through the places that used to be strongholds of the Khmer Rouge.

The 7th-9th Dharma Yatra

In 1998, his final year of Dharma Yatra, he marched 3 times from the seventh to the ninth Dharma Yatras. During that time he has led the journeys as a short procession in Cambodia towards the northeast of the country. Finally, from the 1998 onwards, he was no longer joined the Dharma Yatra march due to the health reason.

4. Conclusion

When Cambodia faced with the political and social crisis problems rooted from the violences. The doctrines from Buddhism have shown significant role of problems solving under the leadership of “Maha Ghosananda”, who dissemination the teachings of Buddha into the society. In this way, Maha Ghosananda is a great spiritual leader, a peace maker, a founder of pilgrimages of truth and the father of step by step march. His teaching is simple, moderate and egoless, he always valued individuals as the critical origin of war and peace. His compassion is boundless, and his peace vision is to build individual’s peace capacity. He said:

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 Community.
A Peaceful Community makes a Peaceful Nation.
And a Peaceful Nation makes a Peaceful World.
May all beings live in Happiness and Peace.

The restoration of people’s hope, the non-violence concept, the campaign against land mines, the afforestation and the reconciliation are the approach of Engaged Buddhism which show the world to see that ever lost Buddhism has return to Cambodian society again for a very truly Peaceful Happiness.

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