

A moment of peace, a glimmer of hope

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

It was in the spirit of “slowly, slowly, step-by-step” that Ponleu Khmer (a group of over four hundred Buddhist monks, nuns and lay people), left Angkor Wat, Cambodia’s national shrine, on the afternoon of May 4, 1993. It was the first steps of a three hundred and fifty kilometer, cross-country journey through the war-torn provinces of Siem Reap, Kompong Thom and Kompong Cham to the capital city of Phnom Penh. It was the beginning of a walk for peace in areas of Cambodia which have known nothing but war ever since the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in October, 1991. The sixteen day walk took place on the eve of the UN-sponsored national election, and it proceeded through the heart of Khmer Rouge territory at a time when the Khmer Rouge was attempting to discourage citizen participation in the voting through public denouncement of the election and threats of violence.

The Dhamma Yietra almost ended before it began. In the early morning hours of May 3, as the participants were gathering for a morning meditation, the pagoda in the city of Siem Reap in which they were staying became a battleground.

In the ensuing four hours’ cross-fire, three participants were wounded. A hand grenade was thrown into the room where two hundred participants, including the Venerable Maha Ghosananda, Supreme Patriarch of Cambodian Buddhism and the leader of the Dhamma Yietra, were gathered. The grenade did not explode. When shooting finally subsided, the participants gathered around the beloved Supreme Patriarch who smilingly said, “Buddha saved us.” (Two days later the venerable monk told the Catholic monk among us, “Christ saved us!” with an ecumenical smile.)

The immediate question after this violent episode was, should the walk go on at all? It was the sentiments of Venerable Maha Ghosananda that swayed the group. “Indeed, this is why we must walk,” he confirmed. Echoing his commitment, the most seriously wounded walker also sent word from his hospital bed that the walk must continue. “Please keep walking... so that we may have peace soon.” Some of the organizers suggested riding the first day, through the ‘rough spots.’ On the next morning, the eve of Vesak, which is the highest holy day of Buddhism, a bus-load of over one hundred fellow walkers from various provinces arrived from Phnom Penh. It was soon followed by another bus of Thai participants, both having been delayed, but not dissuaded,

by the fighting. Upon seeing the first bus pull into the temple compound, one of the organizers affirmed, “We can forget about riding. We’re walking!”

The concept of a Dhamma Yietra is as old as the Buddha himself. In the Buddha’s day (over 2500 years ago) he would lead his monks and nuns in long processions across the countryside teaching peace, a path to relieve suffering. The Buddha would walk to areas of conflict. Following in that tradition, the Venerable Maha Ghosananda announced the Dhamma Yietra, in support of peace for Cambodia and peace for the world.

This particular route was chosen due to the ongoing war. “We must walk where the troubles are,” Maha Ghosananda told the participants. Venerable Kim Teng, one of the principle organizers of the walk, further explained the choice of route to the one hundred and fifty monks gathered for the Dhamma Yietra. “We, as monks, must serve our people. We depend on them. Indeed they are our rice bowl; they sustain us. If the people are suffering, we too suffer. We cannot sit and meditate in our temples. We must walk, where the suffering is the greatest, to share the sorrows of our people, to dry their tears. With each step we will build a bridge, a bridge from war and suffering to peace and tranquility. We are not peace keepers like the UN, but peacemakers, so we must walk where there is no peace yet to keep.”

Later, reflecting on the walk route, he told an audience in Phnom Penh, “The road from Siem Reap to Kompong Thom is not far from here. We walked in less than a month. But it is like another continent. There, people sleep in bunkers, fearing rocket attacks nightly. Their eyes are laden with suffering. They came to share their suffering, bearing their souls before we even asked how they were. Yet seeing us walk was healing, like medicine. It was like visiting a sick person. Even if you don’t bring any medicine, the person feels better afterwards, just because of the visit.”

As Venerable Maha Ghosananda has often said, “The suffering of Cambodia has been deep. Years of violence have brought great tragedy. More violence can only bring more harm. Now is the time for peace.” It was a message that was welcomed with tears by the thousands of people who witnessed and participated in the walk. In reflecting on Maha Ghosananda’s teaching, Kim Teng commented, “People were very happy to hear the teaching that peace begins in the human heart, and can begin with themselves. Until now, people had told them that peace comes through

guns. They told us they are happy because they realize they can assume control. I told them how sincerely I do believe that if they have peaceful hearts, it will spread outwards and soon their families, their villages, our country will be peaceful. And through their offerings to us, we could see that people felt peace in their own hearts upon witnessing the walk. This in turn gave us the strength and energy to carry on."

The walkers would usually begin their daily treks at four or five in the morning, depending on the security situation of

the area they were about to enter. Even at four o'clock in the morning, in town or countryside, families would wait outside their huts with a bucket of water, candle and incense sticks. As the monks and nuns filed past, two by two, they would bless the people with water and words of peace. "May peace be in your heart, your family, your village, our country..." In kind, many a walker had her/his feet "blessed" — washed by those waiting alongside the road, wishing them well on their journey. "May your journey be as cool as this water." The incense sticks would then be extinguished in the water as a symbol of dousing out the flames of war, as many such prayers were exchanged. "May the war end now. May we join hands and never know one another as enemies, from this day forward," exclaimed a grandmother as she held her grandchild out to receive a water blessing from a walker. "They want peace as much as we do," answered a nun. One school teacher commented, "When I heard the Dhamma Yietra was walking for peace, I got goose bumps all over ... now that I see you ... to think we might actually be able to have true peace!"

Minefields on either side of the road, temperatures over 40°C (100°F), and rainstorms did little to dampen the spirit of the walkers, or those patiently waiting by the



Venerable Preah Samdech Maha Ghosananda

side of the road to greet us. One day the walkers were caught in a cold rainstorm. As most of the participants ducked into houses to wait out the rain, about fifty monks proceeded with the walk during the downpour. As they arrived at the temple, villagers were kneeling in mud, waiting for the water blessing of the walkers.

Another afternoon of scorching heat, a woman by the side of the road called out encouragement to the sweating walkers, praising them for withstanding the high temperatures. "Your walking in this heat has

GOT to bring peace!" One man answered, "This heat is nothing compared to the flames of war!" His wife added, "I'd walk in heat much hotter than this if it would bring us peace!" Another oppressively hot day one old grandmother by the side of the road said, "Bless you all for walking in this heat!" to which one of the nuns walking answered, "The weather may be hot, but our hearts are cool!"

In many parts of Siem Reap and Kompong Thom the walkers literally traversed a war zone. Not a day went by when the sound of thumping artillery or land mines exploding was not heard. The walkers heard repeatedly the cries of "We have suffered so much," along the road from people with arm(s), leg(s), or eye(s) disabled by the war; or from people living under blue plastic canvas once again displaced from their home villages five to fifteen kilometers away. "May we have peace so that we may return to our homes soon," offered one father, crouching in front of his blue plastic tent. The Dhamma Yietra walked through areas where the UN peace keeping forces are not allowed to travel further than five hundred meters from their home bases 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 their 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."

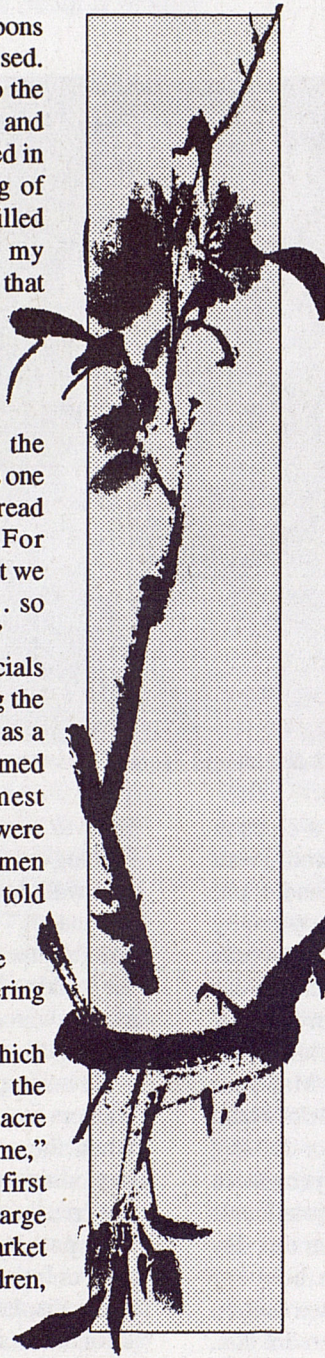
Even soldiers would lay down their weapons as the monks filed past, and ask to be blessed. And at one stop several soldiers came into the temple in which the monks were staying and put their weapons on the floor. They bowed in front of the monks, asking for a blessing of protection. "We don't want anyone to be killed or hurt," one said. "I have no ill will in my heart," he continued. "Please bless us so that our bullets don't hurt anyone, and so that no one else's bullets hurt us."

One of the expressed purposes of Dhamma Yietra II was to encourage a peaceful environment during and after the Cambodian election (May 23-28, 1993). As one monk said, "By walking we seek to spread loving kindness and compassion. For reconciliation after twenty years of conflict we must be able to trust one another again ... so that true peace may prevail in Cambodia."

In some towns local government officials tried to discourage people from welcoming the walkers, somehow seeing the peace walk as a threat to their political interests. But it seemed to have the opposite effect. The warmest welcome was in a town where the people were told clearly 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. And we hunger for peace so much," they said as they made an offering of food to the monks and nuns.

A young man from another village which was told not to receive us, related how the villagers had recently experienced a massacre of thirty people at the temple. "But this time," he said, "he couldn't stay away. It is the first time we have dared to gather together in a large group. This time everyone is here. The market is closed, people left their jobs, their children, to come receive you. We are so grateful that you have come to help us find peace.

The UN has sent people from all over the world to keep peace, but it hasn't worked. All we have left is the monks and Buddhism. If they help us, it shouldn't be so difficult to make peace. They must lead us out of this mess of killing one another. If we just think of killing and revenge, it will never end. The monks must guide us."



By the time the Dhamma Yietra reached the city of Phnom Penh, a city tense with the fear of violence, its numbers had swelled to over three thousand people as many spontaneously joined the walk. A coalition of women's groups, student associations and human rights groups coordinated the walk through the streets of Phnom Penh, as people from all walks of life spontaneously joined in.

"I saw the walk in front of my office, and I just had to join. I couldn't keep it 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," said one Cambodian worker from an international organization. Another added, "People were so afraid of the elections. Here in Phnom Penh they had started to stockpile rice ... but the walkers marched through the streets of the city holding silent meditations for peace at various key points. Rain or scorching heat, thousands joined each walk. After fifteen minutes of silence at what is usually a busy traffic intersection, a boy leaned over and asked, "Do you have peace?" An elderly man who had walked all the way from Siem Reap chanting one phrase in Pali, the ancient language of Buddhism, teaching it to many on the way, overheard and answered with his oft-repeated prayer, "Nanti santi barange sok kang" — there is no greater happiness than a peaceful heart.

On the morning of May 24, Prince Sihanouk greeted the walkers with words of deep gratitude for the Dhamma Yietra. In front of the Royal Palace, the walkers again meditated in silence, praying that all beings be free from suffering, fear, and sorrow. Then the Prince made a solemn plea to all of his compatriots for peace and called on all parties to "put an end to violence and hatred, and take out the spirit of vengeance from this day forward."

Days earlier on a lonely stretch of road which has known no peace for the past twenty-five years, a farmer cradling his young son said, "If the Dhamma Yietra brings us even a moment of peace ... ahhh, I offer my deepest gratitude. For then we can hope." ☉

This field report from Cambodia was compiled by: Bob Maat, S.J. and Liz Bernstein of the Coalition for Peace and Reconciliation; and Yeshua Moser, of Nonviolence International.