

# Somdech Preah Maha Ghosanada

## The Buddha of the Battlefields



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### **Buddha Prophecy**

In the North, the thunder roars –  
Fire Burns the water,  
The Bodhi Tree and the jungle...  
The tigress always finds food in the jungle.  
Even while asleep,  
She safeguards our religion....  
When the sun goes down,  
The tigress sets forth to extinguish the blaze.

[A well known Khmer prophecy]

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### **Introduction**

This is a popular biographical sketch of Samdech Preah Maha Ghosananda, a renowned Cambodian monk. I am not a scholar or historian, and this work is not a scholarly biography; it is merely an assemblage of stories, anecdotes, news reports in newsletters and newspapers, assembled and edited for a record for those who are interested in Maha Ghosanada's life.

I am an American Buddhist monk who met Maha Ghosananda several times in 1998-1999, at his temple Sampeav Meas in Phnom Penh. I consider him a mentor, a role-model, and an inspiration. I can't call him my "teacher" because he never actually "taught" me anything. Nevertheless, I was

profoundly and permanently affected by his transformative presence. He was the most pure, highly evolved person I have ever met, and demonstrated to me Goethe's truth: "Boldness has genius, magic, and power in it."

I personally believe that Maha Ghosananda was a living saint; in Buddhist terms, an Arhant or Bodhisattva; a living Buddha.

I have written this small text for those who knew and loved him; and for those who may have heard about him and would like to know a little more. I apologize for the flaws or mistakes contained herein.

Those who have more information or corrections for any future editions of this small book can contact me at [teflint@yahoo.com](mailto:teflint@yahoo.com)

Remember, "Peace is Possible"

Flower Power,

Venerable Santi, Seattle

April 1, 2007

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**Samdech Preah Maha Ghosanada** (1929-2007), was a most extraordinary human being.

Those people who never met Maha Ghosananda will find it impossible to believe that such a person actually lived. Those of us who met him, or knew him personally, search to find words to express the impossible-to-describe experience.

"He was really sweet! He was like an innocent baby or angel or wild flower; probably like a baby Buddha," recounted Venerable Kaneada Senji.

James Wiseman, a Catholic monk, said: "Looking at the Venerable Ghosananda, one has the impression that not only his smile, but his whole body is radiant. It seems as if his skin has been washed so clean that it shines."

The book **Buddha and Vision** referred to Maha Ghosananda as "one of the Four Living Buddhas of the World." [1]

Crowds of people sometimes burst into tears of emotion at the sight of him. People would often spontaneously rise to their feet, or fall to their knees, when he appeared in public. All other activities would come to a standstill, and all eyes would be riveted on him.

Journalists referred to him as “The Buddha of the Battlefields” or “the Gandhi of Cambodia.”

I personally believe he was a living Buddha, an arahant. I once heard a newspaper journalist ask him, “Are you an enlightened being? An arahant?”

“If I was, I wouldn’t tell you,” he responded, smiling brightly.

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## **BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD**

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Maha Ghosananda was born in 1929, during the reign of King Sisowath Monivong, into a poor farming family in Daun Keo district, Takeo Province, of the Mekong Delta flood plains in the southern part of the Kingdom of Cambodia. [2]

This was the beginning of the Great Depression of 1929 which plunged Cambodia into suffering as the price of rice and rubber plummeted on the world market.

Takeo province is the Cradle of Cambodian civilization. Phnom Da, in Angkor Borey, Takeo is the oldest historical site in Cambodia. It is an ancient temple built on a small mountain in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, by an ancient Khmer King named Rut Trak Varman. The temple features a relief of the “Churning of the Sea of Milk” – the birth of creation.

Takeo is famous for the production of traditional Cambodian silk, woven on wooden looms beneath the stilt houses. The rhythmic clack-clack-clack of the looms fills the air.

“Life as a peasant was seldom easy and at times shockingly harsh. The risk of famine in countries that depend on monsoons to provide the water for irrigating wet-rice cultivation was always in the background. In all but the poorest regions there were occasions for village festivals with their accompanying gaiety, but these were the exceptions to a way of life that was plagued by disease as well as involving demanding physical labor.”

“The basic reality of peasant life was ‘the unchanging nature of existence’. Villagers moved in the face of famine or to avoid war, itinerant traders traveled with their caravans right across the face of the mainland Southeast Asia reaching from lower Burma into the highland regions of modern Vietnam...But having ventured abroad, they returned to a world that altered little in its essentials from year to year and decade to decade.” [3]

Marguerite Duras, a French citizen born in Indochina and who lived in Cambodia during the French protectorate era in which Ghosananda was born, described with pathos her observations of the peasant children:

“There were many children in the plain. They were a kind of calamity. They were everywhere, perched in the trees, on the railings of the bridge, on the backs of the buffaloes. They daydreamed, or squatting on the banks of the marigots; they fished, or they wallowed in the mud, looking for the dwarf crabs of the rice fields. In the river, too, there were children wading, playing, swimming.....”

“As soon as the sun went down the children disappeared into the interior of their straw huts, where they slept on the floors battened with bamboo, after having eaten their bowls of rice. And from daybreak on, they invaded the plain anew, always followed by the stray dogs that waited for them all night, crouched between the wooden piles of the cabins, in the hot and pestilential mud of the plain.”

“There were children as there were rains, fruits, floods. They came each year, by periodical tides, or, if you like, by crops burgeoning...

“Until the age of one year or thereabouts, the children lived attached to their mothers, in a cotton bag tied to the woman’s waist and shoulders. Their heads were shaved until the age of twelve, that is, until they were big enough to delouse themselves, and they went naked also until about that age. Then they covered themselves with a cotton loincloth. At the age of one year, the mother cast them far from her, entrusting them to the older children, not taking them again except to feed them, to give them from her mouth the rice which she had previously chewed...Children had been fed like that for a thousand years. There were children who survived long enough to sing on the backs of the buffaloes.” [4]

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## **RYTHYM OF KHMER LIFE**

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The rhythm of life of a peasant rice farmer family was determined by the agricultural cycles of rice-planting, harvesting, the annual monsoons; and the lunar cycles of Buddhist observances and festivals - of full-moon and new-moon, Buddha's Birthday, Kathin.

Every day life would begin with the sound of monks chanting in the village temples, and the sight of the orange-robed monks walking slowly in single-file alms rounds.

Every full moon and new moon, the rice farmers would gather at the Buddhist temple, the community center, to pay respect to the Buddha and rest from their labor in the fields. The children played rowdy games.

### **Sangkran – New Year – April 13**

Khmer New Year falls on April 13 at the end of the rice harvest, the beginning of the hottest time of the year. Heat lightening dances across the hot night skies of the tropics.

Excitement begins building for almost a month before the holiday actually arrives. Children play the Angkunj "nut tossing game" in the streets, and happily knock the losers' knees with nut seeds. Young folks dance the traditional circle dance called Roam Vong on the street corners of the cities and villages.

The actual holiday lasts for three days. The first day, Moha Sangkran, welcomes the "New Angels" who come to take care of the world for the coming year. People prepare by clearing and decorating their homes, and prepare fruits and drinks for the New Year's celebration, in order to welcome the "New Angles" into their homes. Arrangements of beautiful Lotus flowers are prepared to decorate the tables and Buddhist altars.

At the actual moment the New Year begins, monks beat ancient drums in the temples across the length and breadth of Cambodia. At the sound of the drumbeats, Buddhist devotees begin lighting

incense and making offering before Buddha images, giving thanks to last year's Old Angles and welcoming the New Angles.

On the first evening of the New Years festival, the people prepare food to bring to the temple the following day, to present to the monks and receive blessings.

The elders contemplate Buddhist Dhamma teachings and practice meditation to please the New Angles who will protect their families for the coming year.

Village youth are allowed to mingle and flirt with prospective marriage-partners only on New Years, by holding special "coconut dances" symbolizing youth and fertility. The coconuts make sweet sounding music when knocked together as musical instruments. Young men and women take suggestive poses, teasing and inviting one another. The coconut music is suggestive of wedding music that accompanies the groom when he visits the bride's house to claim her as his wife.

The second day is the "Day of Making Offerings" to parents, grandparents and the elderly. At the first streak of daybreak, the people are already awake, streaming to the temples to make offerings to food to the monks, and to listen to sermons and receive blessings from the monks. Traditional orchestras of Khmer Xylophones, gongs, and reed flutes fill the air, as offering to the Buddha.

The people also make gifts of food and flowers for their friends and teachers.

In the evening, the people assemble at the temples to build sand mountains and ask the monks to bless them for happiness and peace.

The third day of New Year, Leung Sakk, is officially the first day of the New Year. The people go to the temples early in the morning to perform the "Mountain and Sand" ceremony, representing the creation of the world. In this ritual, they make five mountains of sand or rice in the temple courtyard, symbolizing the five footsteps of the Buddha, or the four-directions and the "center" of the universe. Monks plant rice sticks decorated with sacred colored paper, and light incense sticks in the sand mountain, and sprinkle it with consecrated perfumed water.

The New Year's celebration comes to an end in the evening with a special "Bathing the Buddha". People pour consecrated water on the elders, monks, parents, and honored friends, and ask forgiveness for any mistakes they have made, promising to make them happy in the coming year. The

water-pouring ceremony quickly turns into a huge water-fight party, as the monks and elders retire to the temple precincts and an effort to preserve their dignity.

### **KING'S PLOWING CEREMONY**

The King's Plowing Ceremony is the official begging of the rice-planting season.

The King of Cambodia renews his own connection to the earth and solidarity to the Khmer people by personally plowing the ground and planting rice, the life-giving labor of the gods. The royal oxen are decked out in silk and gold bells. The king performs his labor accompanied by bells, drums and flutes. Ceremonial umbrellas shield him from the sun. The royal ladies of the palace walk in procession behind him, scattering seeds from their baskets into the furrows.

They then go to the rice paddies across Cambodia and perform their backbreaking labor of rice-planting in the scorching tropical sun, and wait for the coming monsoon to perform its life-giving magic.

### **RAINS RETREAT**

The full moon in July marks the beginning of the monsoon, and the Rains Retreat, in which Buddhist monks are confined to the monasteries for three months of intensive meditation and study, until the monsoon comes to an end.

The Rains Retreat comes to an end usually around the full moon in October, and is marked by the Kathen Ceremony, or "Robe Offering" ceremony, a sort of Buddhist Thanksgiving in which the people offer new robes and other necessities to the monks. It is one of the greatest Khmer festivals, in which fundraising takes place for community building projects of new schools and clinics, and other community projects.

Traditional Pinpeat orchestra music fills the air as people gather in the temples to pray, meditate, and sing and dance.

### **ANCESTOR DAYS**

In September, the people celebrate "P'chum Ben" or Ancestor Observances, a sort of festival of the dead, lasting for fourteen days, in which the people take turns offering food to the monks as

proxies for the ancestors, in hope that their offerings will satisfy the dead by virtue of the monks' sermons.

This is a very old tradition in Cambodia. Stone inscriptions left by King Yosavarman 889-910 say he build many monasteries and offered rice to the monks on a monthly basis, on behalf of "abandoned souls" who had no family to make offerings for them, and for souls of his soldiers who had died in combat.

On the full moon, the last day of P'chum Ben all Buddhists, rich and poor, gather together in the temples to share their Cambodian identity, to make offerings to the temples. The souls of the ancestors will curse and haunt their descendants with guilt for being ungrateful if they fail to make these observances.

According to legend, the festival was established when King Bath Pempik-sa defied religious custom and ate food before making offerings to the monks during a religious ritual. After their death, the monks became evil spirits, hungry ghosts who requested from the Buddha, "When can we eat?" The Buddha said they must wait until the appearance of the Buddha of the future, Maitreya. The hungry ghost-monks asked the future Buddha when they could eat, and he said, "You must wait until King Bath Pempik-sa made offerings and dedicates the merit and food to you."

## **WATER FESTIVAL**

The Water Festival occurs in March when boat races are held in rivers and streams across Cambodia. The Khmer people say the races are held in honor of the ancestors and to celebrate ancient naval battles. The festival is also to thank the earth and water for their gifts to the people. It also marks the time when Cambodia's annual miracle occurs; the Tonle Sap River begins to flow backward.

About 400 boats from all over the country compete in the boat races held in the Mekong River in front of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh, sponsored by the King.

Each village constructs a boat from a single log especially chosen for this purpose by the shaman. The village sponsors a boat, in which the most athletic and handsome young men of the villages demonstrate their strength and prowess in the races. During the race, drums beat to keep time for the rowers. The boats are consecrated to the spirits, and sacred talismans and threads are

distributed. On the morning of the race, large golden eyes are painted on the boat, to show that it has come alive.

The Water Festival is a celebration of the water element, the mother river (Mekong), the giver of life. Other festivals throughout the year celebrate the earth, wind, and fire.

### **KITE FESTIVAL**

The Cambodians love to fly kites, and have a special festival dedicated to kite flying, usually in the month of December. The ancient Khmer believed that flying the kites helped “prime” the winds to produce the monsoon rains, and thus bring relief from the baking tropical heat. The god of the winds gives air to breath, blows in the clouds to bring the rain, and blows away the clouds to bring sunshine and ripen the rice. In modern time, most people just enjoy flying the kites and are unaware of the underlying tantric meanings of celebrating the god of the winds.

### **HARVEST FESTIVAL**

The Harvest Festival usually occurs in January or February to celebrate the harvest of the rice, the life of Cambodia. The festival marks the end of the season of hard work.

When the rice is ready for the harvest, the entire village goes out to help in the communal work, backbreaking labor. When the fields are finally bear and the work is done, it is a time of celebration.

The Harvest Festival begins in the evening and the people often stay all night in the temple, relaxing, practicing meditation, and cooking special foods for the following day. All the villages’ folk gather at the temple wearing their finest and brightest-colored clothes. The monks chant and give thanks to the ancestors for a bountiful harvest. After the religious opening of the evening festival, the monks withdraw to their rooms, and music booms throughout the temples. The young folks dance late into the night and early morning. Even the elders might join in the dancing; or just sit by and watch the young folks enjoy themselves.

Early the next morning, the village people make food offerings to the monks – first offerings of the new rice harvest to honor the Buddha.

Every grain of rice is sacred to the Khmer people, the milk of the earth, body of Mother Rice. The Rice Harvest festival is a celebration of thanksgiving to nature, rice, earth, rain, water, wind and sun as well as to ancestors and spirits.

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## **EDUCATION**

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Preah Maha Ghosananda received his education in the 1930s-40s. This was a time of convulsive change in Cambodia, with the Great Depression, World War II, and the first awakenings of Khmer nationalism began to stir among the Cambodian people, accompanied by all the social upheaval that implies, including riots, terrorism, political activism, lively journalism.

He received his elementary education at the village temple, where he learned to read and write Khmer script.

Cambodian children memorize books of moral proverbs (chbab'), and stories from the Reamker – the Cambodian version of the Ramayana; the heroic tales of the deeds of kings. He also learned fabulous stories of Buddha's past lives (jataka), morality tales about generosity, patience, strong determination. School exercises consisted primarily of singing poems and proverbs, designed for moral instruction. Education was largely an oral tradition.

Cambodian countryside often vibrates with the sound of children singing their lessons in unison.

As a novice monk, he learned Pali language, primarily by memorization and chanting from palm-leaf scripts, stored in the temple library. He memorized countless pages of Buddhist scriptures, for ceremonial chanting.

When he moved to Phnom Penh, as a young student in the Capital, it was a time of lively intellectual development, and a renaissance of Buddhist scholarship, centered in the newly established Buddhist Institute in Phnom Penh. It was a lively, sometimes frightening time, for a country boy to find himself in the vortex of political and intellectual upheaval in the late 1930s and the following

decade. The Buddhist Institute opened in 1930 and became a hotbed of lively intellectual development.

In 1941 Japanese forces entered Cambodia and occupied the country. The Siamese, seeing their opportunity to take advantage of the vulnerability of Cambodia, invaded their neighbor and annexed Battambang province and part of Siem Reap.

King Monivong died in April 1941, perhaps of a “broken heart” at the loss of Battambang province, and the occupation of his country by foreign powers, as his nation was drawn into a World War that was of no interest to the Khmer. Prince Norodom Sihanouk became king.

Throughout the 1940s, Cambodia was increasingly embroiled in national liberation politics. The nation was riveted in the Monks Demonstration, in which more than 500 Buddhist monks, accompanied with thousands of civilians, marched on the French headquarters in 1942. It was known as the “Umbrella War” because of the umbrellas the monks carried.

Meanwhile, the Cambodians were astonished at the humiliation and subjugation of the French by the Japanese forces. The “protectors” no longer seemed so invulnerable. Having lost Battambang to the Thai, how much “protection” could the Cambodians expect from their overlords? Resentment and resistance increased for the next decade, as Maha Ghosananda came to social awareness as a young monk.

Maha Ghosananda was ordained into the higher order as a Buddhist monk in 1943. Venerable Choun Nath, one of the most outstanding rising stars of the Cambodian Buddhism, was his preceptor.

Venerable Choun Nath was the director of the Ecole Supérieur de Pali, the Buddhist college, when he became Maha Ghosananda’s teacher. Choun Nath became the abbot of Wat Unalom, the most important temple in Cambodia as the seat of the Supreme Patriarch, in 1944. Then he was quickly appointed the Sangharaja (Supreme Patriarch) of Cambodia in 1948, a position in which he led the country for the next twenty years.

Maha Ghosananda attended Buddhist University of Phnom Penh from which he graduated. He later pursued advanced Buddhist studies in the Buddhist University Battambang.

The fact Venerable Choun Nath oversaw Ghosananda's education as his mentor gives an indication that Ghosananda was already recognized for outstanding potential even during this early time in his life.

Venerable Chuon Nath Joatanhnheannoa was born in a poor farming family March 11, 1883 in Kampong Speu province. He became the leader of a reformist movement of rationalist-scholastic model of Buddhism, rooted in linguistic studies of the Pali Cannon. This new movement, known as Dhammakaya influenced young Khmer monks in the early 20th century. The new movement also cultivated Khmer-language identity and culture, giving rise to the notion of Cambodian nationalism.

Chuon Nath had studied modern critical methods under Lous Finot and Victor Goloubew, at the Ecole Francoise de Extreme-Orient in Hanoi in 1922-23.

As director of the Buddhist college, Chuon Nath pushed for a series of innovations in the Khmer sangha beginning in the early twentieth century: the use of print for sacred texts (rather than traditional methods of hand-inscribing palm-leaf manuscripts); a higher degree of expertise in Pali and Sanskrit studies among monks; a vision of orthodoxy based on understanding of Vinaya texts for both bhikkhu and laypeople; and modernization of teaching methods for Buddhist studies.

When he became Patriarch, he banned monks from practices of tantra, astrology, healing, and other traditional practices that he regarded as corruptions and accretions incompatible with the “pure” scholarly Buddhism he advanced.

As Supreme Patriarch, he also headed the project to translate the entire Buddhist cannon into Khmer language; and he oversaw the creation of the Khmer language dictionary, the cornerstone of Khmer culture. He was a dynamo of activity and left a permanent legacy for Khmer Buddhism and culture.

Chuon Nath passed away on September 25, 1969, mercifully spared witnessing the conflagration in which his beloved country was soon to descend. His relics are enshrined at Wat Ounalom.

It was a thrill and an honor for Ghosananda to study under the guidance of Chuon Nath.

World War II convulsed Cambodia, as Ghosananda began his studies. Most notably, the United States dropped atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in early August 1945. The war

ended on August 15, 1945. The whole world was shaken by this spectre of the atomic bomb. Maha Ghosananda's world view and his dedication to peace would be shaped by this pivotal event.

In an odd "accident", American forces dropped bombs on Wat Unalom in 1946, the temple where Ghosananda was probably residing with his teacher Choun Nath, killing 11 people, including many monks. Violence was always near at hand.

The period from 1946-53 was a tumultuous time in Cambodia as King Sihanouk pressed for independence from the French in his "royal crusade for independence." The Khmer Issarak became a guerrilla movement in the outlands of northwest Cambodia. The Khmer Serei (anti-King nationalists) and plain bandits created chaos and terror throughout the countryside.

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## **FIFTEEN YEARS IN INDIA**

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In 1953, the same year Cambodia gained independence from France, Maha Ghosananda left his country to reside in India for the next 15 years as he pursued his PhD.

In India, he studied nonviolence with Nichidatsu Fujii, a protégé of Mahatma Gandhi; while he worked on his PHD at Nalanda University in Bihar State, India.

He interrupted his studies at least once, to attend Sixth Sangha Council of Buddhism in Rangoon, Burma, as an attendant to his preceptor Sangha Raja Chuon Nath, who had become the Great Supreme Patriarch of Cambodia.

The Sixth Buddhist Council was held in Kaba Aye temple in Rangoon, Vesak 24 May 1956, beginning the Buddha Jayanti Celebration, the 2,500 year anniversary of Lord Buddha's Parinibanna.

Sponsored by the Burmese Government under Prime Minister U Nu, Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw was the facilitator of the 2,500 monks assembled for the occasion.

The scriptures of various national-language translations were compared and contrasted for accuracy. Finally, after the Council officially approved the texts, all the Tipitaka and Commentaries were prepared for printing on modern presses in national scripts.

The Sixth Council was a huge event in the Theravada Buddhist world. To celebrate, the government of Burmese government of U Nu ordered all prison sentences reduced by six months, and

commuted all death sentences to 20-year terms. Animals and birds awaiting slaughter were released, and slaughterhouses, fish markets and butcher shops were closed.

He constructed a cave where 500 monks chanted through the last of 1,600 hours of recitation of the cannon as they sat in the “cave”— a vast jumble of rough boulders on the outside, a blue, gold and scarlet auditorium within (capacity 15,000).

The Sixth Buddhist council generated a renewed revival of interest in Theravada scholarship and practice.

### **NICHIDATSU FUJII**

At various times during his India-years, Maha Ghosananda studied with Nichidatsu Fujii in his Ashram near Bodhigaya. The Ashram looks out over Griddhakuta, where according to legend Lord Buddha preached his message of world peace.

Nichidatsu, a colleague and protégé of Mahatma Gandhi, is founder of the Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhist order. While in India, Maha Ghosananda was influenced by Nichidatsu and the legacy of nonviolent direct-action as taught by Mahatma Gandhi.

Nichidatsu had moved to India from Japan in 1930, after having taken a vow to dedicate his life to reestablishing Buddhism in India. He was 46 years old. That same year, Mahatma Gandhi launched his famous Salt March that grew into a mass movement of nonviolence for national liberation of India. Gandhi was sentenced to prison for his nonviolent confrontation with the British Empire.

In 1933 Nichidatsu met Gandhi for the first time, and spent a few months with him at this Wardha Ashram. Nichidatsu was deeply influenced by Gandhi’s teachings of nonviolent direct-action known as Satyaghri or “soul force”.

As the nonviolent Indian independence movement progressed throughout the 1930s-40s, Nichidatsu observed the power of nonviolence to transform nations and empires. He would later employ these same strategies in a struggle against atomic weapons and war.

Nichidatsu was horrified by the specter of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, and dedicated the rest of his long life to the propagation of world peace and disarmament, especially nuclear disarmament. He began constructing Peace Pagodas around the

world as a focal point for creating coalitions and mobilizing people for action on behalf world peace, and to give physical expression to the desire for world peace after the devastation of World War II.

In 1954 he inaugurated the first peace pagoda in Japan, and launched his anti-nuclear weapons movement in Japan. Ghosananda was aware of, and perhaps participated in, many of these activities.

Nichidatsu emphasized nonviolence as the foundation for the struggle for world peace. “When one becomes directly involved in politics, it appears that the just religion is obscured. Religion should be separate from politics, economy, and force. The Lord Buddha was a prince, but it was only in leaving the throne that he became able to deliver the genuine teachings of peace. Politics is deeply influenced by the interests of the nation. Religion should not represent interests or rights. It is an original state of existence,” he said.

“Civilization is neither to have electric lights, nor airplanes, nor produce nuclear bombs,” he said. “Civilization is to not kill people, not destroy living beings, not make war. Civilization is to hold out all respect and affection for one another.”

During his time in India with Nichidatsu Fujii, Maha Ghosananda deepened his understating of the social application of Buddhist teachings in building peace and reconciliation.

“The time has come!” Nichidatsu taught. “The time has come when we can no longer contain the urge to do something, but rush out of our houses. Time has come to look up to heaven, prostrate ourselves to the earth, voice our grief and share it with everyone.”

“They call a ‘saint’ the person who actually practices the moral code,” Nichidatsu taught Maha Ghosananda. “Individuals grow peaceful and societies show healthy development in an era when the moral code is upheld. In an era which the moral code is neglected, ridiculed or destroyed, individuals become corrupt and societies become chaotic.”

“Believing in violence as omnipotent is a characteristic of such an era, and murder and destruction are the skills of those times,” he said.

“Heaven and earth change places in the Era of Decline of the Dhamma,” he said. “A state of perversion is created where people lose sight of the Buddha, which should be the sacred object of faith, and instead worship money, which initially was nothing more than a means of trade, as God on earth.”

Nichidatsu denounced the growing “cold war” between communism and capitalism, which would soon engulf Cambodia in flames: “Whether it is the highly advanced science and technology, or the politics and economics of liberalism or communism that employs science and technology, the way to prevent humanity from self-destruction is not found in any of these doctrines advocated, or in any of the new weapons they produce. The pathway to prevent humanity from self destruction can only be found in the moral code and religion, which are deemed superfluous and are cast aside as antiquated by the modern civilization. But it is the religious belief that has the power to purify and transform even the evils that cannot be restrained by the moral code.”

“Science and technology led to the discovery of the atomic and hydrogen bombs, and a democratic nation used them for murder and warfare....The production and use of atomic and hydrogen bombs are a great disgrace to human civilization. The moral code will criticize this as an indelible disgrace on the United States.”

Religion is the great light of the world in this dark age of modern civilization, he said. “Religion’s purification of the mind through transformation of evil transcends the merits of doctrines. This brings about the fundamental prohibition of murder itself, which is the greatest tragedy of all tragedies in the human world.”

“This fundamental prohibition of murder is the basis for an ultimate civilization of humanity, which has never been given heed by science, economics or politics,” he said.

“This fundamental prohibition of murder is the major issue that extends through and beyond politics, economics and science. This is the ultimate issue that must be addressed in order to deliver humanity from its otherwise potential of extinction.” [5]

The words of this elder Japanese monk were seared into Ghosananda’s heart.

From Nichidatsu he also learned the importance of walking among the people. Just like Gandhi, he walked every day. Gandhi had emphasized the importance of walking; he walked very fast, as if a moment’s delay would delay peace. He had galvanized the nation of India into action by his Salt Walk to the sea.

Nichidatsu Fujii also emphasized the importance of walking in everyday life. For both Gandhi and Nichidatsu, walking was a sort of rejection of technology and technological

developments that had enslaved India to foreign empires, and engulfed the world in war and atomic nuclear conflagration.

Back in Japan as a young monk, Nichidatsu has practiced the walking asceticism known as kaihogyo, in which the monk spent 1000 days walking in the mountains beating a drum in meditation and chanting; he would routinely walk 40 kilometers daily. “The true monk does not stay in one place,” he taught Ghosananda. This walking-asceticism is also native to the Cambodian Theravada tradition, known as ‘Thudong’ in which the monk spends his life walking in the forests practicing meditation in imitation of the Buddha.

Many of the skills would be useful two decades later, when Ghosananda rose to global prominence as an advocate of peace and reconciliation in post-war Cambodia.

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### **MEDITATION IN THE FOREST**

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Maha Ghosananda received doctoral degree from Nalanda University in 1969, and was awarded the title “Maha Ghosananda”. The term “Maha” or “Great” refers to a monk who is a Pali expert, a scholar monk.

For the rest of his life, Maha Ghosananda would joke that “PhD means Person Has Dukkha” – in a sly comment on his fifteen years of study for his own PhD.

Later that same year, he entered the forest hermitage of Thai meditation master Venerable Dhammadasa, at Wat Chai Na just outside Nakorn Sri Dhammaraj in southern Thailand.

In Dhammadasa’s temple, Maha Ghosananda learned a meditation method that emphasized “sati-sampjāna” – “mindfulness and clear comprehension”

During the monsoon “Rains Retreat” the monks would reside within the temple precincts in intensive meditation practice. Throughout the hot and dry season, Ajahn Dhammadasa would often lead the monks in “thudong” – walking retreat in the forests and jungles that would last for many weeks, even months. The monks would pitch camp under the trees wherever they found themselves at the end of the day, in imitation of the Buddha’s wandering lifestyle.

Dhammadaro began teaching about 1954 at Wat Chai Na. He taught anapanasati – mindfulness with breathing. Every evening he gave Thai-language lectures on meditation.

Dhammadaro developed a vipassana technique using hand movements as a meditation object. After nine years of using this method, he felt confident in teaching it to others. Sitting meditation typically begins with some metta practices to develop “altruistic mind” of universal compassion.

He first taught the “Mindfulness with Breathing” method. Then the “Clear comprehension” meditations were taught, focusing on hand movements and sensations to develop of clear comprehension leading to penetrating insight.

For nine years, Maha Ghosananda’s daily schedule consisted of: 4a.m. chanting in the temple; 5a.m. he went on alms round; 8a.m. first meal; 11a.m. he ate lunch; 2-4p.m. sitting and standing meditation; 4-5p.m. walking meditation; 5pm tea break; 6:30p.m. sitting and standing meditation; 8p.m. listened to a lecture by Venerable Dhammadaro; 9-10p.m. walking meditation.

Monks and novices stayed in individual huts. Ajahn Dhammadaro would have each person meditating on their veranda in the open so he “could keep an eye on them.”

Years later when Maha Ghosananda demonstrated his meditation discipline to his own students, he would move his left hand up and down in a slow, rhythmic motion, and say: “In the monastery we learned to meditate this way. All day long, we moved the hand up and down, up and down, with mindfulness, following each breath carefully. Every day, we did only this – nothing more.”

In 1969, while Maha Ghosananda was practicing meditation in his forest retreat, news reached him of the violence breaking out in Cambodia as American “secret bombing” campaign was unleashed. The United States began a fourteen month long series of bombing raids in Cambodia, as part of their attempt to shut down the Ho Chi Minh trail and end the Vietnam War. The bombing campaign, known as Operation Breakfast, quickly destabilized Cambodia. Hundreds of thousands of refugees flooded into the city of Phnom Penh. Cambodia became increasingly consumed in the conflagration of the expanding Vietnam war.

Before the American war ended, an excess of 2,750,000 tons of bombs were dropped on Cambodia, more than the total tonnage dropped by the Allies in all of World War II. Cambodia is a

tiny country, about the size of Washington state. An estimated 600,000 Cambodians were killed in the American bombing campaign.

As the war escalated from 1970-75, Cambodia was engulfed in violence and fully engaged in the war. In 1970 a military coup took place after which the monarch was replaced by a pro-American government.

Every day he listened to news from Cambodia on the radio, and was beset by anguish.

His meditation master advised him to concentrate on his spiritual practice – to foster peace within his own heart – and to wait for the right time to return to his people.

“It was in Thailand, in a place of safety, that he first heard about the outbreak of fighting in Cambodia. He learned that his parents and all his brothers and sisters had been murdered. He was told, over time, of the death of many of his fellow monks and nuns. And of course, he said, he wept for so many losses. He wept for his country. He wept, he said, every day and could not stop weeping. But his teacher urged him to stop. “Don’t weep,” he was told, “Be mindful.”

“Having mindfulness,” his teacher said, “is like knowing when to open and when to close your windows and doors. Mindfulness tells us when is the appropriate time to do things...you can’t stop the fighting. Instead, fight your impulses toward sorrow and anger. Be mindful. Prepare for the day when you can truly be useful to your country. Stop weeping, and be mindful!”

Ghosananda sat for a long time and reflected upon the killings, and upon what his teacher had said. He realized that the dead were dead. They were in the past. Gone. All his family, all his friends, were gone. He thought about the future, and saw that it was totally unknown. He decided to do the only thing that he could do, which was to take care of the present just as well as he could. “The present is the mother of the future,” he said. “Take care of the mother. Then the mother will take care of the children.” So he went back to practice, back to his breath. For, as he said, “Breathing is not past or future. Breathing is now.”

The weeping stopped. “There is no sorrow in the present moment,” he explained. “How can there be? Sorrow and anger are about the past. Or they arise in fear of the future. But they are not in the present moment. They are not now.”

For nine more years he went on with his practice in the Thai forest, secluded in a hut, and there he gained the clarity and stability of mind, the understanding and the love, that are the fruit of very deep meditation. [6]

Maha Ghosananda heard the news that the Khmer Rouge took control of Phnom Penh on April 17, 1975. The leaders of Khmer Rouge envisioned themselves as the saviors of the Cambodian nation-state, capable of reviving Khmer national identity in pristine form, that is, shorn of foreign influence, capable of creating a militant and mobilized peasantry to guard against foreign domination, capable of approximating the agricultural feats achieved during the Angkorean period, and, finally, capable of restoring national grandeur to Cambodia.” [7]

As Khmer Rouge forces entered the city, Supreme Patriarch Hout Tat went onto Phnom Penh radio and asked the military to lay down their weapons. Huot Tat was one of Ghosananda’s teachers as a young monk. “The war was over”, Hout Tat said. “Peace had come to Cambodia.” After the radio address, he returned to his temple at Wat Unalom where he was taken into custody by the Khmer Rouge and falsely accused of keeping a wife and children in Paris.

The next day he was taken to Udong Mountain, the ancient royal capital north of Phnom Penh, and killed, reportedly by being crushed under a bulldozer.

A bust of the patriarch is on display at the Ounalom temple. It was retrieved from the Mekong River in 1979, where it had been thrown by the Khmer Rouge.

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## **SUFFERING OF THE WORLD**

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Venerable Maha Ghosananda met the first influx of Cambodian refugees as they entered Sakeo camp following expulsion of Khmer Rouge regime from power in 1978. Distributed tracts of the Metta Sutta to the refugees: “Hatred can never overcome hatred; only love can overcome hatred.”

The Sakeo was an early Khmer refugee camp near to Sakeo, off the road from Aranyaprathet to Sakeo.

Jane Mahoney and Philip Edmonds described the scene:

“It was 1978. The survivors of the Killing Fields were reeling from the horrors of war, forced labor, genocide, and religious repression in Cambodia. Behind them were the ashes of their beloved cities and villages, rice fields and temples. Ahead were refugee camps and the hope for survival. They arrived at Sakeo, teeming with refugees. Under the scorching sun, streams of men and women, elders and children, starved and emaciated, faces baked and cracked from heat and exposure, staggering and weeping from thirst and hunger.”

“Fifty miles away, on a steep, winding pass, an ancient bus creaked its way down the mountain. Maha Ghosananda was perched cross-legged on a rigid seat with his head bowed, his eyes closed, and his saffron robe draping gracefully to the floor. The slightly-built, middle-aged monk appeared serene, unaffected by the exhaust fumes, the screeching tires, and the frequent lurching movements around him. Overflowing with compassion, Maha Ghosananda was making his way toward Sakeo camp.”

“He traveled alone, reaching Sakeo’s gates three days after the first refugees.”

“The camp was stark- streets were crowded, sewage flowed in open gutters, food and water were scarce, and most refugees huddled inside their tattered cloth tents.”

“Passing through the checkpoint Ghosananda walked slowly toward the center of the camp, and as he did so the gloom that had enveloped the camp instantly turned into excitement. Refugees rushed to gaze at his saffron robe, the long-forbidden symbol of Buddhist devotion.”

“Ghosananda reached into his cloth shoulder bag and pulled out a handful of tattered pamphlets, copies of the Metta Sutta, the Buddhist words of compassion and forgiveness for the oppressor. He offered one to each refugee within reach, bowing his head in the traditional gesture of respect.”

“The people were overcome with grieving and emotion. They fell to their knees, prostrated, wailing loudly, their cries reverberating throughout the camp.” [8]

Maha Ghosanada taught them: “It is a law of the universe that retaliation, hatred, and revenge only continue the cycle and never stop it. Reconciliation does not mean that we surrender rights and conditions, but rather that we use love in our negotiations. Our wisdom and our compassion must

walk together. Having one without the other is like walking on one foot; you will fall. Balancing the two, you will walk very well, step by step.”

The following year, the Vietnamese invaded Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge began fleeing from Cambodia across the border into Siam. Maha Ghosananda went to meet the fleeing Khmer Rouge soldiers, without discrimination against them for what they had done, speaking the Buddha’s teachings of love and forgiveness to them also. Recalling the plight of the refugees, he told Alan Channer, “They suffer so much; they burn themselves. They want peace; they want happiness, and Buddhism gives them peace and happiness.”

Asked how he felt about the Khmer Rouge, Ghosananda bowed his head and said, “We have great compassion for them, because they do not know the truth. They destroy Buddhism. They destroy themselves.”

During 1979, Maha Ghosananda established temples at the refugee camps that lined the Thai-Cambodian border and ordained new monks against the orders of the Thai military.

“His work along the border, however, lasted a little over a year. When the Khmer Rouge resistance movement forced conscription of refugees, Ghosananda and Protestant activist Rev Peter Pond circulated a letter assuring that repatriation was not mandatory and outlining opportunities for resettlement. Ghosananda offered his wat as a sanctuary for those fleeing conscription. Thousands took refuge there, relinquishing their weapons at the door. Thai military officials who had quietly backed the forced conscription were furious. Rev Pond and his son were arrested, but the Queen Mother, a devout Buddhist, intervened on behalf of the monk. Rev Pond reports that Ghosananda visited him in prison and, with characteristic wit, whispered ‘body of Christ’ as he pushed a sandwich and a soft drink between the bars. Banned from the refugee camps, Maha Ghosananda accepted a UN appointment to represent Cambodians in exile at the Economic and Social Council in 1980.” [9]

Only 3,000 monks of the original 65,000 survived the four years of Khmer Rouge orgy of violence. Ghosananda said, “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!”

Dr Peter Carey recounted how Maha Ghosananda prevented violent uprisings in the camps on one occasion by persuading the men to take the Buddhist nonviolent precepts. When various

Khmer Rouge factions and anti-Khmer Rouge groups threatened violent conflict he convinced all the men in the camp to undertake the eight precepts for one day.

“The presence of Buddhist monks has been essential in preventing new outbreaks of violence and inter-communal strife. One recalls how the Venerable Maha Ghosananda prevented a Khmer Rouge controlled refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border erupting into violence during the early 1980s by placing all its adult members on the Eight Precepts for a day. In other cases, such as the second Dhammayietra walk from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh in 1993, the courageous example set by the monks has inspired others to turn away from the path of violence.” [10]

Thus began fifteen years of tireless activity on behalf of the Cambodian people, “direct action” as Gandhi would have called it.

In 1980 he represented Khmer nation-in-exile as consultant to the UN Economic and Social Council.

He cofounded Inter-religious Mission for Peace; launched ecumenical initiatives, world days of prayer for “Peace in Cambodia and the Whole World.”

Late in the year of 1980, he resettled in Providence, Rhode Island, where he set up one of the first Cambodian temples in the United States.

Throughout the 1980s, Maha Ghosananda spent all of his time tirelessly globetrotting, visiting the Khmer diaspora communities through France, North America, and Australia, opening temples and community centers; performing ceremonies and presiding over cultural revival; pursuing peace and reconciliation efforts; and especially pressing forward on negotiations for peace and restoration of a sovereign Cambodia.

In 1983, he met with Pope John Paul II in Rome for the first time, to discuss religious basis for world peace before planned interfaith meeting in Assisi.

Venerable Jakusho Kwong Roshi described the event: “I was fortunate enough to be his attendant one time. He is a very small man – very gentle, soft. Yellows, reds, orange socks....After he met the Pope, I asked him what it was like meeting the Pope. He said, ‘The Pope is very heavy!’ At the Vatican stairs, with maybe a few thousand people watching, the Pope embraced Maha Ghosananda – and almost knocked his glasses off! After that, Maha Ghosananda proceeded to pick up

the Pope. This surprised everyone, but in Cambodia they venerate things by picking them up. So that was the reason why Maha Ghosananda said the Pope was heavy.” [11]

He celebrated New Year April 14, in New York City Zen Center on East 31<sup>st</sup> Street, with about 200 Southeast Asian Buddhists from Cambodia, Laos, Burma and Thailand. He offered visitors a bunches of blessed purple grapes as blessings. Maha Ghosananda was the only monk in attendance. The SE Asians hoped to have their own temple community center in the future.

In 1985, the Peace Pagoda in Leverett, Mass was dedicated. Ghosananda moved to Leverett at the invitation of the Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhist order in Leverett. He founded a Khmer Buddhist temple adjacent to the Peace Pagoda.

In 1986 he was invited by Pope John Paul II to participate in Day of Prayer for Peace with world religious leaders in Assisi (now an annual event always regularly attended by Maha Ghosananda).

The following year, 1987, Ghosananda led contingents of Buddhist monks to UN sponsored Cambodian peace negotiations in Jakarta, Indonesia, proposing a compromise and reminding national leaders that “Peace is our common goal.”

“Peace is Possible!” he insisted. This clarion call would become his personal motto. He would build an “army of peace” he said, whose ammunition would be “bullets of loving kindness.”

“It will be an army absolutely without guns or partisan politics, an army of reconciliation with so much courage that it turns away from violence, an army dedicated wholly to peace and to the end of suffering.”

During the UN Jakarta negotiations, his monks opened daily sessions with prayer and meditation, offered a formal ceremony for peace and unity, and circulated a statement of peace.

The Jesuit brother Bob Matt met Maha Ghosananda at this conference. Maha Ghosananda thanked Matt for his service to the refugees at Site II on the Thai-Cambodian border, where Matt had worked since 1980. He then asked Matt, “But why do you help only one faction?”

“Thus challenged, the Jesuit brother founded the CPR [Center for Peace and Reconciliation] along with Venerable Yos Hut Khemacaro, another prominent Cambodian monk who had been out of

the country during the Khmer Rouge regime. After living in France and Australia, Venerable Yos Hut returned to Site II to assist U.N. human rights training....” [12]

In 1988, in a meeting in Paris, Maha Ghosananda was elected as Supreme Patriarch of Khmer Buddhist monks throughout the world. He accepted the position on a provisional basis, that he would act as patriarch until a duly elected patriarch could be elected to reside in Phnom Penh. [13]

Then in 1989, he was awarded an honorary doctorate of humanitarian service at Providence College, Providence, RI.

A mood of despair hung over Cambodia as the decade of the ‘90s arrived, with 100,000 peasants remaining internal refugees, and victims of expanding fighting between Khmer Rouge and Phnom Penh forces. Anxiety about the economy and fear of the future prevailed across Cambodia. The Chinese, Thai, and U.S. forces continued to support the Khmer Rouge fighting in the Western Zones in an effort to dislodge the Vietnamese-controlled Phnom Penh government.

The US began to turn against the KR in the late year, and withdraw their support; responding to pressure from congress. The US began humanitarian assistance.

In 1991 the Paris Agreement was signed, calling for the closure of Thai camps and repatriation of the three hundred thousand Cambodian refugees.

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## **BUDDHA OF THE BATTLEFIELDS**

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In 1992, the work for which Maha Ghosananda was most widely acclaimed – the Dhammayietra – began.

The outstanding activism of Ghosananda came to the attention to the King of Cambodia who approached him for advice

King Sihanouk was deeply depressed about the immense suffering in his country. Maha Ghosananda was asked what advice he gave the king. “We always remind the king to be in the present. He always thinks about the future, he always regrets the past, and then he suffers. If he stays

in the present moment, he will be happy. Life is in the present moment. Breathing in, present moment. Breathing out, present moment. We cannot breathe in the past,” he said. “We cannot breathe in the future. Only here and now can we breathe.”

“Wars of the heart always take longer to cool than the barrel of a gun...we must heal through love...and we must go slowly, step by step...”

To learn to love one’s enemy is not easy, Ghosananda said, “I do not question that loving one’s oppressor may be the most difficult attitude to achieve. But it is the way of the universe that retaliation, hatred, and revenge only continue the cycle and never stop it. Reconciliation does not mean that we surrender rights and conditions, but rather that we use love in all of our negotiations.”

This requires great humility. For “We must see ourselves in the other. What is the opponent but a being in ignorance, and we ourselves are also ignorant of many things...Only loving kindness and right mindfulness can set us free.” [14]

King Sihanouk awarded him title of Somdech Phreah, and the office of Samdech Song Santipeap (Leader of Religion for Peace) in Cambodia.

## **DHAMMAYIETRA**

April 12, 1992, Maha Ghosananda led the first Dhammayietra for Peace and Reconciliation for one month through northern Cambodia just prior to full implementation of United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).

The Dhammayietra is a “pilgrimage of truth” or a peace walk, lasting for several days or weeks.

Venerable Nhem Kim Teng, a senior Cambodian monk, says of the Dhammayietra: “Maha Ghosananda is trying to bring back the things we have lost. Khmers used to be gentle, honest and forgiving. We should help each other in times of difficulty; speak respectfully...all those things we have lost because of the war and the violence and destruction.”

The first Dhammayietra was conceived as a celebration of Cambodian refugees return to Cambodia, the homeland, in which they would walk from the refugee camps in Thailand back across the border into Cambodia, and return home.

“Over a hundred refugees and international walkers, including monks from Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Japan, crossed into Cambodia. Daily, walkers were reunited with long-lost family members. The walkers arrived in Phnom Penh on May 13, Visakha Puja, the holiday celebrating the life of the Buddha. Crowds gathered on the road side to watch or join in, and by the time they reached the royal palace, their numbers had swelled to over a thousand.” [15]

Maha Ghosananda said that the Dhammayietra was not a political demonstration or a new innovation into Cambodian Buddhism; it was simply following the example of the Buddha, who long ago had walked onto the battle field in an effort to end a war, and bring reconciliation to two hostile factions of his own clan.

Maha Ghosananda was referring to the story of the Buddha at the Rohini River, in which a war broke out between the cities of Kapilavastu and Koliya.

In that story, two relatives of the Buddha were fighting over the use of the water from the Rohini River.

Kapilavastu town of the Sakyans and the Koliya town of the Koliyans were situated on either side of the Rohini River. The farmers of both towns worked the fields watered by the Rohini River. A great drought came upon the land one year, in which they did not have enough rainfall. The rice paddies began to shrivel up, and farmers on both sides of the river wanted to divert the water into their own fields.

The people of Koliya said that there was not enough water in the river for both sides, and that if only they could channel the water just once more to their fields that would be enough for the paddy to mature and ripen. On the other hand, people from Kapilavastu argued that their crops would fail, and they would be compelled to buy rice from other people in order to avoid famine, and thereby become indebted to their neighbors and impoverished.

Both sides wanted the water for their own use only, and were angry due to the abusive language and accusations on both sides. The quarrel that started between the farmers came to the ears of the ministers, and they reported the matter to the mayors, and so both sides prepared to go to war.

The Buddha heard about this desperate confrontation, and saw that both sides of were coming out to meet in battle and he decided to stop them.

All alone, the Buddha went down to the battlefield by the river where the armies had assembled. His relatives seeing him powerfully and yet peacefully sitting above them on the river bank, laid aside all their weapons and paid respect to the Buddha.

The Buddha said to them, “Which is more precious, water or human blood?”

The people responded that, of course, human blood, human life, is more precious than mere water.

“So for the sake of water, you will make a river of blood to flow?” the Buddha said. “Is what you are doing correct?”

The people stood silent.

“For the sake of some water, which is of little value, you should not destroy human lives, which are of so much greater value and priceless.”

These thoughts were in Ghosananda’s mind as he began his walk across the border, into the mine-laden Battlefields of Cambodia.

“We must find the courage to leave our temples and enter the temples of human experience, temples that are filled with suffering,” he would often say. “If we listen to the Buddha, Christ, or Gandhi, we can do nothing else. The refugee camps, the prisons, the ghettos, and the battlefields will then become our temples.”

Elizabeth Bernstein participated in the original Dhammayietra, and recounted her memoirs of the walk. Thousands of families lined the roads to see the largest group of peaceful people in years march home, in an odd sort of undoing of the forced march when the Khmer Rouge had ordered the evacuation of Phnom Penh at the beginning of their reign.

As they passed through the villages and towns, the walkers threw water on the bystanders and shouted “Songkriem jop howie!” – “The war is over!”

“Deep reconciliation and reconnection of the walkers on the personal level became such a regular occurrence that many people began calling the walk ‘Dhamma Teak Tong’, or ‘Dhamma Contact’. Almost every walker from the border refugee camps was re-united with family members from whom they had been separated for thirteen, fifteen, twenty years. Walkers would disappear into a house off the side of the road, or set out once we arrived in town, only to reappear hours later,

beaming. An older woman grabbed my arm one morning and exclaimed amid tears, 'I found my daughter! After twenty years. Now SHE has a daughter. And she told me my other daughter is alive. She lives near Phnom Penh, and I can see her too, when we get there.' The following day another walker ran up and excitedly said, 'I just went to visit my uncle who lives in this village and there in his house was my father! I haven't seen him in twelve years. What luck!' on another evening while we were sitting under a Bodhi tree chatting with some locals, a man brought two young boys over. 'Please meet my sons. They are twins. Thirteen years old! I last saw them when they were only twenty days old. Babies. They're grown up now, and study in boarding school they don't know me.' Another man, who has paid dearly for the war with his leg and who rode a cycle along with the Dhammayietra, related, 'In Battambang I met my sister! She didn't recognize me at first; she didn't know I was still alive. She didn't know I'd survived the Khmer Rouge. She didn't know I'd lost my leg. She didn't know I'd married and had children. She just cried and cried.'....

"The spirit of the walk was spread by the Tuk Mon water blessing. In describing the symbolic significance of Tuk Mon, Maha Ghosananda says, 'Mine are a simple people. To them water means cleansing.' So we washed away the pain of war of the people in many ways. After receiving water over her once elderly woman who couldn't join the walk offered me a stick of incense. 'I can't make it. But take this; it will be my spirit walking with you.'

"Walking was not easy during the height of the hot season, and we usually began walking at 2 or 3 am to take advantage of cooler morning temperatures. One pre-dawn morning I noticed a woman holding tightly onto her husband's wrist. As we approached a bridge and someone shines a flashlight on a gaping hole in it, I heard her say, 'Careful, stay to the right, take small steps.' Her husband was blind. They were both in their sixties. I asked her where they lived. 'Far away,' she said (which turned out to be twenty kilometers away from this road). 'We heard about the Dhammayietra yesterday morning and walked here in the evening. I've never seen anything like this in my life. We had to come. It's our one chance.'

"Before the walk had begun many people said that this event could never happen, that there were too many land mines. We were told that we could never get the agreement or cooperation of the factions. Then there was the UN. Permission was also needed from the Thais who were involved in their own political turmoil and governmental change. It was also known that many former soldiers

had turned to banditry and were prowling the countryside. By the time we felt we could proceed politically, it was the height of the hot season when temperatures average 45C and water shortages plagued the country...

“But the miracle of the walk was not that it happened, but what happened on it and what happened between people along the walk route. As we walked out of Battambang in the early hours of the morning, one woman confided a dream to me: ‘Last night I dreamt of my mother. I haven’t seen her in a dream since she died during the Khmer Rogue period. She was making offerings to many monks. She looked happy. Then this morning I came upon the Dhammayietra and saw all of the monks walking. What an incredibly good sign. I knew I must join you, all the way to Phnom Penh. Immediately I ran home to get some clothes to take. I feel so relieved that my mother’s spirit is now in peace.’”

“Others also spontaneously joined the walk, some joined for a day, accompanying us from their village to the next, often carrying offerings of rice or mangoes. Indeed the offerings of these local, poor communities which sustained the walk, feeding and housing us along the way in temples – many only partially rebuilt from destruction during the wars – even when our numbers reached into the hundreds.”

“The effect the walk had on people in the communities we passed was often profound. One old man told me, ‘All of my children have died. I’m all alone. Now there’s only religion which can help. Now seeing all these people walking for peace and the rebirth of Buddhism in our country overwhelms me with happiness. We forgot our religion and wandered so far, killing one another, waging war, spilling blood. We just have to go back to our religion.’ Another woman added, ‘We Khmer haven’t seen peace for so long. We’ve never known it. Now seeing the monks and all these people walking makes me think they’ve come to teach us to love one another, to unite. When I see them I feel speechless. Maybe we will have true peace after all.’”

On May 13, Dhammayietra arrived in Phnom Penh for the celebration of Vesak, Buddhism’s highest holy day, with over one thousand people walking. A hundred monks were followed by hundreds of lay people in white, walking with quiet dignity down the main boulevard of the capital in a line that stretched for more than a mile. [16]

Maha Ghosananda's return to Cambodia inspired a rumor that he was the fulfillment of an old prophecy that after the brutal reign of the damil (dark ones or infidels; pronounced 'thmil') a 'holy man from the west' who was a light-skinned Khmer would appear, and the prince would come back to save his people.

Other events of 1992 included:

\* Publication of **Step by Step: Meditations on Wisdom and Compassion** by Maha Ghosananda, by Parallax Press [since translated into Khmer, Thai, Spanish, Portuguese] The book is a selection of his pity sayings and Dhamma talks.

\* Awarded 1992 Rafto Foundation Prize for Human Rights, Bergen, Norway.

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## **DHAMMAYIETRA**

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The Dhammayietra walks became a banified "movement" with the second walk, which took place in 1993.

Maha Ghosananda led Dhammayietra II through areas where open civil war was still underway, before the first Cambodian elections in 1993, encouraging citizens to overcome fear of political violence and intimidation and to exercise their right to vote.

Over 400 people participated in the 350 kilometer journey across the war-torn provinces of Siem Reap, Kompong Thom, and Kompong Cham down to the central capital city of Phnom Penh.

The resolve of the Dhammayietra leaders was tested at Wat Damnak in Siem Reap even before the march began. Maha Ghosananda recounted that he "could hear fighting going on outside and bullets were fired through the temple walls. Three of our people were wounded and one was shot through the shoulder."

Ghosananda calmed their fears: "Sometimes we are in fear but later the fear is no longer with us. We have to walk and spread our message with compassion, loving kindness and respect for the human rights of all who are victims of war."

Bob Matt and Liz Bernstein, participants in the Dhammayietra, recounted the walk:

“In the early hours of May 3<sup>rd</sup>, as walkers gathered for morning meditation. The pagoda in the city of Siem Reap in which we were staying became a battle ground. Soldiers from both the Khmer Rouge and Phnom Penh government engaged in combat, and in the ensuing four-hour firefight, three walkers were wounded. A grenade was thrown into the meditation hall in which most of the walkers had taken cover, including the Venerable Maha Ghosananda, the leader of the Dhammayietra. The grenade did not explode. When the shooting finally subsided, the participants gathered around Maha Ghosananda who smiled and said, “Buddha saved us”. (Two days later, the Venerable monk told the Catholic monks among us, ‘Christ saved us’ with an ecumenical smile.)”

“The walkers usually began their daily treks at four or five in the morning, depending on the amount of fighting in the area they were about to enter. Even as early as 4am, in town or countryside, families would wait outside their homes with a bucket of water, candles and incense sticks. As the monks and nuns filed past two by two, they would bless the people and water with words of peace. ‘May peace be in your heart, your family, your village, our country.’ In return, many walkers had his or her feet blessed or washed by those waiting alongside the road, wishing us well on your journey. ‘May your journey be as cool as this water’. The incense sticks were extinguished in the water as a symbol of dousing out the flames of war, as prayers for well-being were exchanged. Minefields on either side of the road, temperatures over 400 C, and rainstorms did little to dampen the spirit of the walkers, or those patiently waiting by the side of the road to greet us.”

“The Dhammayietra walked through areas where UN peace-keeping forces do not travel further than 500meters from their compounds for the sake of their own security; through areas where people’s prayers were hauntingly simple: ‘May we sleep above the ground again, instead of gathering our children for another night in the bunker.’ ‘May the shelling stop.’ ‘We just don’t know where to run to anymore,’ pleaded a mother of five, ‘May we just stop fearing the night.’ ”

“As the walk passed through this war-torn country, many soldiers started to lay down their weapons, and ask for blessing, as the monks, who walked in front, filed past. At one stop, several armed soldiers came into the temple in which we were staying and asked to see the monk leading the walk. They then laid their weapons on the floor. They bowed in front of Venerable Kim Teng and requested a blessing of protection. ‘We don’t want anyone to be killed or hurt,’ one said. ‘Even

though I am a soldier, I have no ill-will in my heart.’ ‘Please bless us in a way that our bullets don’t hit anyone, and so that no one else’s bullets hurt us.’”

“In some towns, government officials tried to discourage the people from welcoming the walkers, believing the peace walk was a threat to their political interests. One of the Dhammayietra’s warmest welcomes was in a town where the people had been clearly told not to come. Old men and women would whisper to the walkers, ‘We were told not to come, but they cannot stop us. This is our religion.’ ‘We hunger for peace so much,’ they said while they made an offering of food to the monks, nuns and lay walkers.”

“In another village, which was also instructed not to receive the walk, a young man related how the village had recently experienced a massacre of 30 people at the temple. ‘This is the first time we have dared to gather together again in a large group,’ he said, ‘We just couldn’t stay away. Everyone is here. The market closed, and people have left their jobs to come to receive you. We are so grateful that you have come to help us find peace again. The UN has sent people from all over the world to keep peace, but it has not worked. All we have left is Buddhism. If you will help us, it should not be so difficult to make peace. The monks and nuns must lead us out of this mess of killing one another. If we just think of killing and revenge, it will never end. Buddhism must guide us.’”

“Before the walk reached Phnom Penh, the city was tense with the expectation of violence. As the walk approached the outskirts of the capital, the number of walkers increased to over three thousand...through the streets of Phnom Penh. ‘I saw the walk in front of my office, and I just had to join,’ explained a Khmer worker for an international organization. ‘I just couldn’t keep inside. I walked off my job. All Cambodians, and foreigners too, should stop work and walk for peace today.’ ‘When I saw the monks, I was speechless.’ Another added, ‘People were so afraid of elections. Here in Phnom Penh they had started to stockpile rice. The walk has relieved us of our fear, and given us new hope.’”

The walk ended in front of the Royal Palace where the people gathered to meditate in silence and pray that all beings be free from suffering, fear and sorrow. King Sihanouk greeted the walk and made a solemn plea to all Cambodians to ‘put an end to violence and hatred, and forget the spirit of vengeance from this day forward.’” [17]

Jesuit Brother Bob Matt, was deeply touched by Maha Ghosananda's personification of the teachings of Jesus, and said knowing Ghosananda had taught him more about his own religion. "I have learned so much about what it means to be a Christian, catholic and Jesuit from Buddhist friends, Maha Ghosananda said, 'If you want to work for peace in my country, come follow me' He didn't tell me what to do, how to do it, what to be, how to act as a Catholic. He just said, 'Come walk with me.'"

"People would sit along the road with a bucket of water and incense sticks –this would be a three or four in the morning when we would begin the walks. And everyone would bless each person with water, would wish them peace in their own heart, peace in the country," Matt said. "And people would just weep, especially old people. It really showed me you can destroy all the temples, you can take every sign and symbol of a religion away from a people, but you can't take it out of the human heart."

R. Scott Appleby said the Dhammayietra gave the Cambodian people the courage to overcome their fear, and dare to come out to vote, and to hope that peace was possible, after so many years of war. Days before the election, Khmer Rouge rebels had killed scores of civilians and twenty UN Peacekeepers, in an effort to derail the elections. Nevertheless, predictions for disaster during the elections didn't come true. Long lines of voters lined up and stood in the pools of rainwater for hours, to cast their vote for peace. More than 90percent turnout.

"The marchers hoped to build popular confidence in the elections and overcome the fear that had been aroused by Khmer Rouge threats of violence and disruption. By the time Maha Ghosananda and his supporters reached Phnom Penh, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians had encouraged the marchers along their path, and more than 10,000 people had joined their ranks."

"Ninety percent of the Cambodian electorate voted in the ensuing free and fair elections, the first in the country's history. While the UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia UNTAC had created the conditions necessary for the holding of the elections, many Cambodians and NGO workers attributed the extraordinary level of popular participation to the success of the Dhammayietra." [18]

"The walkers gained the respect of the U.N. Transitional Authority in Cambodia as they moved through Khmer Rouge territory at the height of pre-election tensions, assaulted by the constant sounds of rockets, mortars, and AK-47 rifle shots. U.N. helicopters and round troops monitored the

walk with grave concern. By the time the marchers reached Phnom Penh, an estimated three thousand people joined the procession through the streets and circled the Independence Monument.” [19]

After the elections Ghosananda also supported the constitutional convention. “As a further demonstration of Buddhist concern for democratic practices, Maha Ghosananda organized monks and nuns to meditate for a ‘just constitution’ during the Constitutional Assembly following the election. The venerated monk’s leadership was acknowledged when a coalition of Cambodian NGOs formed the umbrella organization Ponleu Khmer and elected him as honorary chairman. His wat, Sambav Meas, hosted the new Dhammayietra Center, which shared offices with the Coalition for Peace and Reconciliation.” [20]

Also in 1993, Ghosananda was named honorary leader of Ponleu Khmer, a citizens’ advisory council to the Cambodian Constitutional Assembly, also with offices at his temple Sambav Meas. Ponleu Khmer presented proposals for the protection of human rights and for nonviolent resolution of the continuing Cambodian conflict. As a result, Cambodia has one of the most progressive constitutions of any nation in the world, especially regarding human rights.

#### MOVING ON - 1994

His humanitarian work for people continued throughout 1994. He blessed the opening ceremony of Interfaith Pilgrimage for Peace and Life at Auschwitz, Poland.

Dhammayietra III was conducted through the war-torn western province of Cambodia in the spring of 1994. The walk was caught in crossfire between government forces and Khmer Rouge and a monk and nun were killed. Ghosananda completed the walk saying “this violence is indeed the reason we walk.”

R Scott Appelby recounted the most tragic of all the peace walks. This walk was the most dangerous of all, seeking reconciliation between Khmer Rouge and opposing Cambodians factions: “The political circumstances and thus the immediate purpose of the march had changed (since the 1993 march). Held in support of national reconciliation, the 1994 march came less than a month after Khmer Rouge troops had recaptured their strategic stronghold and nominal ‘capital’ of Pailin, a lucrative gem-mining area, and only days after peace talks between the Khmer Rouge and the

coalition government (formed after the 1993 elections) had been postponed indefinitely. A Mennonite Central Committee worker on the scene noted that the marchers, scheduled to arrive at their destination one month later, on a Buddhist holy day, would plant trees as a symbol of rebirth and reconciliation as they passed through vast tracts of deforested land and areas made perilous by land mines.”

At a talk at Angkor Wat, Maha Ghosananda compared Cambodia to a boat and said, “If Cambodia sinks through war, violence, greed, hatred, everyone sinks as well. We all live in Cambodia together.”

“Our journey for peace begins today and every day. Slowly, slowly, each step is a prayer, each step is a meditation, each step will build a bridge.”

Liz Bernstein participated in the walk and left a first hand account.

“Despite fighting in the area, participants began arriving a week early. Most had heard of the walk by radio, others via the informal ‘temple information network.’ By April 23, 1994, about 450 monks, 250 nuns, and 100 lay people had gathered at Wat Bo Viel in Battambang. The walkers represented various religions, backgrounds, and ages, from 13 to 89 year old nun, a veteran of two previous marches.

Throughout the pre-walk training, which included nonviolence, mine awareness, and first aid, shelling remained audible. The Dhammayietra appealed for an immediate cease fire and urged the two sides to negotiations without pre-conditions. During one of the daily training walks the appeals were delivered to the vice-governor of the town. In addition, a delegation of the Dhammayietra visited victims of the recent fighting in the hospital.

The Dhammayietra began on April 24, with over 800 pilgrims accompanied by 1,000 well-wishers, who walked a few kilometers in solidarity. Thousands of villagers lined the roads with buckets of water and incense to receive the blessings of the walk, dousing incense sticks in the water as a symbol of extinguishing the flames of war.

The walk proceeded as planned for three days. Shelling could be heard from further down the road, yet everywhere villagers lined the roads, palms joined together in a greeting of respect. They awaited the water blessing and brought offerings of food to the local temples which housed the walkers. At each village, Maha Ghosananda gave a talk, spreading the message of the walk.

As the walk left Bung Ampil, the fighting intensified and came closer. Villagers were debating whether to flee their homes. Eight kilometers ahead, most villagers had already left. Soldiers kneeled by the roadside, their guns laid on the ground next to them, awaiting the water blessing. One lone elderly man, crouched down after the row of soldiers, with an offering of rice in one hand, held aloft a piece of metal in the other. On it he had written in chalk, “Nati santi param sokham (there is no greater happiness than peace).”

The pilgrims walked through abandoned ghost towns, as rockets whizzed overhead, chanting: “May all beings be free from suffering, may all beings be free from fear, may all beings live in peace.” Soldiers careened by on tanks and trucks, barely slowing for the hundreds of monks and nuns meditating in silence.

Soon the leaders announced that the Dhammayietra would return to Bung Ampil. The war had become impassable. The Cambodian Royal government troops had said the fighting up ahead was too heavy for the walk to continue. Confusion ensued, as some retreated, catching rides on motorbikes and trucks. One elderly nun insisted, “I, for one, came to walk with Samdech Ghosananda, and I will continue to walk with him wherever he leads us.”

“That evening she and about 200 remaining walkers retreated alongside the thousands of families now fleeing. The pilgrims walked alongside the file of ox carts, motorbikes, and bicycles laden with water buckets, rice sacks, chickens, pots and pans, and children. The ubiquitous blue plastic bags signaled a previously hopeful move – the recent United Nations High Commission for Refugees repatriation – but once again these Cambodians were on the road, silent but for the beat of the Japanese monk’s drum and the creak of oxcart wheels. One woman, struggling with four children, said, “It’s so late in the day. Where will we sleep tonight?”

The walk leaders sought a quieter route to Palin, detouring west to Komping Poey, north to Bavel district. Preparing to traverse single-file through a “forest” on the way from Komping Poey reservoir to Bavel, one of the walk leaders asked a government soldier to indicate the mine-free path. Unarmed, but in uniform, he accompanied the walk. Several other soldiers, armed, wove in and out of the line of walkers claiming, “We’re on our own patrol.”

Suddenly, the walkers encountered a group of Democratic Kampuchea (Khmer Rouge) soldiers, and bullets and rockets flew. During a lull many ran back to a big tree. Bullets rang out again. Venerable Kol Saroth, a monk was shot in the leg. In all, three monks and a nun were killed in the crossfire.

The Khmer Rouge soldiers detained many of the pilgrims and took them back to the camp in the forest. For the most part, the soldiers were just boys, who grieved that monks had been killed in the crossfire. Bernstein noted how she was moved that the Khmer Rouge soldier who detained her was just a frightened 27-year old boy who hadn't seen his mother in 15 years.

The Khmer Rouge commander apologized to the Peace activists, assured them he also wanted peace, and asked them to remain neutral and non-partisan in their work of reconciliation.

“Please remind all foreigners working in Cambodia that all Cambodians, including those of the Democratic Kampuchea, want peace and development. I apologize for the death of the monk. If there had not been any soldiers, we would not have shot at the monks.”

He then asked about the Dhammayietra, and Maha Ghosananda, who had helped start temples in their refugee camps in Thailand. “We want to meet the monk,” he said. “We want to find another way. We, too, are tired of fighting for 20 years.” After talking for over an hour, the Khmer Rouge released the group.

In reaction to the tragedy, King Norodom Sihanouk sent a letter to Ghosananda and the Dhammayietra walkers, asking them to cancel the walk for fear of further violence.

But the walkers held a funeral for the victims, and then pledged to continue the walk. “This violence is indeed why we are walking. We remain committed to nonviolent means to create peace, reconciliation and unity,” Ghosananda said.

“The King asked us to stop out of love. It is, however egotistical love, not universal love. We must go on.

A few frightened walkers left, but others joined. The walk continued north, and people continued to greet it wholeheartedly.

## **Angkor Wat**

The walkers continued the walk by another route, and stopped for the night at Angkor Wat, the ancient complex.

Along the route Ghosananda saw and heard the everyday living conditions of our fellow Cambodians. He witnessed the fear and anxiety due to the endless flames of war, banditry, threats, extortion, rape. He saw people sleeping in the mud in rice fields under sheets of blue plastic as the monsoon rains began. He listened to the stories of endless suffering due to the flames of war, banditry, threats, extortion, and rape.

All along the route, the suffering people in every village, in every wat, received the Dhammayietra with gratitude.

“I have run my whole life. I can’t count the number of times. Five times in five years, at least. Are we Cambodians born to spend our lives fleeing?” one woman asked him.

Maha Ghosananda, compared Cambodia to a boat, said, “We are all in the same boat together. If Cambodia sinks through war, violence, greed, hatred, everyone sinks as well. We all live in Cambodia together.”

When one of the monks asked a woman refugee what message she wanted him to send to the leaders in Phnom Penh, she answered, “Just tell the leaders to make peace. Then we don’t need any assistance. We’ll plant rice and farm, and make our own living, but let us live in our village in peace.”

On May 27-28, after the completion of the Dhammayietra, Maha Ghosananda traveled to North Korea to attend the peace talks: “Peace is always a point of arrival and a point of departure. That is why we must always begin again step by step, and never get discouraged.”

Alan Channer, film producer, arrived in Cambodia in 1994 to produce a film about Ghosananda and his peace work, a film that would show the relevance of Buddhist values of nonviolence in the reconstruction of civil society in Cambodia.

“I first met Maha Ghosananda on a hot afternoon in Phnom Penh. As I peered round the door of his residence he emerged from the bathroom, water dripping from his hands. I was unannounced, a stranger. He bowed, smiled and invited me in,” Channer remembered.

“A few days later I was sitting on the tiled floor opposite the beaming patriarch...I asked what had led him to become a monk. ‘It is the custom of Cambodia,’ he said, as if leading the celibate, penniless life was the most obvious option in the world. He went on to explain that bhikkhu can be translated as ‘beggar’.

“Do you see yourself as a beggar?” I interjected.

He laughed. “Yes!” he said, laughing more, “Special beggar!”...

“Had his family suffered under the Khmer Regime of Pol Pot,” Channer asked.

“Yes,” Ghosananda answered.

Channer questioned further.

“All of them are dead,” Ghosananda said.

Incredulous, Channer asked, “Your parents?”

“Yes.” Ghosananda said.

“Your brothers and sisters?”

“Yes.” [21]

A result of the encounter was the film **The Serene Life**, produced by David and Alan Channer, which featured Maha Ghosananda and the Dhammayietra. The premiere in Cambodia was attended by 700 people including senior Buddhists and government officials. Maha Ghosananda told them that the film showed the advantages “when the heart followed peace and truth and compassion.”

These values, he said, could only be beneficial if they were followed by people and society.

“If a society is to have peace there must first be peace in the individual, and the way to peace is not only through prayer and meditation but also through our thoughts and behavior,” Ghosananda said.

“If we have hatred, ambition and anger, we will have no peace at all but if we leave these out of our hearts and replace them with kindness, compassion sympathetic joy and justice then we and our society will enjoy peace and happiness.”

Venerable Tep Vong, the Supreme Patriarch of Cambodia, praised the film that “will help foster a more peaceful Cambodia.” [22]

The film helped spread the message of peace and reconciliation in Cambodia, even finding its way into Khmer Rouge camps, where it was views in the jungles. In one instance in 1997, Maha

Ghosananda presented **The Serene Life** to the commander of a battalion of former Khmer Rouge soldiers who had defected to the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces. The video was subsequently used in a training program for these soldiers run by the **Khmer Institute of Democracy**.

May 27-28, Maha Ghosananda led contingent of high-ranking monks to Pyongyang, North Korea, to peace negotiations held under the auspices of King Sihanouk.

While the talks were underway in North Korea, the Dhammayietra activists had a campaign in Cambodia to “tie a saffron ribbon for peace” and hung banners and ribbons throughout the city of Phnom Penh. When they learned later that the talks had not resulted in Peace, they reminded each other of Maha Ghosananda’s teachings: “Peace is always a point of arrival and a point of departure. That is why we must always begin again, step by step, and never get discouraged.”

Other activities this year:

- \* He attended a second round of follow-up negotiations later in Phnom Penh.

- \* He also led an inter-religious delegation to peace negotiations in Colombo, Sri Lanka, to help seek and end to that country’s civil war.

- \* Maha Ghosananda was first nominated for 1994 Nobel Peace Prize by US Senator Claiborne Pell, Chairman of US Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

- \* On December 4, 1994 he gave a blessing to the “**Auschwitz to Hiroshima**” peace walk inauguration at Auschwitz Concentration Camp in Poland. It was the opening of the four day **Convocation of the Interfaith Pilgrimage for Peace and Life**, a world wide walk in memory of WW II. Sponsored by the Coalition for Peace and Reconciliation.

The walk began on December 10<sup>th</sup> from the ‘receiving platform’ at the Birkenau camp. It eventually traversed through Eastern Europe, the Middle East, India and Southeast Asia to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, arriving August 8, 1995. Initiated and organized by the Nipponzan Myohoji order.

- \* While he was in Europe, he also attended the UNESCO Peace Conference in Barcelona, Spain. Fifty religious leaders gathered to discuss “The Contribution by Religions to the Culture of Peace” and draw-up a manifesto of peace.

The main objective of the UN dialogue was to concentrate on the cultural aspect of peace and the wisdom of the great religious traditions.

The Barcelona statement said, “We face a crisis which could bring about the suicide of the human species or bring us a new awakening and a new hope. **We believe that peace is possible**....Peace implies that love, compassion, human dignity and justice are fully preserved. Peace entails that we understand that we are all interdependent and related to one another. We are all individually and collectively responsible for the common good, including the well being of future generations. Peace demands that we respect Earth and all forms of life, especially human life. Our ethical awareness requires setting limits to technology. We should direct our efforts towards eliminating consumerism and improving the quality of life. Peace is a journey – a never ending process.”

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### **LANDMINES DHAMMAYIETRA**

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In February 1995, Maha Ghosananda attended the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) conference at Nakhon Nayok Thailand.

Then in May, he led Dhammayietra IV across Cambodia from the Thai border to Svay Reing near the Vietnamese border. Dhammayietra IV focused on banning land mines, to draw attention to the more than 10 million landmines in Cambodia; more mines that people, continue to this day to kill and maim hundreds of farmers and children each year. During the walk, the Buddhists collected 20,000 signatures to ban landmines.

Dhammayietra IV greeted the “Interfaith Pilgrimage for Peace” that had left Auschwitz, Poland the previous year, at the Thai-Cambodian border. The yearlong pilgrimage was organized by the Nipponzan Myohoji to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima.

The 1995 Dhammayietra set off from the northwestern border town of Poipet, the headquarters of the Khmer Rouge. The sound of artillery shells booming across the countryside from a distant battle between the army and the Khmer Rouge guerrillas, echoed in the ears of the pilgrims as they set out.

Reuters News Service reported that “Cambodian soldiers manning roadside defenses laid down their weapons and knelt in prayer as the marchers passed by. In scorching pre-monsoon heat, villagers along the seventy-four-mile route from Poipet to Battambang waited with smoldering incense sticks and buckets of water decorated with flowers....Families crouched with candles along the road, waiting to be showered with holy water and receive blessings from the monks. Family members and soldiers spoke fervently of their wish for peace. When the marchers arrived at their destination, a massive crowd gave them a festive welcome, celebrating the renewed hope for peace.”

Meanwhile, back in Providence, Rhode Island, where Maha Ghosanada resided part time, a group of local religious leaders and peace activists gathered to pray for the success of the Dhammayietra. The religious leaders held a news conference at the New England Buddhist Center, and called for a total ban on the use, production, trade, and sale of land mines.

Am Chom-Pond, a Cambodian native whose adoptive father, Peter Pond, had worked in Cambodia with some of Ghosananda’s disciples, said the Peace Walk galvanized a new generation of Cambodian youth. “Maha Ghosananda was a wonderful inspiration,” Chom-Pond said, “because he had not taken sides in the fighting between government forces and the Khmer Rouge, putting himself only on the side of Buddha.”

A Unitarian minister read a message from Ghosananda: “Peace is always a point of arrival and a point of departure. That is why we must always begin again, step by step, and never get discouraged. Panna (wisdom) will be our weapons; metta (loving-kindness) and karuna (compassion) our bullets; and sati (mindfulness) our armor. We will walk until Cambodia and the whole world is peaceful.”

In November, Maha Ghosananda attended the **Buddhism and Development of Khmer Society** conference at a temple on the outskirts of Battambang city, about 30 kilometers from Khmer Rouge held territory. About 350 people attended the conference including monks, nuns, government officials and NGO workers, who debated philosophical issues. The conversed, joked, meditated, chanted and parted with fresh conviction that Buddhist values can provide a foundation for peace and development in Cambodia.

Supreme Patriarch, Tep Vong attended the conference, and said, “Conflict within individuals is linked to conflict within the nation.”

Maha Ghosananda addressed the crowd and said, “If a driver is not sober how can he drive a car? If you don’t calm your spirit, you cannot bring peace to the country.”

Queen Monineath Sihanouk attended the first morning of the seminar, and released two large turtles into the monastery pond.

They screened Alan Channer's film **The Serene Smile**.

In his free time between conference sessions, Maha Ghosananda visited a refugee family that had returned to their previous home, where the family lived on small plots that were subject to heavy flooding, in a bleak landscape. Ghosananda blessed the family. [23]

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### **BODHI TREES DHAMMAYIETRA**

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Ghosananda turned his attention to illegal logging and environmental devastation in 1996.

Dhammayietra V, held in 1996, focused on deforestation and the link between militarism, illegal logging and the ongoing civil war. Maha Ghosananda pointed out the link between healthy forests and the vitality of the Buddhist order. The walk took place against a background of continued violence as the Khmer Rouge continued to fight with the Phnom Penh government throughout the year with thousands of Cambodian casualties.

Seven hundred people took part in the Dhammayietra V through some of the provinces most damaged by deforestation. They planted 2,000 trees along the pilgrimage. They printed 90,000 fliers on deforestation, and distributed them along the walk.

They also gave public talks in the villages thorough which they passed.

Maha Ghosananda stressed the Buddhist values as a basis for social reconciliation and compassion, encouraging the listeners to “remove the land mines of hatred from out hearts.”

He explained that the forests and the Buddhist religion are closely linked. Buddhist monks have lived under the trees and wandered in the forests for millennium, and the forest is the environment which has fostered great teachers.

The Buddha was born, attained enlightenment and passed away under the trees. Sitting peacefully in the shade of a tree, Maha Ghosananda explained how the trees participate in meditation: “Breath. In Buddhism, peace means to breathe, in and out. To live is to breathe, without this peace, there is no life. We walk every day. This peace walk is the same. Without walking, you have no life.”

“When we respect the environment, then nature will be good to us,” he said. “The trees are like our mother and father. They feed us and nourish us: provide us with everything – the fruit, the leaves, the branches, the trunk. They give us food and satisfy many of our needs. But if we just cut down the trees it won’t rain anymore. The trees make it rain. So on the Dhammayietra we are spreading the Dhamma of protecting ourselves and protecting our environment, which is the dhamma of the Buddha.”

### **Gethsemane Encounter in July.**

The Gethsemane Encounter was held at the Trappist monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemane in Kentucky. As the home of the great spiritual writer Thomas Merton, Gethsemane is perhaps the most renowned monastery in America.

The Gethsemane Encounter was held in honor of Thomas Merton’s work for dialogue and understanding between Catholics and Buddhists. The conference was sponsored by Monastic Inter-religious Dialogue (MID). [24]

Maha Ghosananda delivered a paper on “The Human Family.”

“We Buddhists must find the courage to leave our temples and enter the temples of human experience, temples that are filled with suffering,” he said. “If we listen to the Buddha, Christ of Gandhi, we can do nothing else. The refugee camps, the prisons, the ghettos, and the battlefields will then become our temples. We have so much work to do.” (See the appendix for text of The Human Family.)

Afterward his presentation, a Japanese Zen monk named Eishin Nishimura, spoke to the gathered monks and nuns, and described his own journey to the refugee camps in Thailand some

years ago. “There was little for the Cambodian refugees to do in the camp,” he recounted, but he noticed a makeshift Buddhist temple made of bamboo, set up in one corner of the refugee camp; and inside the bamboo temple, a single Buddhist monk sat in meditation.

Turning directly to Ghosananda, Nishimura exclaimed: “That man was you! My question is: What were you doing there?”

Ghosananda replied: “I was making peace with myself so I could share it with others.”

Ghosananda did not engage in conversation and debate. When various Christians tried to draw Ghosananda out on practical questions of resistance to injustice, he refused to engage in detailed discussions of tactics and strategy and repeated the pithy wisdom of the Buddha to make peace with oneself.

At the end of the conference, Maha Ghosananda led the monks and nuns in silent walking meditation to the grave of Thomas Merton, where he stood alone behind the cross as the others gathered around, as he had led marchers for peace through war-torn Cambodia.[25]

Other activities at this time:

\* In September Maha Ghosanda was in Rangoon, Burma where he met with Aung San Suu Kyi and Buddhist Sangha officials.

\* Then later in the year, he met with Catholic Bishop Ruiz of Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico.

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## **KHMER ROUGE RECONCILIATION**

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The Dhammayietra VI of 1997 was a milestone in reconciliation between Khmer Rouge and Government forces, in which Maha Ghosananda urged forgiveness and reconciliation for Khmer Rouge forces who repented and renounced violence. He dramatically modeled this reconciliation by giving a blessing to Ieng Sary, a senior Khmer Rouge leader, third in command to Pol Pot.

Dhammayietra VI retraced the path of the tragic third walk in which several people had been killed. It traveled from Battambang to Pailin, ending in Banteay Meanchey.

Ieng Sary defected with his battalion a year earlier. His headquarters in Pailin was a former Khmer Rouge stronghold, and was now slated for 'reintegration.' As Maha Ghosananda and the peace pilgrims assembled in Pailin, Khmer Rouge families, unfamiliar with Dhammayietra, watched the procession curiously and sometimes with a welling up of emotion.

In a moving reunion, the Khmer Rouge officer who had released the Dhammayietra hostages in 1994 met with the organizers. This time the walkers reached Pailin without incident and were welcomed by Sary before continuing on to their final destination. [26]

Sary, Pol Pot's second-in-command during the genocidal reign of the Khmer Rouge, welcomed Ghosananda and his followers into Pailin. Ieng Sary presented himself to Maha Ghosananda for a blessing, on March 26, 1997 as Dhammayietra VI paused in Pailin to call for peace and reconciliation with the Khmer Rouge. Ieng Sary pledged to lay down his weapons, and this pledge of peace was sufficient for Maha Ghosananda to forgive him and offer reconciliation and blessing. "In Buddhism, when people know their crimes and they ask for pardon, then the Buddha pardons them. We do not know if [Ieng Sary] is lying or not, but the Dhamma forgives people who return to the light and give up fighting," Ghosananda said.

The meeting between Ghosananda and Ieng Sary was brief. Ghosananda sprinkled water from a plastic bottle on a respectful Sary but paid him no special attention.

Both leaders then made their way into Pailin's Wat Kong Kang, perched on the hill on the outskirts of town, for a short prayer session. The sound of landmines being detonated was heard in the distance.

Hundreds of former rebel fighters and their families, decked out in their best and brightest, hovered uncertainly along roads to welcome the march, offering gifts of food, candles and money to the weary walkers. Waiting to be sprinkled with water and blessed by Ghosananda and the Dhammayietra monks, Pailin locals said they were ready for peace and Buddhism.

"We are very happy to see the Maha Ghosananda and the Dhammayietra here because it means the war is really over and we can settle down to a better life," said Dhai Ly, who owns a bamboo shop near Pailin. "In the past we had to move often to the forest to avoid shelling, now the development is starting we are building houses, roads and gardens."

On the following day, about 1,000 Pailin residents gathered along roads for a personal blessing from Maha Ghosananda, who completed a 45-minute circuit of the town, leaving many people still bowing in his wake.

“We have only 90 percent peace now. The other 10 percent is the remaining hard line Khmer Rouge, land mines and unresolved differences between people,” Maha Ghosananda told reporters.

Pailin officials, who had spread the word of the walk’s arrival, bustled along ahead of Maha Ghosananda, alerting people to his arrival.

Ieng Sary held a press conference after Maha Ghosananda left the village, and said that Maha Ghosananda’s presence would reinforce Cambodia’s Peace process: “When we welcome the Dhammayietra we are reinforcing the peace process, which has already begun, by educating the people that Cambodian will not survive as a national unless there is peace,” Sary said. Sary, reiterated his claim that as a key figure in the Khmer Rouge regime, he had been powerless and that he was not responsible for the Khmer Rouge excesses. “I did not show outwardly that I was a Buddhist but in my heart I remained a Buddhist secretly,” Sary told reporters, adding that he had left a Buddhist pagoda as a teenager, disillusioned with religion. “I have no guilt on my mind...I did not give the order to stop religion and destroy the pagodas.”

Locals who had traveled from surrounding villages to greet the peace walk, said they were grateful that after almost 20 years without monks and religion in Pailin, Buddhism was making a come back. “Pol Pot didn’t like the monks,” said Choun Heng, a 64-year old grandmother, recalling the execution and removal of monks from the pagodas.

“I am very happy for my grandchildren to see this walk. I think in the future many people here will practice Buddhism.”

As the walk proceeded into the countryside outside the town of Pailin, the emotion seemed to grow stronger among bystanders and spectators. In the former battle site village of Sala Krao, in one instance, lines of school children gathered along the dusty road as streams of villagers poured in to welcome the walk with flowers and incense.

The walk continued for three weeks through all the former strongholds of the defecting Khmer Rouge units. Traveling through some of the most heavily mined territory in the world,

Ghosananda offered a message to throngs of villagers: “We must remove the landmines in our hearts which prevent us from making peace. The landmines in the heart are greed, hatred and delusion. We can overcome greed with the weapons of generosity; we can overcome hatred with the weapon of loving kindness; we can overcome delusion with the weapon of wisdom. Peace-making starts with us.” [27]

Maha Ghosananda’s activism for peace had helped inspire the Khmer Rouge to end their resistance and seek reconciliation with the government. In 1996-7, the Khmer Rouge split into two factions, one wanting to defect to the government, and one wanting to continue the fight.

Chhieng Keo, Deputy Commander of a Khmer Rouge Division which defected to the Royal Cambodian Army, received a copy of *The Serene Life*, a film through which Maha Ghosananda expresses a message of peace for his compatriots. After seeing the film Keo spoke from the floor to the audience of 300 people: “We can change our opinions in this hall. What I saw here I will take back to my camp. I will tell my soldiers about education in the Buddhist way.”

**Phnom Penh Post** reported 230 peace marchers took part in Dhammayietra this year. [28]

Maha Ghosananda’s willingness to forgive Khmer Rouge leaders included Pol Pot himself. After King Sihanouk proposed national reconciliation in 1995 for all members of the Khmer Rouge except Pol Pot and his military commanders, Maha Ghosananda proposed a Buddhist solution, namely, that Pol Pot and Ta Mok rejoin the national community by entering the monk hood and thereby renouncing violence.

Some human rights organizations criticized him for being “indifferent to the demands of justice”. Amnesty International workers, for example, grumbled that his broad statements of forgiveness avoided accountability and punishment for heinous crimes. Yet Maha Ghosananda believed that the most direct path to the prevention of further conflict lay in modeling forgiveness and compassion as political virtues.

“Reconciliation does not mean that we surrender rights and conditions, but rather that we use love in all our negotiations,” he said. The Cambodian people needed their energies for renewal and rebirth, not revenge. “Don’t struggle with people with men. Struggle with the goals and conditions that make men fight each other.”

Cambodia prepared to hold their national elections. In the political turmoil of 1997, a grenade attack that killed 20 and wounded 100 during a March 1997 rally held by opposition candidate Sam Rainsey outside the National Assembly.

Then on July 5-6 a brief violent coup in Phnom Penh, Hun Sen took over the government, as tanks rumbled down the streets and military personnel looted shops.

Maha Ghosananda again stepped into the fray. In early August, he led monks, nuns and lay people on a peace walk from his temple at Wat Sampeou Meas to the National Assembly, where they conducted a traditional ceremony and meditation as a call for peace. The group also issued a statement to political officials, the United Nations, and the media asking for calm. [29]

Other activities at this time included:

\* He co-sponsored a Free Tibet service with the Dalai Lama in National Cathedral in DC. Friday, April 25, 1997.

\* May 9, 1998. Maha Ghosananda was awarded the Niwano Peace Prize in a ceremony in Tokyo, Japan. The prize is given to individuals and organizations that have contributed to interreligious cooperation, furthering the cause of world peace.

\* This year Maha Ghosananda led two shorter peace walks in Cambodia. Dhammayietra VII was a journey to northeastern Cambodia. One of the themes of the walk was to protect the environment.

Dhammayietra VIII was a walk from Takeo to the King's Palace in Phnom Penh. Its purpose was to encourage a nonviolent election. Maha Ghosananda no longer to part in the Dhammayietra walks after 1998, because of his failing health.

\* Maha Ghosananda participated in the **AFSC/OXFAM Peace Forum** at the World Vision Center in Phnom Penh on May 28. He talked about peace and nonviolence, and explained the basic tenets of Buddhism: Buddha made great efforts for six years to search for the right way to attain happiness and peace; namely the eightfold path and middle way which includes right thought, right view, right speech, right effort,...

He said that "the eightfold path can make us happy and peaceful. But the ways must be the middle ways, not too lax or not too tough. Practices of peace is like harp strings which must not be too loose or too tight, otherwise they will break.

“If a person is peaceful, a family has peace and happiness. A peaceful family makes a peaceful community. A peaceful community makes a peaceful nation. If the nation is peaceful the whole world will have peace and happiness.”

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### **MAHA GHOSANANDA OLD AGE**

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By 2000 Maha Ghosananda was growing old and ill, and no longer able to participate in the walks, which continued without him. His strength was beginning to fail.

He made courtesy appearances at gatherings of religious activists and at peace conferences, to bless the proceedings, but had little to contribute. He attended the **Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders** in August 2000, when two thousand of the world’s religious and spiritual leaders gathered at the United Nations in New York City.

They signed a pledge presented to Kofi Annan, outlining areas in which religious leaders can play an active role in reducing conflict and addressing the needs of humankind. They condemned violence in the name of religion and called on all religions to respect religious freedom.

Venerable Maha Ghosananda had a calming influence on the religious leaders in New York. He blessed the gathering, starting by paying homage to the Buddha and then quoting from his teaching: “To all who suffer, may they be relieved. Just like a mother protects her only child, we must value every human being without limitation.”

“Non-action is the source of all action...We begin with silence, meditation and prayer...We require; karuna, metta, mindfulness; selflessness, the root to make peace, striving not for fame, honor, glory; wisdom, step by step; equanimity; non-duality, non-attachment...the Middle Way of wisdom and compassion.”

In April 2002, Maha Ghosanada attended the Gethsemane Encounter II, at Gethsemane Abbey in Kentucky. Christian and Buddhist monks and nuns gathered to have dialogue, and practice

meditation together. Though Ghosananda had nothing to say, the beaming, joyous presence of the ancient monk left an indelible, unforgettable impression on the assembly of monks and nuns.

James Wiseman, OSB, a Benedictine monk said: “On the eve of our dialogue, Buddhists and Christians gathered together in front of the monastery wall to plant a tree of friendship. When His Holiness the Dalai Lama joined us, he went directly to greet an elderly Cambodian monk, the Venerable Maha Ghosananda, who is the Supreme Patriarch of Cambodian Buddhism. As he approached the Venerable Ghosananda, His Holiness bent over so low that his hands, pressed together in a gesture of reverence, seemed to brush along the tops of the grass. When they met and embraced, the smiles on their faces were radiant with joy and loving kindness.”

“Looking at the Venerable Ghosananda, one has the impression that not only his smile, but his whole body is radiant. It seems as if his skin has been washed so clean that it shines. One can only wonder what this man has seen, what he has experienced of the terrible killing fields in his home country. One thing however is obvious: whatever his experience has been, it has brought forth extraordinary growth in the spiritual life.”

Blanche Hartman attended the monastic gathering as a representative of Buddhism: “We were discussing self-righteous anger to suffering, anger itself as suffering. The conversation went around, and then Brother David Steindl-Rast handed the microphone to Maha Ghosananda, who took the mike. He was sitting, cross-legged, beaming as he always does. He said, “When you know suffering, you know Nirvana,” and he handed the microphone back. It was stunning, and it has stuck with me ever since. I don’t think I understand it, but it stuck with me.”

Venerable Heng Sure, who attended the dialogue, said: “I have another Maha Ghosananda story to tell. At United Religions Initiatives Global Summit in 1997, Bhante Maha Ghosananda was there and beamed through the whole week without saying a word. These would be intimate groups and he would sit at the table and beam in silence and didn’t say a word, wearing his orange hat in the ninety degree weather. The microphone was passed around on the last day, and it was really time for Bhante to say something. Obviously the moment had come and it was time for him to speak. He took the microphone and sat with it for a full minute, and then said, “We are all in the same boat together,” and passed the microphone on.”

“We are all in the same boat together. Whether you apply that to the realm of suffering or the realm of monastics who are in a social context, that is going to be influenced by the world as the world becomes more greedy and confused.”

But his strength failed as he grew older, and he had less and less to say, although his presence seemed to have increasingly profound impact on those who encountered him.

He wouldn't carry on a conversation with you. He was incapable of “small talk” in any conventional sense. But he seemed to become more saintly, more ethereal, even more profound than before. If you asked him a question, he'd respond with a line from the suttas, or a quotation from the Buddha's teachings, that seemed to cut through all nonsense.

Marcia Rose, a Buddhist teacher staying at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Ma, described one such incident in fall 2002 when she encountered Maha Ghosananda: “Yesterday afternoon I went to visit venerable Maha Ghosananda, who is staying at a nearby Cambodian temple....An incredibly glowing human being, Maha Ghosananda is 90 years old now and has been a monk since he was 14. He feels like one of the purest and energetically lightest beings I've ever encountered – so simple, so unpretentious, so aware: a being of pure heart.”

“A year and a half ago I had the great honor of teaching a three-day retreat with Maha in Creston, Colorado. During that time a sweet and deep connection arose between us. But we hadn't known each other very well and hadn't seen each other for over a year. He's such an old man, these days there are things that he doesn't recall, so I asked him if he remembered me. He said, ‘Oh yes, I remember your nose.’ I burst out laughing, and said, ‘It must be quite a nose.’ He responded, ‘It's a good nose.’”

“Yesterday I felt like I was going to see my Dharma grandfather, who calls me Mum. During the visit I asked him why, since he's so much older than me. He replied, ‘We have all been each other's mother at some point, and so you are ‘Mum.’ So yesterday Mum and Grandfather sat and drank tea, laughed a bit, talked a little history about his life, spoke about this retreat and how you are also diligently practicing, and mostly talked Buddha Dhamma. Being with Venerable Maha Ghosananda is a most precious gift that opens and lightens the mind/heart – a gift he selflessly offers simply through his being, or maybe more accurately, a gift he offers in simply being. I find it amazing

and surprising after I've been with him how my heart feels like it has filled my whole body, my whole being and beyond – and it goes on and on.”

During the last few years of his life, Samdech Preah Maha Ghosananda becomes old and increasingly fragile. He spent his last year divided between Cambodian communities in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania, giving blessings to one and all.

In his small temples in the heart of the Khmer community, he sat in meditation as a reassuring presence. When he went out on his walks, neighborhood children followed along behind him, happily chanting his prayer: “Step by Step, every step is a prayer, for peace!”

He sprinkled water on children riding by in Big Wheels. He attended back yard barbecues. He was often in obvious physical pain, but refused to discuss it with others. He shuffled around in his daily activities, smiling, beaming radiant happiness.

“The body is a vehicle, like a car, a plane, or a bicycle,” he said. “We use the body, but we need not allow it to use us. If we can control the mind, then even when we are faced with physical suffering it can remain free and clear.”

Samdech Preah Maha Ghosananda passed away into Nibbana on March 12, 2007 in Lowell, Massachusetts.

## **QUOTES BY MAHA GHOSANANDA**

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**“Peace is possible!” -**

Maha Ghosananda’s motto.

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“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.

A Peaceful Community makes a Peaceful Nation.

And a Peaceful Nation makes a Peaceful World.

May all beings live in Happiness and Peace.”

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“The cause of fighting and war is greed, anger, hatred and ignorance. The cause of peace is morality, concentration, and wisdom. Also truthfulness and gratitude. When we have truth there is no more greed. When there is compassion there is no more anger. When there is wisdom there is no more ignorance. So there is no more fighting. We must keep morality.”

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“The cause of fighting and war is greed, anger, hatred and ignorance. The cause of peace is morality, concentration, and wisdom. Also truthfulness and gratitude. When we have truth there is no more greed. When there is compassion there is no more anger. When there is wisdom there is no more ignorance. So there is no more fighting. We must keep morality.” [Hughes 1998]

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“During his lifetime, the Buddha lobbied for peace and human rights. We can learn much from a lobbyist like him. Human rights begin when each man becomes a brother and each woman becomes a sister, when we honestly care for each other. Then Cambodians will help Jews. And Jews will help Africans. And Africans will help others. We will all become servants for each others rights....Any real peace will not favor East, West, North, or South. A peaceful Cambodia will be friendly to all. Peace is nonviolent, and so we Cambodians will remain nonviolent toward all as we rebuild our country. Peace is based on justice and freedom, and so a peaceful Cambodia will be just and free.”

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“Don’t struggle with people, with men. Struggle with the goals and conditions that make men fight each other.”

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“What can Buddhism do to heal the wounds of the world? What did the Buddha teach that we can use to heal and elevate the human condition? One of the Buddha’s most courageous acts was to walk onto a battlefield to stop a conflict. He did not sit in his temple waiting for the oppressors to approach him. He walked right onto the battlefield to stop the conflict.

“We Buddhists must find the courage to leave our temples and enter the temples of contemporary human experience, temples filled with suffering. If we listen to the Buddha, Christ or Gandhi, we can do nothing else. The refugee camps, the prisons, the ghettos, and the battlefield will then become our temples. We have so much work to do.”

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“I do not question that loving one’s oppressors – Cambodians loving the Khmer Rouge – may be the most difficult attitude to achieve. But it is a way of the universe that retaliation, hatred, and revenge only continue the cycle and never stop it. Reconciliation does not mean that we surrender rights and conditions. It means that we see ourselves in the opponent – for what is the opponent but a being in ignorance, and we ourselves are also ignorant of many things. Therefore, only loving kindness and right mindfulness can free us. [From his essay The Human Family.]

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### **Universal Love**

Many religious leaders preach that there is the only way to salvation. I listen with a smile  
but I do not agree.

Two thousand five hundred years ago, the Buddha told his disciple Kalama:

Do not accept anything simply because it has been said by your teacher,

Or because it has been written in your sacred books,

Or because it has been believed by many,

Or because it has been handed down by your ancestors.

Accept and live only according to what will enable you to see truth face to face.

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“How can ordinary people become peacemakers?” someone asked Maha Ghosananda.

He responded: “Just take care of yourself. Just love yourself. Be compassionate with yourself. Then you are a peace-maker. Peace begins with you.”

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### **THE HUMAN FAMILY**

During his lifetime, the Buddha lobbied for peace and human rights. We can learn much more from a lobbyist like him.

Human Rights begin when each man becomes a brother and each woman becomes a sister, when we honestly care for each other. Then Cambodians will help Jews, and Jews will help Africans, and Africans will help others. We will all become servants for each other’s rights.

It is so even in my tiny country. Until Cambodians are concerned with Vietnam’s right to exist and be free, and with Thailand’s rights, and even with china’s rights, we will be denied our own rights.

When we accept that we are part of a great human family – that every man and every woman has the nature of Buddha, Allah, and Christ – the new will sit, talk, make peace, and bring humanity to its fullest flowering.

I pray that all of us will realize peace in this lifetime, and save all beings form suffering!

Peacemaking is at the heart of life. We peacemakers must meet as often as possible to make peace in ourselves, our countries, and the whole world.

And real peace will not favor East, West, North or South. A peaceful Cambodia will be friendly to all. Peace is nonviolent, and we Cambodians will remain nonviolent toward all as we

rebuild our country. Peace is based on justice and freedom, and so a peaceful Cambodia will be just and free.

Our journey of peace begins today and every day. Making peace is our life. We must invite people from around the world to join in our journey. As we make peace for ourselves and our country, we make peace for the whole world.

#### WHO IS THE ENEMY?

In 1981, the United Nations held a conference to discuss the future of Cambodia. During that time, we held a Buddhist ceremony for peace, at the end of the ceremony, a Khmer Rouge leader came up to me, very cautiously, and asked if I would come to Thailand to build a temple at the border. I said that I would.

“Oh!” thought many people. “He is talking to the enemy. He is helping the enemy! How can he do that?” I reminded them that love embraces all beings, whether they are noble-minded or low-minded, good or evil.

Both the noble and the good are embraced because loving kindness flows to them spontaneously. The unwholesome-minded must be included because they are the ones who need loving kindness the most. In many of them, the seed of goodness may have died because warmth was lacking for its growth. It perished from coldness in a world without compassion.

Gandhi said that he was always ready to compromise. He said, “behind my non-cooperation there is always the keenest desire to cooperate, on the slightest pretext, even with the worst of opponents. To me, a very imperfect mortal is ever in need of God’s grace, ever in need of the Dharma. No one is beyond redemption.”

I do not question that loving one’s oppressors – Cambodians loving the Khmer Rouge – may be a most difficult attitude to achieve. But it is a law of the universe that retaliation, hatred and revenge only continue the cycle and never stop it. Reconciliation does not mean that we surrender rights and conditions, but rather that we sue love in all of our negotiations. It means that we see ourselves in the opponent – for what is the opponent but a being in ignorance, and we ourselves are also ignorant of many things. Therefore, only loving kindness and right mindfulness can free us.

Gandhi said, “The more you develop ahimsa in your being, the more infectious it becomes, until it overwhelms your surroundings and, by and by, it might over sweep the world!” we are each individually responsible for our own salvation and our own happiness. Through our service, we find a road to salvation. This service is nothing but our love for all beings and the uplifting of ignorance into light.

#### PEACE IS GROWING STEADILY

There is no self. There are only causes and conditions. Therefore, to struggle with ourselves is useless. The wise ones know that the root causes and conditions of all conflicts are in the mind.

Victory creates hatred. Defeat creates suffering. The wise ones wish for neither victory nor defeat.

We can oppose selfishness with the weapons of generosity. We can oppose ignorance with the weapons of wisdom. We can oppose hatred with the weapon of loving kindness.

The Buddha said, “When we are wronged, we must set aside all resentment and say, ‘My mind will not be disturbed. No one angry word will escape from my lips. I will remain kind and friendly, with loving thoughts and no secret malice.’” Peace begins in the mind. Yes, we show loving kindness, even for the oppressor.

After a great darkness, we see the dawning of peace in Cambodia. We are grateful for the Buddha’s compassion and light, his realization of peace, unity and wisdom. We pray that this unity, the heart of reconciliation, the middle path, will be present at every meeting and dialogue of Cambodia’s leaders.

We seek to learn and teach the skills of peace. When we live the Dharma, we develop inner peace and the outer skills needed to make peace a reality. With peacemakers of all faiths, we can accept no victory except peace itself. We have no need for personal honor, title or glory.

Loving kindness is alive in every heart. Listen carefully. Peace is growing in Cambodia, slowly, step by step.

#### WE ARE OUR TEMPLE

Many Buddhists are suffering – in Tibet, Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Vietnam and elsewhere. The most important thing we Buddhists can do is to foster the liberation of the human spirit in every nation of the human family. We must use our religious heritage as a living resource.

What can Buddhism do to heal the wounds of the world? What did the Buddha teach that we can use to heal and elevate the human conditions? One of the Buddha's most courageous acts was to walk onto a battlefield to stop a conflict. In the west, we call this 'conflict resolution.'

How do we resolve a conflict, a battle, a power struggle? What does reconciliation really mean? Gandhi said that the essence of nonviolent action is that it seeks to put an end to antagonism, not antagonists. This is important. The opponent has our respect. We implicitly trust his or her human nature and understand that ill-will is caused by ignorance. By appealing to the best in each other, both of us achieve the satisfaction peace. We both become peacemakers. Gandhi called this a "bilateral victory."

We Buddhists must find the courage to leave our temples and enter the temples of the human experience, temples that are filled with suffering. If we listen to the Buddha, Christ, Gandhi, we can do nothing less. The refugee camps, the prisons, the ghettos, and the battlefields then become our temples. We have so much work to do.

This will be a slow transformation, for many people throughout Asia have been trained to rely on the traditional monkhood. Many Cambodians tell me, "Venerable monks belong in the temple." It is difficult for them to adjust to this new<sup>2</sup> role, but we monks must answer the increasingly loud cries of suffering. We only need to remember that our temple is always with us. We are our temple.

### **Enlightened Shade, Enlightened Life**

In the dry season, absence of wind, in the middle of rice field,  
The heat is enormous, but the tree can still bare such an ordeal respectfully.

Look! Admire the tree that provides cool shade to men and animals,  
Always tolerant of the sun's rays, in accordance to her nature.

Likewise, the protector provides comfortable shade for others,  
He possesses the quality of endurance, struggle for hardship.

Admire the parents! Both of them are protectors of the children,  
How have they endured the suffering.

Enlightenment that is achieved by gigantic endeavor,  
Will always be the shade of heart.

(Buth Savong, 2003)

[1] **Buddha and Vision**, published by Cambridge University Religious Department,

[2] Maha Ghosananda is reportedly born on May 23, 1913, according to the official obituary released by the Internal Community of Khmer Buddhist Monks Center, in Massachusetts. Most published accounts list his birth date as 1929.

The discrepancy may be accounted for by the possibility that Cambodian authorities gave him a false birth date in order for him to qualify for admission to the doctorate program he applied for in India in 1953.

[3] **Southeast Asia: An Introductory History**, Milton Osborne, p50.

[4] **The Sea Wall**, Marguerite Duras

[5] This is a speech Nichidatsu gave in August 6, 1956. I quote from it as representative of the teachings Ghosananda would have received from his mentor.

[6] "In This World, Hate Never Yet Dispelled Hate", A Remarkable Life, **Insight Journal**, Fall 2004

[7] The Political Nature of Democratic Kampuchea, Kate Freison, 1988, on-line publication.

[8] **Step by Step**, ed Jane Mahoney and Philip Edmonds.

[9] Kathryn Poethig, "Transnational in Cambodia's Dhammayietra", **History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia**, ed John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie]

[10] Dhamma Revival in Cambodia, **Forest Sangha Newsletter**, Dr Peter Carey.

[11] Jakusho Kwong Roshi, Sonoma Mountain Zen Center, speaking at Providence Zen Center. On-line.

- [12] Kathryn Poethig, “Transnational in Cambodia’s Dhammayietra”, **History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia**, ed John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie.
- [13] “Cambodian Buddhists Elect Patriarch”, **Providence Journal-Bulletin**, July 30, 1988.
- [14] **The Future of Peace**, Chapter 6, by Scott Hunt, Harper Co, 2002.
- [15] Kathryn Poethig, “Transnational in Cambodia’s Dhammayietra”, **History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia**, ed John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie.
- [16] “Washing Away the Blood, Elizabeth Bernstein, **Forest Sangha Newsletter**, July 1992.
- [17] **A Moment of Peace – A Glimmer of Hope**, a report by Bob Matt and Liz Bernstein.
- [18] The Ambivalence of the Sacred, R Scott Appelby.
- [19] Kathryn Poethig, “Transnational in Cambodia’s Dhammayietra”, **History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia**, ed John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie.
- [20] Kathryn Poethig, “Transnational in Cambodia’s Dhammayietra”, **History, Buddhism, and New Religious Movements in Cambodia**, ed John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie.
- [21] Cambodia’s Nobel Nominee, **Forest Sangha Newsletter**, January 1996, Alan Channer.
- [22] Alan Channer, **For A Change**, 1996.
- [23] Alan Channer, 1996 **For a Change**.
- [24] Tape recordings of the Gethsemane Encounter are on file in the archives of: Notre Dame University MID 009: Monastic Inter-religious Dialogue: Audio-Visual Material. AMID 22491-22495 X; Gethsemane Encounter 5 tapes 1996-0723. It included a Ghosananda Interview: AMID 22512 CB: 4. Ghosananda Interview 1996/0726] and also a talk [AMID 22509 CB: 2 The Arahant Ideal and its Relation to Socially Engaged Buddhism, Ven Ghosananda and Ven Samu Sunim 1996/0726.
- [25] From “**Monks in conversation**” by LDL **Christian Century** October, 16, 96.
- [26] This section incorporates passages from **Phnom Penh Post**, April 17, 1997.
- [27] **For a Change**, June-July 1997, by Alan Channer.
- [28] **Phnom Penh Post** April 17, 1997, by Tricia Fitzgerald, Dhammayietra Peace Walk
- [29] **Mind, Heart, and Soul in the Fight Against Poverty**, by Katherine Marshall and Lucy Keough.