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Kathryn Poethig

*California State University, Monterey Bay*, [kpoethig@csumb.edu](mailto:kpoethig@csumb.edu)

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## Locating the Transnational in Cambodia's Dhammayātrā

KATHRYN POETHIG

In the high heat of April 1992, a dusty band of Cambodian refugees and orange-swathed monks walked across the Thai border back into Cambodia after nearly twenty years of exile. Mahā Ghosananda, the elderly monk who led that first Dhammayātrā,<sup>1</sup> had conceived of the walk as a mindful means to initiate a peaceful exchange between former refugees returning and those left behind. They did not know then that the decision to repatriate on foot would blossom into an internationally acclaimed movement.

The massive multilateral buildup toward Cambodia's transition to democracy after the signing of the Paris Agreement in 1991 brought U.N. agencies, election monitors, and a wide range of international development organizations intent on establishing a "civil society" in Cambodia. In the next two years, with this international encouragement, a host of local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) sprung up to address the unmet needs of Cambodian citizens. Unlike any of these first Cambodian NGOs, the Dhammayātrā and its organizing body, the Coalition for Peace and Reconciliation (CPR), focused on the intractable conflict in Cambodia through religious philosophy and practice. It offered a vivid sign of a socially engaged Buddhism: a Buddhist practice of nonviolence that had been forged through contemporary circuits of transnational exchange.

The Dhammayātrā quickly established itself as an annual peace walk. For eight years, a stunning visual assembly of monks in saffron robes and laypeople dressed in white traversed Cambodia's embattled terrain. Thousands of Cambodians lined the roads as the monks passed, ready for the *dik mant* (lustral water blessed by Pāli prayers) and incense plunged into the water to "extinguish the fire of war." Each

evening, the walkers assembled in the local wat for rest and *dharmma* talks by Mahā Ghosananda who reflected on the Dhammayātrā's purpose: "Peace is growing in Cambodia, slowly, step by step. . . . Each step is a meditation. Each step is a prayer." (Ghosananda 1991, 65)

Socially engaged Buddhism is a concept that has gained great currency in both Asia and North America in the last two decades. The Dhammayātrā thrived because of a transnational network forged by its expatriate founders and the prominence of its leader, sometimes called the "Gandhi of Cambodia," Saṃtec Braḥ Mahā Ghosananda. I will show how the Dhammayātrā balanced local legitimacy and strategic transnationalism in its philosophy and practice.

### Engaged, Transnational Buddhism

"Socially engaged Buddhism" is a moniker created by the South Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh in the 1960s to refer to Buddhist social action. Thich Nhat Hanh became well known for his neutrality during the Vietnam War, which earned him a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King, Jr.—and premature exile to France when he was cautioned against returning to Vietnam.

From the beginning, engaged Buddhism was a transnational movement. The term "transnational" gives stress to the phenomenon of a world no longer merely divided into nation-states but also critically defined by cross-boundaried forma-



**Fig. 9.1** Dhammayātrā 1993 (P. Gyallay-Pap)

tions—Appadurai (1990) calls them “scapes”—that may usurp the state’s claims to sovereignty. It has often been noted that religion is one of the oldest transnational institutions—transcending the political boundaries that carve up our world.

Queen and King refer to engaged Buddhism in Asia as “voluntary groups and non-governmental organizations committed to realizing a just and peaceful society by Buddhist means” (Queen 1996, 20). Leaders of these movements, such as Thich Nath Hanh, Sulak Sivaraksa, and the Dalai Lama, share Mahā Ghosananda’s emphasis on both mundane goals (peace in Cambodia) and supramundane goals of Buddhism (*nibbāna*) in their work for peace. Queen and King argue that these liberation movements mark a sea change in Buddhism across Asia in the last two decades (Queen, Prebisch, and Keown 2001). This sea change is part of the trend toward an increasingly global civil society in which political moralities (such as nonviolent approaches to civil conflict) are transmitted by transnational religious movements (Casanova 1994; Keck and Sikkink 1998; Rudolph and Piscatori 1997).

A vigorous cross-Pacific exchange of Buddhist activists since the late-1970s *tūn jī* movements attests to Buddhism’s new transnationalism. Sulak Sivaraksa, an outspoken Thai lawyer, has employed the term “engaged Buddhism” in his Buddhist critique of development strategies in Thailand (Sivaraksa 1988, 1993; Swearer 1996). In the 1980s, American Buddhists were also seeking justification for social activism in their religious practice (Eppsteiner 1988; Jones 1992; Kraft 1992; Macy 1983). The U.S.-based Buddhist Peace Fellowship and other social action groups emerged (Queen 2000). By 1989, the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) was established at an international Buddhist conference to serve this growing network of engaged Buddhists. By the late 1990s, INEB’s membership spanned thirty countries. Saṃtec Braḥ Mahā Ghosananda and the Dhammayātrā, having emerged only since 1992, have appeared only recently in the scholarship on engaged Buddhism (Skidmore 1997; Appleby 2000, 123–140; Moser-Puangsuwan 2000).

### The Trajectory of Cambodian Buddhism

During the past twenty-five years of civil war and revolution, Cambodian Buddhism has been both the hammer and anvil of various political agendas. This chapter is primarily concerned with the late 1980s and the 1990s, a period when international negotiations led to a plan for elections under U.N. supervision, entailing the reintegration into the country thousands of refugees who had been living in refugee camps on the country’s borders. (The mission ultimately failed in its goal of integrating the Khmer Rouge into the plan.)

The story begins in the refugee camps, with Mahā Ghosananda and NGO relief workers. Expatriate relief workers at Site II were greatly divided over the implications of aiding resistance forces fighting against Cambodia’s existing

regime. Bob Maat, a Jesuit brother who had been working in the camps since 1980, attended the ASEAN-sponsored Jakarta peace talks that had convened the four Cambodian factions.<sup>2</sup> There he met Mahā Ghosananda and an entourage of monks who presented themselves as an “army of peace.” Maat recalls that Mahā Ghosananda thanked him for his efforts in the camp and then added, “Why do you help only one faction?”<sup>3</sup> Thus challenged, the Jesuit brother founded the CPR along with Ven. Yos Hut Khemacaro, another prominent Cambodian monk who had been out of the country during the Khmer Rouge regime. After living in France and Australia, Ven. Yos Hut returned to Site II to assist U.N. human rights training. Elizabeth Bernstein, originally an English teacher in the camp, soon joined them as a major organizer.

They secured neutral space for expatriate staff to reflect on the political situation, organizing speakers, videos, and a monthly discussion so that when advocacy was required, there was a network in place. The primary strength of CPR was its vision of a reconciled Cambodia brought together through information exchange between the border camps and Cambodia and training in nonviolence.

The Paris Agreement signed in 1991 called for the closure of Thai camps and repatriation of their three hundred thousand occupants. In order to prepare the *sangha* and Buddhist laypeople for reunification, CPR contacted INEB in Bangkok to develop a series of workshops on nonviolence. They were joined by Yeshua Moser, an American working in Bangkok with INEB, and an NGO called Nonviolence International. Those sympathetic with CPR’s mission sought ways to symbolize and support a reunified Cambodia. Moser recalls that one night, Maat mused, “I was thinking about doing a peace walk in Cambodia.”<sup>4</sup> In the following days, they discussed the idea with increasing seriousness. Mahā Ghosananda, already celebrated as a peace advocate, was attending an INEB conference in Thailand. Bernstein and Moser invited him to participate. In order to initiate dialogue between high-ranking monks in the border camps and Cambodia, CPR and INEB sponsored a workshop in Thailand (Coalition for Peace and Reconciliation in Cambodia and the World 1992). One of the objectives was garnering support for the peace walk. The Phnom Penh-based Mahānikāy *sangharāj*, Ven. Tep Vong, supported the idea at the workshop but retracted his position when he returned to Phnom Penh. Other monks invited to walk also declined. It thus fell to Mahā Ghosananda to assume leadership. He insisted that walkers carry a picture of the former Mahānikāy patriarch Chuon Nath, his mentor and a revered figure. He referred to the walk as the Dhammayātrā, intended to bring peace to Cambodia “step-by-step.”<sup>5</sup>

Only with difficulty would Thai, Cambodian, or U.N. officials grant permission for the refugees to cross the border. But finally, on April 12, 1992, over a hundred refugees and international walkers, including monks from Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Japan, crossed into Cambodia. Daily, walkers were reunited with

long-lost family members. The walkers arrived in Phnom Penh on May 13, Visākhā Pūjā, the holiday celebrating the life of the Buddha. Crowds gathered on the roadside to watch or join in, and by the time they reached the royal palace, their numbers had swelled to over a thousand (Bernstein and Moser 1993).

### Mahā Ghosananda: Exile and Return

Mahā Ghosananda's return to Cambodia inspired a rumor that he was the fulfillment of an old prophecy that after the brutal reign of the *damiḷ* (dark ones or infidels; pronounced "thmil") a "holy man from the west" who was a light-skinned Khmer would appear, and the prince would come back to save his people.<sup>6</sup> Mahā Ghosananda's exile in the West had been a long one. Born the only son of poor farmers in Takeo Province, his gifts and attraction to the monkhood were recognized early. He studied at Buddhist universities in Phnom Penh and Battambang, progressing rapidly to the higher echelons of the Mahānikāy under the tutelage of its Supreme Patriarch, Chuon Nath. In 1951, at the age of twenty-seven, he left for doctoral work at Nalanda University in India. For the next forty years, he would spend little time in his homeland. In India Mahā Ghosananda received his title.<sup>7</sup> There he also met Nichidatsu Fujii, a Japanese Buddhist whose long friendship with Mahātmā Gandhi had inspired him to found the Nipponzan Myohoji, an order dedicated to world peace. At the Fujii ashram in Rajgir, Mahā Ghosananda learned the Gandhian philosophy and practice of Satyagraha that would later inform his work in Cambodia. After fifteen years in India, he visited other wats throughout Asia, returning to Cambodia briefly before leaving for Thailand in 1965 to study in the forest monastery of the meditation master Ajahn (*ācāry*) Dhammadaro. He was there when the Khmer Rouge occupied Phnom Penh.

When waves of starving refugees flooded the border in 1978, Mahā Ghosananda joined an international delegation to Sakeo, a camp occupied by Khmer Rouge and their hostages fleeing Vietnamese troops. He used donations given to him for an airline ticket to France to print forty thousand leaflets of the *metta sutta*, the Buddha's discourse on loving-kindness. These he handed silently from his cloth bag as he walked through the camp. The sight of an orange-robed Cambodian monk in the camp proved so cathartic that many refugees fell prostrate at his feet and wept uncontrollably (Mahoney and Edmonds 1992).

Throughout 1979, Mahā Ghosananda established wats at the refugee camps that lined the Thai-Cambodian border and ordained monks against the orders of the Thai military. Reportedly fluent in ten languages and accomplished in interfaith interchange, he quickly formed alliances with various faith-based organizations.

His work along the border, however, lasted a little over a year. When the Khmer Rouge resistance movement forced conscription of refugees, Ghosananda and Protestant activist Rev. Peter Pond circulated a letter assuring that repatriation

was not mandatory and outlining opportunities for resettlement. Ghosananda offered his wat as a sanctuary for those fleeing conscription. Thousands took refuge there, relinquishing their weapons at the door (Mahoney n.d.). Thai military officials who had quietly backed the forced conscription were furious. Rev. Pond and his son were arrested, but the Queen Mother, a devout Buddhist, intervened on behalf of the monk (Cooper 1981). Rev. Pond reports that Ghosananda visited him in prison and, with characteristic wit, whispered “body of Christ” as he pushed a sandwich and a soft drink between the bars. Banned from the refugee camps, Mahā Ghosananda accepted a U.N. appointment to represent Cambodians in exile at the Economic and Social Council in 1980. Later that year, he resettled in Providence, Rhode Island, where he set up one of the first Cambodian wats in the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Over the next decade, Mahā Ghosananda established more than forty wats around the globe. The exiled *sangha* in France elected him a Sangharāja (Supreme Patriarch) of the Mahānikāy order in 1988.<sup>9</sup> This pointed to a basic division in lines of authority, since the socialist government in Phnom Penh had already made Tep Vong the chief of the Cambodian *sangha*; when Sihanouk returned, Tep Vong would be given the title of Sangharāja. Mahā Ghosananda promised to resign when the overseas *sangha* and Cambodian *sangha* were reunited, and did so in 1992. At that time, King Sihanouk bestowed on Mahā Ghosananda the honorary title of Saṃtec Braḥ.<sup>10</sup>

As one of the few multilingual Cambodian monks able to communicate with the American public, Mahā Ghosananda was quickly recruited as the Cambodian face of interfaith peace activism. At Rev. Pond’s urging, the two cofounded the Inter-Religious Mission for Peace in Cambodia and the World. This led to several meetings with Pope John Paul II and other engaged Buddhist leaders. American engaged Buddhists also drew him into their ambit. His supporters collected his *dhamma* talks into a small book, *Step by Step*, to introduce him to the American public (Mahoney and Edmonds 1992).

### Out of the Temple, into the World: Ghosananda’s Philosophy

As a Cambodian refugee engrossed with his country’s “tragedy of history,” Mahā Ghosananda drew the connection between individual and social suffering that is the strongest feature of an engaged Buddhist philosophy (Ghosananda 1991, 66). Noting that Cambodians are not alone in their anguish—Buddhists in India, Burma, and Sri Lanka also know political strife—he argues that all this suffering is “but a mirror of the suffering of the world.” The means by which the *sangha* addresses this suffering is also engaged. Mahā Ghosananda often notes that the Buddha conducted “conflict mediation” when he walked onto the battlefield between the Śakyas and Koliyas. This Buddha act, argues Ghosananda, should inspire Buddhists to “leave our temples and enter the temples of human experi-

ence that are filled with suffering” (Ghosananda 1991, 63). He notes that Buddha, Christ, and Gandhi offer examples of this. Like them, the monks must “go to the people. They sustain us and feed us and give us refuge, if they suffer we suffer” (Burslem 1993).

What is sometimes called “loving-kindness” (Pāli, *mettā*) is a complex Buddhist concept suggesting ideas such as love, compassion, friendliness, sympathy, and well-wishing. It is Ghosananda’s antidote to the rage and despair of the victims of war. Ghosananda likens loving-kindness to water.

Just like water, it can stay everywhere—in a glass, in the mouth, in the belly. When water boils, it becomes very hot; but if we leave water for some time it naturally becomes cool again. Sometimes we are angry, but if we have loving kindness we can cool down easily. (Ghosananda 1989)

This loving-kindness is cultivated through meditation. For Mahā Ghosananda, the essence of Buddhist *dhamma* is the practice of peacemaking. It requires skillful means, the ability to listen with compassion to the perspective of the one who has done you and others harm, and being mindful and selfless in negotiating a peaceful resolution to conflict. During the Jakarta peace talks in 1988 he called his contingency of monks a “fifth army of peace.” This army of the Buddha, armored with mindfulness, he said, would “shoot the people with bullets of loving-kindness” to disarm the four Cambodian factions. His monks opened daily sessions with prayer and meditation, offered a formal ceremony for peace and unity, and circulated a statement of peace.

As a Buddhist monk highly trained in techniques of meditation, Mahā Ghosananda has promoted walking meditation as a skillful means toward mindfulness. The Dhammayātrā as a walking meditation helps its participants understand that both personal and national peacemaking is incremental (“step-by-step”) and requires mindfulness, compassion, and nonattachment.

### Training the People to Walk

While the Dhammayātrā began as a celebration of the refugees’ return to Cambodia, its practice and underlying philosophy captured the country’s imagination and inspired a second walk. In order to encourage participation in the U.N.-monitored elections in 1993, another walk was organized, starting at Angkor Wat in Siem Reap Province and ending in Phnom Penh 350 kilometers away. At that time much of the province of Siem Reap was still controlled by Khmer Rouge forces, but the region was important for the march because of its deep associations with Cambodian nationalism. The resolve of the Dhammayātrā leaders was tested at Wat Damnak in Siem Reap Town two days before the march began. During meditation, Mahā Ghosananda recalls that they “could hear fighting going on outside



and bullets were fired through the temple walls. Three of our people were wounded, one was shot in the shoulder.”<sup>11</sup> A grenade flew through the window and landed in front of the statue of the Buddha. Everyone but the meditating monk fell to the floor. When it did not explode, Mahā Ghosananda exclaimed, “The Buddha saved us!”<sup>12</sup>

The walkers gained the respect of the U.N. Transitional Authority in Cambodia as they moved through Khmer Rouge territory at the height of pre-election tensions, assaulted by the constant sounds of rockets, mortars, and AK-47 rifle shots. U.N. helicopters and ground troops monitored the walk with grave concern. By the time the marchers reached Phnom Penh, an estimated three thousand people joined the procession through the streets and circled the Independence Monument.

As a further demonstration of Buddhist concern for democratic practices, Mahā Ghosananda organized monks and nuns to meditate for a “just constitution” during the Constitutional Assembly following the election. The venerated monk’s leadership was acknowledged when a coalition of Cambodian NGOs formed the umbrella organization Ponloeu Khmer and elected him as honorary chairman. His wat, Saṃbau Mās, hosted the new Dhammayātrā Center, which shared offices with the Coalition for Peace and Reconciliation in Cambodia and the World and Ponloeu Khmer.

The schema of the Dhammayātrā was established by the second walk. Between 1993–1999, when the “big walks” sponsored by the Dhammayātrā Center in Phnom Penh were replaced by more localized walks, certain features of the walks were replicated. By far the greatest percentage of walkers (and the most disciplined) have been the *tūn jī*, Cambodia’s female Buddhist “nuns.” All participants were required to attend nonviolence workshops before the May event. Each walk lasted about two weeks, covering between twenty and twenty-three kilometers a day. To avoid the heat, walkers started between four and five o’clock in the morning. Along the route, *bodhi* trees were planted. Villagers usually lined the road before their arrival, awaiting a blessing. Meals and lodging were arranged beforehand by designated wats along the route. Villagers provided much of the food, although the World Food Program provided several tons of rice, canned fish, and oil. King Sihanouk and international NGOs donated part of the financial support for the walk and prewalk training; additional donations were collected along the route.<sup>13</sup> Mahā Ghosananda or a senior monk usually offered *dhamma* talks several times each day.

The third Dhammayātrā in 1994 tested the nonviolence preparedness of its walkers. It was routed from Battambang to Pailin through the war zone in western Cambodia, intending to “spread our message of compassion, loving kindness and respect for human rights to all Cambodians who are victims of war” (Mang 1994). Dhammayātrā’s organizers had secured permission from Khieu Samphan, a top-

ranking Khmer Rouge official, to pass through their territory, but renewed combat had shifted the front lines. Several days into the walk, Dhammayātrā walkers grew increasingly anxious as they passed deserted villages and heard distant rocket fire. Warned of intense fighting ahead, Dhammayātrā organizers decided to retreat to Wat Andaek in Biñ Añbil, joining thousands of fleeing families. That night, a “quieter” route was chosen, but it proved no less dangerous. As they tracked single file through the landmined forest, government soldiers joined the walk to protect them, and Khmer Rouge soldiers opened fire. In the mayhem, a monk and nun were killed, several walkers were wounded, and nine walkers (six were foreigners) were taken hostage. After an hour of walking, the hostage party met the Khmer Rouge commander. He motioned for them to sit under a tree and issued an appeal “that you remind all foreigners working in Cambodia that all Cambodians, including those of the Democratic Kampuchea, want peace as well” (Mang 1994). During the following hour of conversation, he apologized for killing the monk and asked about Mahā Ghosananda and the Dhammayātrā. Then he designated a soldier to take them back. Bernstein remarks,

The point of the walk was to meet Khmer Rouge. We had said we would walk until our enemies become our friends, and yet we had been fleeing them from the beginning. At that point we had nowhere to flee to. We were there in front of them. It was the only occasion we had to meet them, and in some ways it was very positive. It opened the door. (Moon 1995)

With the walk in disarray, the organizing committee wrestled with the decision to disband. The walk resumed, rerouted to Siem Reap.

The crisis of the third Dhammayātrā wrought significant changes in its organizational framework. Moser-Puangsuwan (2000) identifies three changes. First, a more disciplined formation program for nonviolent behavior was instituted. Nonviolence workshops multiplied at each subsequent walk. Dhammayātrā organizers set up trainer-training workshops and designed a new curriculum for prewalk workshops. Between 1994–1997, George Lakey ran trainers’ workshops for the Dhammayātrā (Coalition for Peace and Reconciliation 1994). These two workshops became the primary sources for nonviolent training for the Dhammayātrā. The training included stories of individual peacemaking, introduction to the theory of Buddhism and nonviolence, ways to handle fear, role-playing of situations the participants might encounter, and a practice walk around town. Walkers were required to sign a pledge stating

I will maintain a discipline of nonviolence at all times while on the Dhammayātrā. I will sustain a practice of meditation daily while on the walk. I make a commitment of service to others while on the Dhammayātrā, and knowingly sacrifice

my usual comforts for the duration of the walk. I acknowledge that my participation in this event carries potential risks to my personal well being.<sup>14</sup>

Potential walkers also agreed to attend prewalk training, not ride vehicles, and avoid drugs, alcohol, and weapons.<sup>15</sup> Monks or nuns were required to present a letter of approval from their abbot. Participants who violated the rules of the walk were given three chances before they were expelled. Dhammayātrā organizers also demanded that government soldiers refrain from accompanying them along the route, as this had obviously incited Khmer Rouge reprisal. While weapons were always forbidden, Dhammayātrā leaders now required civilian clothing. In order to discourage political figures from co-opting the walk, they were required to find a place with laypersons behind the monks.

Second, groups were organized into twenty (and later ten) walkers, with a group leader responsible for distributing supplies, food and water, medical attention, and information. Subcommittees of volunteers also were organized for specific tasks such as transporting food and supplies, receiving donations, and distributing leaflets. Third, the organizing committee was recomposed to constitute a membership representative of the walkers—monks, nuns, and laypeople living in Cambodia.<sup>16</sup> Its gender ratio was unusual for Cambodian organizations, and in fact the most prominent figure in the walk and training was Kim Leng, a laywoman. It became more formalized, and decision making occurred by consensus.

In 1995, Dhammayātrā IV greeted the Interfaith Pilgrimage for Peace at the Thai-Cambodian border and accompanied the pilgrimage to the Vietnamese border at Svay Rieng. The yearlong pilgrimage was organized by the Nipponzan Myōhoji to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and started at Auschwitz. Some of the Dhammayātrā organizers went with the pilgrimage to Japan. During that walk Dhammayātrā participants solicited twenty thousand signatures for the International Campaign to Ban Landmines. The following year, Dhammayātrā V traveled southwest from Phnom Penh, illuminating the connection between the Civil War, illegal logging, and deforestation for the first time. Two thousand trees were planted along the route.

In 1997, Dhammayātrā VI retraced the route of the tragic third walk. It traveled from Battambang to Pailin, ending in Banteay Meanchey. After Ieng Sary, third in command to Pol Pot, defected with his battalion a year earlier, Pailin, a former Khmer Rouge stronghold, was slated for “reintegration.” Unfamiliar with the Dhammayātrā, Khmer Rouge families watched the procession curiously and sometimes with a welling up of emotion. In a moving reunion, the Khmer Rouge officer who had released the Dhammayātrā hostages in 1994 met with the organizers.<sup>17</sup> This time the walkers reached Pailin without incident and were welcomed by Ieng Sary before going on to their final destination. In addition to now common educational components of landmines and deforestation, there was attention to domestic violence for the first time.

While Dhammayātrā VI drew attention to the end of the war in the western provinces recently under fierce Khmer Rouge control, violence erupted elsewhere in Cambodia. As pre-election tensions rose, grenades were tossed into an opposition campaign rally in Phnom Penh, killing sixteen. Then, on July 2–7 a brief but violent coup upset the fragile balance between the FUNCINPEC and the Cambodian People's Party in the government.<sup>18</sup> A new group was formed to address the violence. Metta Thor, a Forum for Peace through Love and Compassion, was organized by a small group of women from various NGOs, with a Cambodian American as its spokeswoman. At their request, Mahā Ghosananda led a march in Phnom Penh sponsored by this group.

Built around the goal of reconciling Cambodia's warring factions and upset by factionalism of its own, the force and scope of the Dhammayātrā waned in the following years. A second round of national elections was scheduled for 1998. Concerned about the existing level of political violence, an ad hoc collective of NGOs organized the Campaign to Reduce Violence for Peace (CRVP) and held pre-election peace walks in sixteen provinces. That year, the Dhammayātrā Center organized the pre-election walk in Phnom Penh (Dhammayātrā VIII) and also Dhammayātrā VII through Rattanakiri, a much-neglected province in the northeast and site of great deforestation. Focusing on the environment, a tree was ordained during the walk. "When we ordained a tree, it became a monk," explained Mahā Ghosananda, "and we told the people. When you kill the tree, then you kill the monk."<sup>19</sup> Only two hundred completed this walk.

In 1999, Dhammayātrā IX recruited only two hundred participants and did not reach its intended goal. Intending to traverse former Khmer Rouge territory from Siem Reap to Prāsād Preah Vihear, it got stuck in the mud, making it as far as Anlong Veng. By 2000, Mahā Ghosananda, ill and in his late seventies, no longer attended the walks. This time, new walks, organized by a former member of the Dhammayātrā organizing committee who lives in Sisophon at the Cambodian border, took place in western Cambodia. They went shorter distances, were led by different monks, and encouraged local participation. The CPR-Dhammayātrā Center in Battambang run by Bob Maat has offered support. While the Dhammayātrā Center became dormant in 2000, it scheduled a small walk to Preah Vihear in 2001. This time they made it.

### Local Meanings: Dhammayātrā as Engaged Cambodian

Appadurai (1990) argues that dominant cultural forms localize differently; there is a dialectical relationship between an action and its response. The integration of engaged Buddhism into Cambodia's religious and political landscape occurred along four vectors—its look, its message, its relevance to a young, undisciplined *sangha*, and its adaptability to a maturing civil society. I will take each in turn.

The philosophy and practice of engaged Buddhism could take root in Cam-

bodia only if it *looked* Khmer. The visible presence of Saṃtec Braḥ Mahā Ghosanda, his patronage by King Sihanouk, the Dhammayātrā Center's presence at Wat Saṃbau Mās, and the Dhammayātrā's embrace of the *sangha* through walk participation, philosophy, and hospitality along the route established the Dhammayātrā's Cambodian identity. The foreign organizers and overseas Cambodians who first organized the walks have gone on to other pursuits, leaving Cambodians in charge. By 1995, Cambodians were both the primary architects and recipients of the message of the walk. Cambodian organizers have argued that the foreign presence at its inception and behind its funding has been incidental to its continued success, but foreign supporters had the language to communicate with donors, accounting skills, and familiarity with governance structures. The absence of these weakened the Dhammayātrā Center's ability to maintain itself in the last few years (Sasse 1999).

The Dhammayātrā's local success has also been attributed to its social relevance in responding to some of Cambodia's most pressing issues: repatriation, peaceful elections, the Khmer Rouge/government conflict, landmines ban, and illegal logging. For those who participated in the walks and for those along the routes, its message of nonviolence was unequivocal. Skidmore (1997) suggested that the first Dhammayātrā walks were more immediate in their connection to the populace's needs. It could also be argued that the Dhammayātrā's practice of walking continued to address some of the most troubling aspects of Cambodian history—displacement, flight, and mined land.

Third, the Dhammayātrā's stress on self-disciplined nonviolence and meditation has been critical for the formation of a postsocialist generation of young monks. It was perceived as a reconstruction of the pre-revolution Khmer moral order. Ven. Nhem Kim Teng, senior monk of the Dhammayātrā, has suggested that "in essence, Mahā Ghosanda is trying to bring back the things we have lost. Khmers used to be gentle, honest and forgiving. We would help each other in times of difficulty, speak respectfully of all those things we have lost because of the war and violence and destruction" (Coalition for Peace and Reconciliation 1995). Guthrie, in chapter 6, has illustrated the connection between the *ṭūn jī* and the Dhammayātrā movement. In addition to training monks, the Dhammayātrā Center contributed to the empowerment of the *ṭūn jī*. The Dhammayātrā Center/CPR helped to plan the first national seminar in 1995 for *ṭūn jī*, which included training in *dhamma*, meditation, and engaged Buddhism. Ghosanda's presence at this conference lent them additional legitimacy. Finally, the Dhammayātrā Center and CPR strengthened Cambodia's civil society in many ways. They encouraged initiatives rising from monks and *ṭūn jī* who participated in the walks, such as Ven. Kim Teng's Sante Sena community forestry project in Svay Rieng. It was most evident through the educational component of the walks, which set up workshops to educate villagers about landmines, domestic violence, and deforestation. By far the

most significant contribution has been training a generation of peace activists. By the late 1980s, the Dhammayātrā's Buddhist philosophy of nonviolence, its workshops, and its practice of walking had been replicated by other peace-based local and international NGOs in Cambodia.

This mantle of Cambodian leadership and Buddhist peacemaking, however, has cloaked more complicated transnational arrangements. Indeed, Mahā Ghosanda's global connections have significantly contributed to the transnational features of the Dhammayātrā just as Maat and Bernstein's CPR connections gave it the NGO support it needed. Certainly its origin story begins with foreigners and refugee monks crossing borders. Its constituency, though predominantly Cambodian, regularly includes expatriate staff from NGOs and the peripatetic Japanese monks of the Nipponzan Myohoji.

It is this strategic transnationalism that has given the Dhammayātrā its shape, support, and visibility in its first decade. By strategic I mean that the Dhammayātrā's expatriate organizers and Mahā Ghosanda chose to situate the Dhammayātrā in a global network. This transnational vision influenced the ways in which local organizing took on the broader focus of international issues that also impacted Cambodia, such as the international campaign to ban landmines and the campaign against nuclear testing in the Pacific in 1998. It also integrated the Dhammayātrā's philosophy with other agents of peacemaking—Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Quakers teaching Buddhism, American nonviolence trainers, Japanese peace monks, Thai engaged Buddhists, and the global interfaith peace network that Mahā Ghosanda has known since the early 1980s, when he was a refugee. As the “Buddha of the Battlefields,” Saṃtec Braḥ Mahā Ghosanda's message of peacemaking as *dhamma* is shared with his contemporaries, Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama. There is thus nothing particularly Khmer about the Buddhist philosophy and practice promoted by the walk.

A similar statement might be made about Mahā Ghosanda's complex relationship to his former homeland. Hailed as the “Gandhi of Cambodia” in international circles, he is the most celebrated figure of Cambodia's postwar peacemaking efforts. In addition to five Nobel Peace Prize nominations, he has been the recipient of many peace awards around the world, including Norway's Rafto Foundation Prize for Human Rights (1992), a peacemaking award from Sri Lanka's Sarvodaya (1997), and the coveted Niwano Peace Prize from Japan (1998). But unlike Gandhi, who returned to his homeland to build a movement, Mahā Ghosanda has rarely stayed in Cambodia for any length of time except during the Dhammayātrās. This follows a pattern set early in life. His itinerary for the last decade shows a constant series of appearances at conferences or peace gatherings.<sup>20</sup> According to some reports, Mahā Ghosanda is a U.S. citizen, and while this is not unusual in Cambodia (the Cambodian political party FUNCINPEC is dominated by dual citizens), it presses the question of citizenship and place in former

refugees' avowal of national identity. Mahā Ghosananda's choice to signify as singularly Cambodian is balanced with a complex, cosmopolitan embrace.

There has been a strong incentive in the international community to depict the Dhammayātrā as a fully realized, indigenous Buddhist-based peace movement in Cambodia. This is evident in the global media, feature articles, and a growing number of video documentaries. This has also been the agenda of most international NGOs and donors aligned with the Dhammayātrā Center, though they have been more realistic about its realization and conflicting visions of the walk (Sasse 1999). Unfortunately, the expense of prewalk trainings and the size and duration of the walks has required substantial assistance. The symbiotic relationship between the Cambodian staff of the Dhammayātrā Center and expatriate donors who also consider themselves allies has been at times confused and conflicting. This is a common feature of North-South NGO partnerships, but it challenges the notion that "local" movements, especially in the South, can be unhampered by "global" interests.

Moser-Puangsuwan (2000) argues that the Dhammayātrā's philosophy and practice are not culturally specific but transferable to other forms of conflict. He posits that its Buddhist philosophy of compassion is a unique contribution to the peace movement (Moser-Puangsuwan 2000, 266). One example of this is an eponymous Thai version of the walk that focuses on the environment (Santikare 1999).

### Conclusion

The Dhammayātrā as an example of the transnational networks and philosophy of engaged Buddhism attests to a fluid mixture of political forms and philosophies in an era of global cultural melange. Mahā Ghosananda's peacemaking efforts both in the diaspora and back in Cambodia can be seen as paradigmatic of this new Buddhism. Can engaged Buddhism be seen in terms of Appadurai's model "dominant cultural forms" that "locals" then integrate? Given its multiple influences and sources, engaged Buddhism cannot be represented as homogenizing or hegemonic. As for its local integration, while neither its message nor its practice is derived from any Khmer model, the Dhammayātrā's legitimacy is a result of its success "on the ground." In the decade of diaspora return and national reconstruction in Cambodia, the Dhammayātrā and its philosophy of nonviolence have been a particularly powerful message for poor Cambodians tired of war.

I have pressed the transnational features of the Dhammayātrā and Mahā Ghosananda to counter a tendency for both local and transnational allies to simplify the representation of the Dhammayātrā and Mahā Ghosananda in order to maintain their Cambodian authenticity. The notion that transnational alliances can dilute the efficacy of a Buddhist peace walk is a curious concern given the trans-

national nature of religious institutions. In an era of permeable borders, Cambodia's *sangha* has garnered much transnational support—wat reconstruction paid by overseas Cambodians, texts from Japan, funding through German donors, and training for monks in Thailand and Sri Lanka.

As a multisourced entity of engaged Buddhism, the Dhammayātrā in Cambodia has left a considerable legacy for peace activists in this country and elsewhere. Although the walks have not wrought significant changes on the political front, the replication of nonviolence and conflict mediation techniques among a larger group of players signifies an effective transfer into public discourse. While fighting between the Khmer Rouge and Cambodian armed forces has ended, other conflicts continue to require vigilant efforts on the part of a more empowered Buddhist community. It remains to be seen how a decade of engaged Buddhist peace walks has contributed to a practice and philosophy of nonviolence in Cambodia's civil society, and what peace walks elsewhere in the future might be inspired by the Dhammayātrā.

#### Notes

I wish to thank Phil Edmonds, Bob Maat, Victoria Rue, and John Marston for their help.

1. *Dhammayātrā* (pronounced “dhammayietra”) is a Pāli-language compound. “*Dhamma*” is a Buddhist technical term that may be translated as “doctrine,” “righteousness,” or “law,” and “*yātrā*” means “walk,” “to go.” In its Khmer context here, *Dhammayātrā* can be translated as “journey” or “walk for righteousness.”

2. ASEAN (Association of South-East Asian Nations) is a political organization representing nations in Southeast Asia, which at that time included Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines, and Brunei. The four Cambodian factions were Democratic Kampuchea (the Khmer Rouge), two noncommunist resistance groups (the royalist FUNCINPEC and the Republican Khmer People's National Liberation Front (KPNLF), and the Phnom Penh-based government (People's Republic of Kampuchea [PRK], later called the State of Cambodia [SOC]).

3. B. Maat, personal communication, November 13, 1994.

4. Moser-Puangsuwan, personal communication, August 2001.

5. Moser-Puangsuwan offers a detailed account of the first and second walks in “The Buddha in the Battlefield.”

6. Ibid. Ed. note: this seems to be a reference to the Buddhānāy.

7. The movement translates the name Mahā Ghosananda as “Great Joyful Proclaimer.” It could be translated more simply as “The Great Talker.”

8. Mahā Ghosananda has kept Providence as his residence despite his hectic international schedule.

9. “Cambodian Buddhists Elect Patriarch,” *Providence Journal-Bulletin*, July 30, 1988.

10. While there have been recent changes, at the time the research for this chapter was being conducted there were five monks with the title of *Sarṅteç*, an Old Khmer word mean-



ing “powerful person,” one given to officials of high rank. They include the *sanghrāj* of the Mahānikāy at Wat Unnalom and the Dhammayut at Wat Botum Vadey, a second abbot at Wat Botum Vadey, the abbot of Wat Mahā Mantri, and Mahā Ghosananda at Wat Sāmbau Mās, who is called “member-at-large.”

11. “Mahā Ghosananda, a True Peacemaker,” *Bangkok Post*, May 30, 1993.

12. B. Maat, personal communication, November 13, 1994.

13. The most consistent support has come from the Peace Partnership between the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), both Christian churches with a theology of pacifism. Other NGOs include Church World Service, Oxfam, Great Britain, Catholic Relief Services, CIDSE (Cooperation Internationale pour le Developpement et la Solidarite), and STAR Kampuchea.

14. “Dhammayatra VIII—Pre-Election Peace Walk,” 1998 press release.

15. This was particularly a problem with the younger monks, who abused the respect of the community by soliciting money for their own personal use and requesting rides when they grew tired of walking. See Sasse 1999.

16. From 1993–1995, the most active members of this committee were Ven. Nhem Kim Leng and Ven. Yos Hut. Lay leaders included Kim Teng and her husband Ong Vuthy, the driver for Mahā Ghosananda on his first visits to Cambodia in 1991 and 1992. Lay activists included Chea Mouy Kry (founder of Youth Resources Development Project), Thida Khus (founder of SILAKA and Metta Thor), and Mu Sochua (founder of the first women’s NGO, Khemara, and now minister of women’s affairs).

17. For an extended interview, see the video of the walk, “Army of Peace—Quest for a Non-violent Cambodia.”

18. “More than 1,000 Meditate, March for Peace in Phnom Penh,” *The Cambodia Daily*, August 4, 1997.

19. “A Monk tells of Lifelong Commitment to Peace through Compassion,” *World Buddhism Supplement, The Cambodia Daily*, May 1998.

20. See Niwano Peace Prize web site: [www.interfaith-center.org/oxford/press/niwano98.htm](http://www.interfaith-center.org/oxford/press/niwano98.htm).