

Maha and I

RB Stewart

Venerable Maha Ghosananda, Supreme Patriarch of Cambodian Buddhism, passed away on March 12 in Northampton, Massachusetts at the age of 77. Although he was a world class scholar and linguist, his devotion to one of Buddhism's simplest teachings: "Hatred does not cease by hatred. Hatred ceases by love alone" is his greatest legacy. He was initiated as a monk at the age of 14. In 1965, after completing his doctoral degree, he entered a remote Thai forest monastery. He remained there until 1978, when he left his hermitage to meet the waves of refugees streaming across the border, fleeing the genocide in Cambodia. Millions of people died from starvation, torture, or execution, including more than 95% of the monastic population and all of Maha's extended family.

He became a father figure to many Cambodians, and an embodiment of the hope that their traditional culture might yet survive the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge. In 1992, Maha began leading the Dhammayietra—pilgrimage of truth—across Cambodia's warring countryside, where weapons fire and unmarked land mines were commonplace. We must find the courage to leave our temples and enter the temples of human experience, temples that are 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 battlefields will then become our temples. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize several times.

Maha was also a good friend of Zen Master Seung Sahn's and an occasional visitor to our Zen Centers. Many of us got to spend time with this man, who literally glowed with compassion and happiness.

In the late 1990s, I lived in Western Massachusetts, not too far from a Cambodian temple where Maha spent a lot of time. So, one evening after a talk at Cambridge Zen Center, I got the job of chauffeuring him back to his temple, a two hour drive west along Route 2, an old and notoriously dangerous state highway.

Now, I've never really liked driving at night, I was short on sleep, and by the time we left the Zen Center, it was pitch dark and a light rain was falling. Of course, all I could think was "This guy survived twelve years of solo retreat AND the Khmer Rouge. Don't crash the car!" For his part, Maha said "Drive slow. Slowly slowly," and then promptly fell asleep.

To keep myself alert, I did some quiet chanting, thought about his life and what it meant. I thought about my life and what it meant. I touched his hand. I prayed for his health and well being. There was something very tender about giving this saint a ride in my cream colored 1984 Buick Skylark. It was unlike anything I'd experienced before or since.

Maha woke up just before we arrived at the temple (I had driven REALLY slowly). When I dropped him off, he gave me a little gift to thank me for the ride, and invited me to visit the temple again, which I did many times. Eventually my daughter Gaela would also become a frequent visitor to admire the colorful sculptures and flags and look for frogs in the pond at the top of the hill.

Thank you for your gentle presence Maha, I'll never forget it. 🙏

