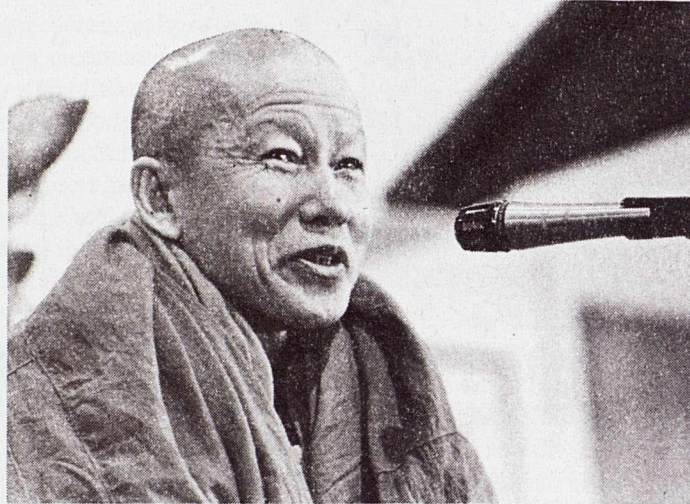


“We are Never Discouraged”



*Ven. Maha Ghosananda
continues to walk for peace*

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Dhammayietra III, the Cambodian walk for peace and reconciliation, began April 24 on a note of hope. More than eight hundred people assembled in Battambang city for a week of training in non-violence—monks, nuns, Cambodian citizens, and a small contingency of foreign clergy and laypeople representing a variety of religions and civic organizations.

For three days, Samdech Preah Maha Ghosananda, Cambodian Supreme Patriarch, led the Dhammayietra through Battambang city. Monks mindfully beat on drums. Walkers raised up banners proclaiming, “More violence can only bring more harm... Now is the time for peace.” Residents crowded onto the city streets, lining the pathways with buckets of water, waving incense, casting flowers, and queuing to receive the Dhammayietra’s blessing. “May we live in peace.... as cool as this water!” one villager said. Cambodia has known civil war for over two decades.

Early on the morning of the fourth day, Ghosananda led the walkers onto the highway and out beyond city limits. The Dhammayietra was to proceed along Route 10, through controlled territory and some of the world’s most heavily mined areas, and on to Khmer Rouge headquarters in Pailin. The recent increase in military conflict in Cambodia’s northwestern provinces had brought Samdech Preah Maha Ghosananda to choose this route. “We must walk where peace is most needed,” he said.

On the fifth day, without warning, the walkers were caught in crossfire between royal government and Khmer Rouge forces. In the melee to follow, one monk and one nun were killed, and several Cambodians wounded. Six foreigners who had joined the walk were briefly taken hostage by Khmer Rouge soldiers, to be released several hours later with apologies.

Maha Ghosananda, a 1994 Nobel Peace Prize nominee and a onetime student of Mahatma Gandhi, proclaimed that the Dhammayietra must continue despite the tragedies. “Peace will come slowly,” the monk said, “It is coming step by step.”

Peace has indeed come slowly to Cambodia. Military conflict began late in the 1960s, as the Vietnam War spread across Cambodian borders. Extensive U.S. and internal bombings contributed to destabilization of the Cambodian government. In the years to follow, a series of political and military conflicts festered into a national holocaust, resulting in the death of more than a million Cambodian citizens and almost complete destruction of the Cambodian infrastructure. Today, Cambodia remains among the world's poorest nations. Civil war and factionalism rage on, despite last year's U.N.-sponsored elections that were supported by over 90% of the nation's populace.

As Dhammayietra III continued and guerilla attacks escalated, Maha Ghosananda joined Cambodia's King Sihanouk in calling for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire, to be followed by round-table talks between royal government and Khmer Rouge leaders. The Dhammayietra has always been inter-religious and non-partisan in spirit; it calls for all sides to lay down arms and put selfish goals aside, in an effort to promote peace and reconciliation. "Hatred can never be appeased by hatred. It can only be appeased by love."

Dhammayietra III proceeded for three weeks, concluding a week ahead of schedule, due, in part, to repeated military encounters. The Pailin destination was never reached. In the end, a long, thin procession of some 1,200 saffron-robed monks, white-robed nuns, lay people and villagers walked peacefully and quietly into Siem Reap town, then on to the site of the ancient and majestic Angkor Wat temples. On May 16 a closing ceremony took place below the temples' central tower, with chanting, speeches and public prayers. The Phnom Penh Post reported that a double rainbow appeared overhead.

Several weeks after the Dhammayietra's conclusion, Maha Ghosananda led a contingency of Buddhist monks to peace talks held in Pyongyang, North Korea, and again to a second round of talks held in Phnom Penh. Both rounds of talks ended prematurely and without consensus.

A foreign reporter queried Maha Ghosananda as to whether he had ever been discouraged during his twenty-five years as leader of the Cambodian peace movement. The monk replied, "It's like breathing in and breathing out. Breathe out, you die. Breathe in, and you are born again. So each and every day, our journey for peace begins anew. We are never discouraged." ☉



Dharma Circle

by *Elise Dirlam-Ching*

In near stillness
only nostrils and bellies
softly flaring falling
and a flutter at the toes of Buddha
ghost of incense
memory of flame:

Silence tumbles over silence.

Who knows
that the next one's throat
has tightened on a loss
another's loins cramp against desire
another's mind is just
this moment a sprung trap?

Startle of wood
bodies bow
circles scattering
except the one
that holds the stillness.

*Biographical note:
Elise Dirlam-Ching
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