

ACROSS

Cambodia

FOR

Peace

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The Dhammayietra is an annual pilgrimage across Cambodia, led by Maha Ghosanada to bring peace and reconciliation. This year an election, considered part of a transitional process to democracy, was being held in July. A second Dhammayietra was initiated, to carry the message of nonviolence during the campaign season.

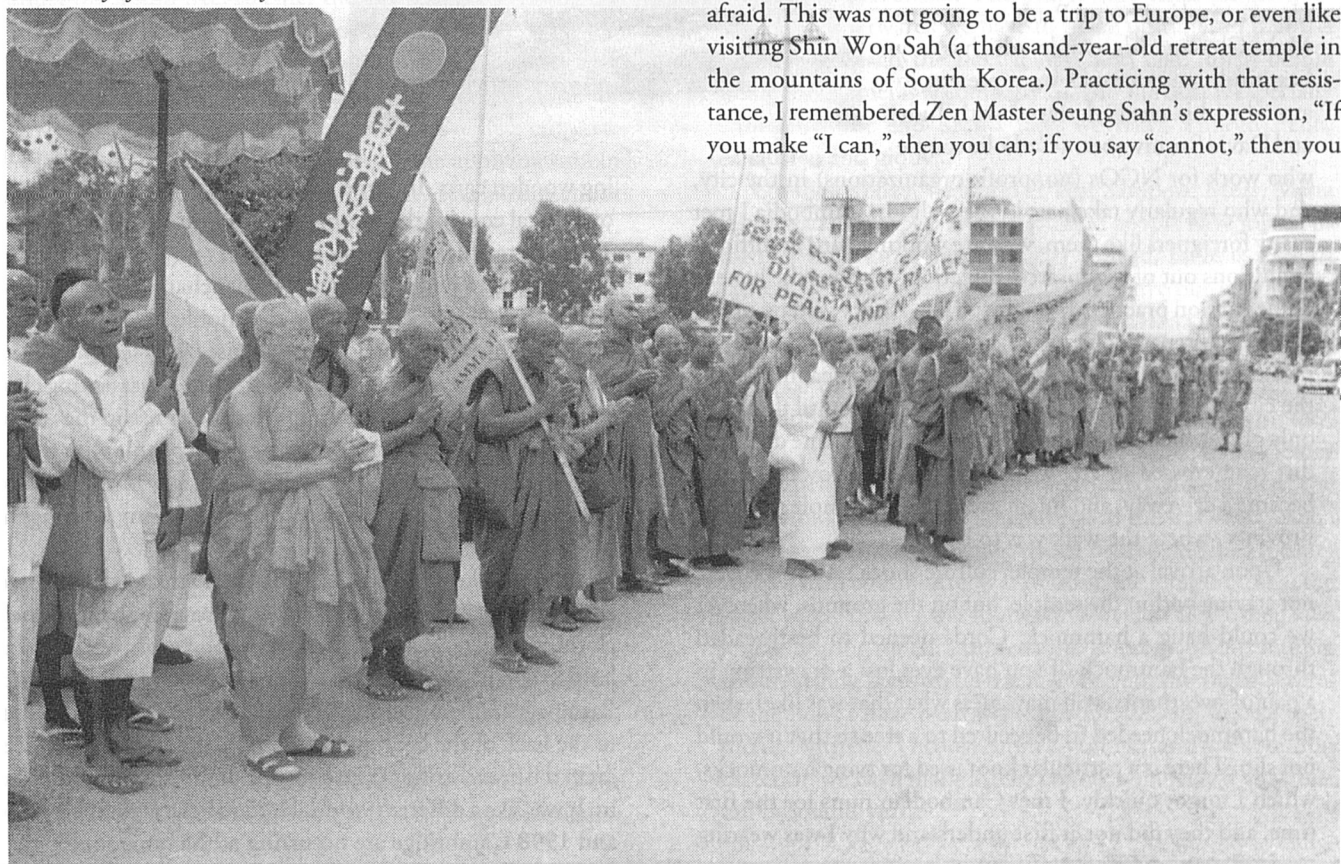
This summer I had no plans. Not making anything, everything soon appeared!

I was doing a one day retreat at the Houghtons' cabin in Lexington, Massachusetts. The cabin is surrounded by conservation land, outside the city. That night, Dyan Houghton came out to the cabin with a message: "Maha Ghosananda is in town, and he is asking for you." So, my practice was in the city, after all.

Maha Ghosananda was visiting only overnight; before he left in the morning, we had breakfast. Maha Ghosananda spoke about his upcoming Dhammayietra for peace during Cambodia's first elections. He said, "Please come." Then, he put money on the counter, meaning, he really does want me to come; buy the ticket. Before I had much chance to check in, he had left. Should I go or not? The Zen Center is not so busy during the summer; maybe this is possible. So, I resolved, if I am able to get a good ticket, if I can get all the necessary immunizations, if the Zen Center business is well taken care of, then I will go. If not, then not. All of this business was concluded much more quickly than expected. The tickets, the immunizations, even the Zen Center business wrapped itself up more smoothly than anticipated.

The only obstacle was my own fear. Reading the news reports of violence in Cambodia, the State Department Advisory, and the Center for Disease Control report, I became afraid. This was not going to be a trip to Europe, or even like visiting Shin Won Sah (a thousand-year-old retreat temple in the mountains of South Korea.) Practicing with that resistance, I remembered Zen Master Seung Sahn's expression, "If you make "I can," then you can; if you say "cannot," then you

The last day of the Dhammayietra, in Phnom Penh.





Above: A bodhi tree at a Cambodian temple

Right: Ji Hyang Sunim with Cambodian nuns at Wat Phnom, the temple built at the point where Phnom Penh was founded

cannot. Which one do you like?" Without taking a risk, breaking open their shell, seeds would never grow. There is so much possible in the situation; also, there is the Great Vow. So I went.

The travel was long and not comfortable; thirty-six hours of flying and airport time, just to get to Bangkok; an overnight there, then another flight to Phnom Penh. We traveled together. Maha Ghosana taught me then, by being completely relaxed and at peace throughout it all. Upon arrival in Phnom Penh, we went to Maha Ghosana's temple, which is very beautiful; many monks were present to attend to his needs. I stayed with Judy and David Saumweber, a Catholic couple

who work for NGOs (nonprofit organizations) in the city, and who regularly take part in the walk. In Cambodia I met many foreigners like them, who are working hard in difficult conditions out of bodhisattva direction, without the benefit of meditation practice. It was inspiring. After two days of rest and basic preparations in the city, we took a pick-up truck into the country to begin the walk. The road leading out of the city was paved; the road became rougher, until there was only gravel. The gravel road continued and became dirt. The dirt road crossed several wooden bridges, narrowed until it became a driveway, and finally we reached a temple in Takeo Province, where the walk was to begin.

Upon arrival at the temple, culture shock set in. We were not staying within the temple, but on the grounds, wherever we could hang a hammock. Cords needed to be threaded through the hammock (if you have ever lost a drawstring in a pair of sweatpants, you may guess what that was like); then the hammock needed to be secured to a tree so that it would not slip. There is a particular knot used for tying hammocks, which I forgot quickly. I met Cambodian nuns for the first time, and they did not at first understand why I was wearing



gray instead of white. Yet, with persistence, and the compassion of my fellow travelers, all these things were no problem.

That night we had a presentation on landmine awareness. There were slides: this is what a mine looks like, this is unexploded ordnance. This is called a "corn cob mine" because it looks like a corn cob; this is called a "TV mine" because it looks like a TV. Some of these mines are from the Soviet Union, some from Vietnam, some from China, some from the United States. If you find yourself in a mine field, stay put unless you can clearly retrace your footsteps, and call for help; better one day spent in a minefield than a life paraplegic. Although there were no landmines on our route, it was sobering.

The next morning, we were awake at 4:00 am. Time to untie and pack away the hammock, fill water bottles, return our backpacks to the bus. I had the option either of walking with the foreigners, or the Cambodian nuns. I was very happy to walk with the nuns. Even though we couldn't speak with one another much, our practice and just-doing-it walking five hours a day made for deep friendship. Interspersed throughout the lines were banners—"A peaceful heart makes a peaceful person," "A peaceful community makes a peaceful nation," "May all beings be at peace." It was 6:00 am when we set off. We shared the road with oxen, pull-

ing wooden carts. In some cases, the carts were pulled by the ox's metal cousin, the motorbike. Pigs cut through our line. There were chicks running around. As we passed along the road, villagers had their hands in hapchang (hands raised, palms together) and knelt for the monks' blessing. There would be three sticks of burning incense (representing desire, anger, and ignorance) above a pail of water, representing clear mind. The monk would extinguish the incense in the water, then use a spray of palm leaves to bless the people with water. Since it was ninety degrees, children especially loved this, and sometimes ran along the street to catch as many blessings as possible!

As we walked, the road stopped at a stream that crossed rice paddies. Some walkers waded through, soaking their clothing. There was also a ferry, composed of two sampans lashed together with cord, boards nailed on top to form a raft. Passengers pulled it across by means of a rope, as a ferryman in the back of the boat, poled it across. His young daughter sat in the prow, using a cup to scoop out the water that washed in. It was like a different world. Hard to believe that this scene and 1998 Cambridge are occurring at the same time.

The warmth of the people is something I will always remember. The older nuns taking my hand, and smiling. Another friend sharing her umbrella, under the hot sun. Long before we reached the temple where we were to have lunch, the traditional music could be heard. Temple women gathered to meet us, and then there would be a wonderful lunch. All this in a country where, materially, people do not have very much.

Before any meal, upon arriving at the temple, we would circumambulate the wat (temple). Since the wat area was paved with concrete, and clean, it was often used for drying vegetables. At one temple, we walked through drying red peppers; at another, green onions. Then there would be chanting in Pali, including a meal offering. I regretted not knowing the prayer, thus being able to thank the Khmer people for their abundant hospitality. Some foreigners spoke on behalf of all of us, and I at least managed “aucun”—thank you.

These temples were the centers of their community, and there were always many children. They were fascinated by foreigners; some had never seen one before. Asleep or awake, we were surrounded by children. As I drew pictures of flowers, dogs, cats, stars, birds, clouds, and monks, they taught me Khmer.

By the second day, walking began to fall into a rhythm. The road itself, dust, rocks, boards, and ridges. It kept my practice honest. A lapse of mindfulness, and I would trip. Walking step by step, the picture of the Buddha’s footsteps that Maha Ghosananda keeps in his office came back to me. When the Buddha was deciding whether to leave his seat under the Bodhi tree, to enter the city and teach people, he did walking meditation. That point is “just do it.”

By the third day, a few blisters have appeared. We are all feeling the impact of the heat. To compound it, much of our time is spent on the wat grounds, where it is temple etiquette not to wear a hat. These nuns observe me applying suntan lotion; one asks to use it for her headache. The lotion cannot help her. Another has rheumatism; I share a muscle relaxant. I wish to do more for these tiny, courageous old nuns, who are walking fifteen kilometers each day in the heat, wearing only flip-flops. At least the moleskin, gauze bandages and tape are of use against their blisters.

After walking the fourth day, we rest near the Mekong River, where a path crosses the grassy field. There are small colored butterflies, bicycle bells sounding. The bushes are white with nuns’ cloths; many saffron cloths dry nearby in the sun. Having gotten through the larger part of the walk, we are relaxed. At dinner, Yeshua Moser (one of the organizers) walks over. “Murukami Sensei is sick tonight. Will you give the dharma talk with the Samdech?” “When?” “When chanting is over, in a few minutes.” My heart leapt into my throat. Summoning up every bit of “do it” mind, I agreed. As it turned out, Murukami remained sick the next night, and I was again asked to step in.

The talks were formal, given in Khmer every night to the walkers, the temple and the village (the talks were broadcast

over a public address system.) How could a young female foreigner begin to speak in this setting? Even the monk who showed me in was confused at this point; he initially found a place on the floor for me. Maha Ghosananda then motioned to the empty chair next to him—as always, he was completely at ease. Every word I spoke was translated by Venerable Ghosananda with great joy and confidence—and often some value added. When I spoke the first line of the Metta Sutra, Maha Ghosananda translated the whole thing. As I went on with the next few lines, the Samdech offered a commentary on the sutra. With the next few lines, there was a commentary on the commentary. At the end of the talk, Maha Ghosananda taught the crowd, “Only go straight,” “Don’t know,” and “No problem,” and spoke about Zen Master Seung Sahn with great appreciation.

On the fifth day, we had agreed to walk an extra ten kilometers, in order to attend a prayer vigil at which representatives from every party would be present. When we began walking, the sky was completely dark. The Southern Cross and a billion stars hung overhead. Surely, I thought, no one will be by the side of the road this time. As we walked out through the temple gate, onto the road, there were points of light scattered along our path, the candles of people who had gotten up early to kneel by the side of the road, with water and incense, in hapchang. Oxen lowing in the cool night air, the rhythms of the drum and our feet, and silence. A very present morning. It was as I have imagined the Nativity; the climate of something being born.

After breakfast, we walk on to the prayer vigil, where we are greeted by a dozen cameramen, which changes the atmosphere somewhat. The prayer vigil takes longer than expected. Afterwards we have to make up time, so that the monks can reach the next temple and take lunch before noon. The cameras accompany us, and the heat is especially strong. At the end of the day, we reach Phnom Penh, exhausted and giddy.

On the last day, we begin at Wat Sampeau Meas, Maha Ghosanada’s temple. Three thousand people have joined us for this walk throughout the city. Ahead, there is a sea of saffron; behind, a sea of white. Police have put down their assault rifles to accompany the Dhammayietra across traffic. This is the last day of campaigning before the election. The presence of the Dhammayietra makes it possible for the opposition parties to hold rallies in the capital; on this day, no one will throw a grenade. We walk to the Victory Monument, which originally celebrated victory over the Vietnamese, and is now a memorial to the war dead. Maha Ghosananda leads chanting, which rises strong into the city air. We then continue to Wat Phnom, the temple built at the point where the city was founded. We chant there, then take lunch. During lunch, a professional photographer is milling about, selling pictures he has just taken of the walk. Several of the nuns I have been walking with ask him to take their picture with me. Through smiles, walking, and our common direction we have made a deep connection. May it continue ten thousand years.