

By Yos Hut Khemacaro*

Steering the Middle Path:

Buddhism, non-violence and political change in Cambodia

The limitations of the recent, internationally-inspired peace intervention in Cambodia highlight the need for a greater emphasis on peace-building initiatives which are grounded in the local Khmer culture. Buddhism is the sole institution which cuts across the deep political divisions separating Cambodians today. The tendency to see it as a passive religion has often led its great potential to be overlooked by outsiders. Khmer Buddhism's timeless message of non-violence and compassion offers an important platform for promoting constructive social and political change in Cambodia today.

Such a mandate is, however, still seen as controversial by many in Cambodia. Moreover, Khmer Buddhism's inherent conservatism and its slow recovery from near annihilation under the Khmer Rouge leave it poorly placed to challenge prevailing social injustices. Cambodia's monks face real challenges and dilemmas as they seek to reconcile a greater public role with traditional Buddhist edicts requiring them to adopt a strictly non-partisan approach — the so-called 'Middle Path'.

Destruction and revival

Buddhism has always been much more than a religion in Cambodia: it is a social doctrine encompassing all aspects of life. Most Cambodians consider themselves Buddhists. The village-based monastic system which developed over many centuries in Cambodia effectively linked enlightenment with community involvement. Under the direction of monks, *wats* (temple-monasteries) became not only religious centres but also sources of popular education and social services. Buddhism, as a consequence, became the main medium through which the Khmer language and culture was transmitted, explaining why it remains intricately woven into the current social fabric despite Cambodia's tumultuous past.

The arrival of the French 'civilising mission' in 1863 set in motion significant changes in Cambodia's Buddhist culture. The *Sangha* (the formal Khmer monastic institution) was gradually forced to modernise and incorporate western-based teaching methods, although it

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*Clash of unequals: Buddhist monks
and instruments of war*

Source: Mak Remissa



continued to serve as the principal moral and institutional opposition to colonialism. Following World War II, Cambodia's westernised elites continued the transformation of the country from a Buddhist-influenced polity into a secular nation-state. The number of *wats* and monks nonetheless underwent a phenomenal rise at this time, though this was not necessarily accompanied by an increase in the quality of Buddhist practice.

Some suggest that rituals, ceremonies and festivals became increasingly bereft of meaning. Meditation and thinking on Buddhist principles were promoted with less intensity than recitation of the Pali scriptures. Among many monks, the quest for 'inner peace' took precedence over the development of a more socially activist role as had occurred in neighbouring Vietnam. Despite enjoying immense moral authority in their local communities, Cambodia's Buddhist abbots rarely sought to extend their influence into the political domain.

However, the *Sangha* would not remain immune from the deep ideological rifts that plagued Khmer society from the 1960s and 1970s as the Vietnam War spilled over into Cambodia. Some

learned monks took an active part in the political tumult and the *Sangha* fell victim to neglect on the one hand and to western ideologies of both left and right, on the other. By the early 1970s fighting between communists and anti-communists, along with an intensive bombing campaign by the US, was creating severe social havoc across Cambodia.

This turmoil laid the groundwork for the Khmer Rouge's rise to power in 1975 and the virtual destruction of Cambodia's Buddhist culture. Defining religion as reactionary and a tool of the exploiting class, the Khmer Rouge systematically set out to obliterate Buddhism along with the minority faiths of Islam and Christianity. Many *wats* and the bulk of the Khmer Buddhist literary heritage were destroyed over the next four years. Monks, like ordinary people, were forced to pledge loyalty to the *Angka* ('Organisation' — a euphemism for the communist party). Very few of Cambodia's 65,000 Buddhist monks survived the Khmer Rouge's reign of power.

Despite the massive scale of human tragedy, however, the Khmer Rouge only succeeded in destroying the outward signs of Buddhism and

not the beliefs within. Buddhism's recovery during the 1980s would be slow given the decimation of its leadership and moral influence, the lack of resources to rebuild, and the restrictions imposed on Buddhism by the new Vietnamese-backed government which had driven the Khmer Rouge out of power. Although Buddhism was formally restored as the national religion in 1988, and many of the restrictions on it lifted it has never resumed the status and role it enjoyed prior to the 1970s. This can in large part be explained by the decay of traditional values stemming from the war and Cambodia's increased exposure to outside cultures during the last century.

Yet the widespread building of *wats* in contemporary Cambodia, along with popular participation in a wide range of religious ceremonies, indicate that Buddhism remains very strong in people's consciousness. This suggests that Buddhism could potentially play a more active peace-building role than it has to date in Cambodia, although this would require a radical adaptation by Khmer Buddhists to the changes occurring in Cambodian society and the wider world.

Radical conservatism

Khmer Buddhism's inherent conservatism is a reflection of its development in an agricultural-based society. Peasants have traditionally sought to mitigate their economic insecurity through hierarchical patron-client relationships. The implied protection offered by elites in exchange for loyalty under this system has long stifled the development of a strong sense of collective social responsibility in Cambodia. Along with the high value placed on harmony in the Khmer culture, this has served as a strong disincentive among monks and the wider population to challenge the existing social order.

This conservative outlook on change persists in post-war Cambodian society due to low levels of formal education. In this context, Cambodians have become very discouraged about the persisting conflict and many believe that peace — when it finally comes — will come from outside.

The Buddhist clergy continue to place more emphasis on serving as the 'conscience' of society than on actively seeking to transform it. Moreover, many monks are very young and lack both the education and the experience needed to effectively lead their monasteries or to gain the respect of the community.

The Buddha's 'step-by-step' approach to social change has resonance with political notions such as participation, democracy and human rights which have come from outside Cambodia. While these ideas are touted by some politicians as foreign imports, with little relevance to Cambodia, they are also found in the *dharma* (see box overleaf). Buddha himself advocated democracy within the community of monks, citizen participation in government and opposition to tyranny.

Committed Buddhism requires active participation in social and political life, which in turn requires a clearer understanding by people of both their rights and obligations in the society in which they live. In the face of Cambodia's age-old traditions of deference and hierarchy, it is easy to misinterpret Buddhist teachings on forgiveness and justify inaction in the face of injustice. The key lesson of recent years in Cambodia is that peace is not sustainable if injustice prevails. Khmer Buddhists must take their faith out of the monasteries even at the risk of defying Buddhist edicts which have traditionally kept them out of public life.

Steering the Middle Path

Because public activities which challenge injustice are often seen as partisan by Cambodia's leaders, monks have a responsibility strictly to follow the Middle Path. Non-partisan activism in favour of peace walks a fine line between neither endorsing nor opposing any party in a conflict and making clear statements of opposition to policies which lead to violence and suffering. Nevertheless, in Cambodia's current political climate, such a position is still seen as controversial by many.

Many within both the government and the Buddhist clergy argue, for instance, that

The *dharma*: building peace 'step-by-step'

Even though the Cambodian *Sangha* (the formal Khmer monastic institution) remains poorly equipped to address the social dimensions of peacemaking, a bold way forward is outlined in the *dharma* (the Buddhist teaching). The Buddha himself advocated a 'step-by-step' peacebuilding approach which envisaged a broad process of social change as the ultimate goal. The starting point is the quest for inner peace which, the Buddha taught, can only be achieved through a process of instruction, meditation and strict observance of the five precepts — to refrain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and intoxication. As one is gradually liberated from one's greed, hatred and delusion, one attains greater spirituality.

The achievement of inner peace does not result in inactivity, but on the contrary leads to greater creativity in the face of society's problems. Buddhism links personal change to social change by teaching that a peaceful heart makes for a peaceful person, a peaceful family, community, nation and world. It is therefore not enough to simply wish for peace — Cambodians must actively contribute to achieving it, sustained in their relations with one another by the pillars of loving kindness, compassion and wisdom. Even if each Cambodian only follows these ideas partially, the country as a whole will be better for it.

Novice monk



Source: Roland Eng

monks who adopt a more public role are meddling in politics and overstepping the bounds of their religious duties. They also maintain that political problems should be dealt with by the proper authorities who are empowered by the Constitution. These arguments highlight the risks Cambodia's monks take in seeking to play a more active social role, though there are many ways in which they can have a constructive impact on politics and remain non-partisan.

Cambodia's legal institutions are currently far from adequate: there is a pressing need for complementary initiatives to bolster the state's formal system of governance. Domestic violence and land disputes, for instance, are perhaps the greatest source of conflict in rural Cambodia and are often closely linked to conflicts at the national level. Community-based development has traditionally been the basis for social peace in Cambodia and monks are actively involved in a range of initiatives to promote this. This includes training seminars which seek to instill values of human rights and democracy in the community as well as economic initiatives which target the poverty underlying much social unrest.

There is also a need to ensure that the national law is formulated and applied fairly so that all Cambodians may benefit equally. Khmer Buddhists recognise the Constitution as the supreme law of the land. Buddhist groups actively participated in the 1993 Constitutional Assembly, registering their views and concerns as the new laws were debated. Cambodia's monks also have the influence to hold political leaders to account. Recognising the immense moral authority which monks enjoy, political leaders regularly call upon them to bless their programmes. This enhances the public legitimacy of politicians, though all too often monks have not taken advantage of the opportunity offered to instruct political leaders on their duties to the people.

In many cases, however, monks will simply not be listened to. Cambodia's leaders often say that the people are not ready for human

Dhammayietra peace march entering Pailin, March 1997

Source: David van der Veen



rights or democracy. They argue that to call for more human rights is a political act which is not the responsibility of monks. Yet many Buddhists would argue that human rights are not simply a political matter, but are part of the much more fundamental economic and social freedoms guaranteed by the Constitution. The dilemma is that if the people simply wait for the government to offer them their rights they may never have them.

This raises the possibility of more direct involvement by monks in party politics or other forms of political activism in order to put pressure on the government to make changes. This is an issue of legitimate concern for Cambodia's monks who are divided on which approach to take. Ironically, the National Electoral Law authorises monks to vote even though the Assembly of Monks, which has the authority to rule on this matter, was not consulted during the formulation of the electoral law. Certain government officials, who feel they have the support of the monks, are happy that they are accorded the vote though they consistently resist any other kind of political role.

While many monks did vote in the July 1998 elections, others still believe that voting will lead the Buddhist clergy to adopt a partisan position in defiance of their traditional Buddhist edicts. They would argue, however, that this does not necessarily stop monks from instructing the people on the criteria to use when making their choices. Public education campaigns are not incompatible with maintaining political neutrality if their focus is on increasing respect for the Constitution, the highest law of the land.

Other forms of social mobilisation led by monks, such as the *Dhammayietra* peace marches (see box overleaf) have come to be tolerated, if not accepted, by the government. As Cambodians become more socially aware, they will be in a better position to organise themselves and press for political change. Associations for farmers, teachers, students and factory workers, for example, are the key to empowering the dispossessed and replacing the cults of power which exist in Cambodian society. Yet because Cambodia has little tradition of such associations, it will be a long time before people have the courage or knowledge to mobilise themselves.

The *Dhammayietra* peace marches

The *Dhammayietra* ('pilgrimage of truth') peace marches are the most visible expression of Khmer Buddhism's condemnation of violence. The 'army of peace', as it came to be known, made its first historic journey in 1992. A large party of refugees and monks from Cambodia and other countries were led by the Venerable Maha Ghosananda on a four-week march from the Thai border into Cambodia. By the time the army of peace reached Phnom Penh, it was 1,000-strong and had attracted the world's attention to Cambodia's problems.

This massive peace demonstration has become an annual event in Cambodia and traverses some of the country's most insecure regions. Two marchers were injured in 1993 and two killed in 1994 when the peace march made its way through battle zones. Rather than flagging, however, the peace march was reinvigorated by these trials and has continued to bring a message of hope and encouragement to all Cambodians. More recent marches have also raised awareness on issues such as landmines and deforestation: in 1996, 2,000 trees were planted along the march route.

As a rule, marchers must be dressed in civilian clothes and may not carry firearms or any form of party political slogans. They must also attend a pre-march training, where they are informed of guidelines for the march and are given basic training in Buddhist concepts, meditation and ways of handling fear. Military personnel from all sides in Cambodia's conflict are barred from marching, even to protect the marchers. "Non-violence", the organisers insist, "cannot be protected with the instruments of violence."

This 'peace army' has come to enjoy the support of many Cambodians, including some government officials, and has gained a momentum which will prove increasingly difficult to stop. Based on universal values of compassion, non-violence and solidarity, the peace army also serves as a model of social mobilisation for oppressed people in other countries.

Baptism of fire

A new generation of activist Cambodian monks came to the forefront of Cambodian politics in September 1998 during public demonstrations against Hun Sen's allegedly fraudulent electoral victory. Their open defiance of traditional Buddhist edicts and orders from their elders not to participate made them targets of a violent government crackdown. Their fate prompted a mixed reaction: incredulity and outrage among many Cambodians, while others again argued that 'religion and politics do not mix'. Some monks themselves protested that 'if the government wants to keep Buddhist monks from getting involved in politics, they should not allow monks to vote'.

Yet, public actions denouncing injustice are desperately needed in Cambodia, given the very real possibility that war will break out again if human rights abuses continue unchecked. Challenging the powerful requires great conviction on the part of monks who are themselves not immune from pressures and temptations. Cambodia's political fractures have been reflected in the Buddhist community, making it harder for monks to develop a forceful and united stand in favour of peace. In order for their contribution to be constructive they require greater education on the teachings of Buddhism as well as a more sophisticated awareness of the world outside the monastery. Only then can they effectively instruct and provide guidance to the people.

The possibility that peace activism will be opposed with force by the government poses the greatest challenge for contemporary Khmer Buddhism. While the principles of non-violence and neutrality are not open to compromise, the Buddha himself made it clear that social injustices themselves lead to violence. To forsake social change and ignore the causes of Cambodia's persisting conflict will only delay the emergence of a more viable peace in the future. ■

By Mu Sochua

Cambodian women in politics: *breaking through the traditional image*

The socio-economic burdens of Cambodia's transition from three decades of upheaval to relative peace have been disproportionately shouldered by its women. Along with unequal access to educational opportunities and persisting cultural biases, this has proved a formidable obstacle to Khmer women seeking a more active role in public life.

Women as mass mobilisers

During the 1980s Cambodian women played a major role in the revitalisation of their society. Shattered by the long war and the Khmer Rouge genocide, Cambodia suffered further from the international isolation of its new Vietnamese-backed government. At this time, women accounted for some 60% of the population. One third of them were widows. More than half were also the principal breadwinners in their families.

Led by the Women's Association of Cambodia, women were behind a nation-wide literacy campaign. They also took the lead in caring for the thousands of war orphans and in developing a nation-wide system of cooperatives to regenerate local social and economic activity. With women still struggling to meet their families' daily needs, however, only a very few became active in formal politics.

A timid political awakening

The 1991 Paris peace agreements opened the way for Cambodian women to play a greater political role than ever before. The proliferation of indigenous NGOs (some 300 to date, of which over 40 have a women's agenda) marked an important step forward. Khemara, Cambodia's first indigenous NGO, was founded by a small group of women dedicated to a society based on democratic and gender-balanced principles. The fledgling NGO-based women's movement became involved in addressing domestic violence and sexual exploitation and also lobbied for specific articles in the Constitution to ensure greater recognition of their rights.

At the same time, Cambodian women have worked to promote a broader social and human development agenda for Cambodia's reconstruction. This reflects a more comprehensive understanding of the needs of Cambodia's deeply divided society with a particular focus on its largely neglected rural majority. In a society marked by open displays of violence, the peace-building approaches of women, involving diverse initiatives such as peace rallies and petitions,

stand out from the more confrontational tendencies of men and student groups

Through their experience as social activists, women have come to realise that overcoming gender-biased policies will demand a more active political role as well as broader changes in Cambodia's male-dominated society. After the 1993 elections, seven women joined the 120-seat National Assembly and a Ministry of Women's Affairs was created. At the same time, however, virtually no women won posts in the provincial, district and commune-level administrations. While there were twice as many female candidates in the 1998 elections, they still represented just ten% of the total at this level.

Changing mind-sets

The lack of women in official posts masks more enduring problems in Cambodian society. Even when women are elected to official positions, they still face difficulties in breaking into the 'boys' club' and playing a real role in decision-making processes. Behind the formal trappings of the parliamentary system, this still occurs informally in a largely male-dominated world. Here elections and politics are often interpreted narrowly as a means of settling disputes rather than as an opportunity to debate and advance issues linked to broader national interests.

The ability of women to make their voices heard is further undermined by traditional cultural biases against women. Women are still expected to be more soft-spoken than men, and many Cambodians see the maintenance of gender relations which discriminate against women as crucial to the preservation of the Khmer cultural identity. Few Cambodian political parties, despite their claims, have seriously invested in programmes to help women move out of their traditional gender roles. Along with fears of intimidation and a lack of formal education, this saps the confidence of many women.

The huge socio-economic demands still placed on Cambodian women are perhaps the greatest obstacle militating against their greater political role. While there is still a long way to go before women enjoy the full fruits of equality, their growing involvement in Cambodia's political life has injected a new vitality into it and placed a greater emphasis on social issues. ■