

## **Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia: Restoration Development and Challenges**

Preah Maha CHUON Bunsim

Cambodia is widely known as a Buddhist country with around 95% of population adhering to Theravada Buddhism<sup>1</sup>. Cambodian people have officially professed to Theravada Buddhism since the late thirteenth century and then it has become a way of life and cultural foundation among them. Cambodian Theravada Buddhism serves Khmer society in a variety of functions such as cultural, social, moral, educational ones. The importance of these functions results in the inclusion of Khmer Theravada Buddhism as the State Religion under article 43 of Cambodian constitution. One can find that Cambodia's National Trinity is Nation, Religion (Buddhism is State Religion) King. This suggests that Buddhism is really important for Khmer society since it is deeply embedded in Khmer beliefs and becomes part of Khmer identity. Therefore, in the following paragraphs I would like to present its historical background and its main contribution to Khmer society from the past until today.

Following the third Buddhist council, 218 years after the demise of the Lord Buddha, King Asoka of India sent two Theras-Preah Sonathera and Uttarathera to Suvannabhumi to propagate Buddhism. Between India and China at that period four states were to be found. Those were Mons, Khmers, Chams and Malayas. The propagation of Buddhism beyond India in ancient times was equally by land or by sea routes. In both cases, this expansion was made possible by commercial activities. In each of their traveling, merchants always invited Buddhist monks to accompany them or brought with them images of the Buddha to avoid bad luck of their journeys and to practice their cult. However, in the middle of the Sixth century, it was the Chenla period. Mahayana Buddhism was the most remarkable factor in the religious history of Chenla. Then after the Angkor period, from the fifteenth century onward Theravada Buddhism has definitely

---

<sup>1</sup> Cambodia, Phnom Penh Dialogue 2008 on Interfaith Cooperation for Peace and Harmony 3-6 April, 2008

established itself in Cambodia and become a Khmer cultural foundation<sup>2</sup>. As for Mahayana and Brahmanism, they gradually lost their followers. The Brahmin temples were turned into pagodas and on their altars statues of the Buddha replaced those of linga. However, these pagodas still retain their former names such as Ang, Tang, Krang, and Svay. During the French colonial period, Buddhist pagodas served as cultural and social centers for Khmer people. When French colonists desired to replace Khmer alphabets with Latin ones, a riot led by monks during the 1940s erupted against the French intention so the Khmer alphabet remains in existence until today. During King Sihanouk's leadership, he created a philosophy of Buddhist socialism where pagodas and villages helped each other. After Cambodia was thrown into civil war between 1975 and 1979, Buddhism was neglected and abolished. However, following the toppling of the Khmer Rouge Regime, Buddhism was revitalized and practiced. This is the brief historical background of Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia. The following paragraphs will deal with the structure and roles of Theravada Buddhism in Khmer society.

In Cambodia, there are two sects of Theravada Buddhism: the Mahanikay and the Dhammayut. The Dhammayut sect was brought from Thailand and first established at Wat Neak Ta Soeng with the patronage of Cambodian kings around 1855<sup>3</sup>. The followers of Dhammayut are far smaller in number, whereas Mahanikaya is the larger group. In 1961, Mahanikaya alone had more than 52000 monks in about 2700 pagodas, while the Dhammayut order had 1460 monks in just over 100 pagodas. After 7 January 1979, everything started from zero. Today, there are 4168 wats and 54327 monks of the Mahanikay sect, and Dhammayut has 139 pagodas and 1256 monks. Therefore, the total number of Khmer Theravada monks is 55583 and 4307 wats<sup>4</sup>.

As far as monastic administration is concerned, *Sanghareachs* need to be nominated by the king. Then the Mahanikay supreme patriarch has this power to appoint senior ecclesiastic monks to the position of chief monk for respective province (*mekun*) with the approval of both the King and the Ministry of Cults and Religious Affairs. Each provincial chief monk has the right to appoint *Anukun* who acts as a head of either the district or the sub-district, and *Anukun* may be chosen by the supreme patriarch and minister

---

<sup>2</sup> Sorn Samnang, Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia, present and future. Royal Academy of Cambodia. 11 May, 2005, P.VII.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Harris, Cambodian Buddhism, History and Practice, (The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group. The United States of America, 2005) P. 106.

<sup>4</sup> Min Khin, Document on Buddhist monk students graduation ceremony, printed in Phnom Penh, 2008) P.2

of cults and religious affairs. Moreover, in the monastic administration there are also ecclesiastic Courts. The courts have been designed to resolve monastic disputes operating at four different levels. A pagoda chief monk heads up his respective wat court. At the district level, there is a Council headed by an *Anukun*. At the provincial level council (*salagana*), Mekun is assisted by his right-hand assistant (*balat-kun*), an elder skilled in monastic discipline (*Vinayathor-kun*), a registrar (*Samuh-kun*) and a secretary (*lekha-kun*). At the final level, the supreme Council (*therasabha*) works under the presidency of the supreme patriarch. This council is the final Court of appeal, which decides all matters relating to monastic discipline. Furthermore, it is the only body that has authority to disrobe a recalcitrant monk in serious cases. Only after this procedure has been gone through properly can a monk who is accused of a serious crime be sent to the civil authorities for trial.

Buddhism has played an essential role in the lives of Khmers, both rural and urban. The core teachings of Lord Buddha put emphasis on good deeds, accumulation of merits and peace making. Observing the ten precepts or five precepts is how Khmer people dedicate their souls and meritorious deeds to their country. It becomes almost widely know that the idea of what means to be a Khmer as a Cambodian lady said. "How can I be a tree without my roots?"<sup>5</sup> She referred this to Theravada Buddhism, a religion deeply ingrained in the Khmer traditional society. From the past until present day, Buddhist monasteries have served many functions such as social, spiritual, moral, cultural and educational services. In addition, monasteries provide retreat centers for the old people, recreational centers, meeting places, rest areas for travelers, orphanages, and funeral homes.

Buddhism has contributed to building Khmer culture, diversifying its characteristics for Khmer people in their daily lives. It should be recalled that at 2002-2003 Preah Sihanouk Buddhist University entrance, 3rd July, 2002, our prime minister, Samdec Hun Sen, stated that "Buddhism and monasteries are not only the symbol of Khmer national identity but serve as a great shelter of priceless seeds for inculcating people with wisdom, conscience, social morality which are the most important spiritual foundation in rebuilding the nation in all fields" The wat functions as a meeting place for various discussions. It includes discussions of building public infrastructures like roads, health centers, schools, dams, ponds and works pertaining to the nation as a whole. Local authority and political figures also use the wat in the community as their meeting place. This is an

---

<sup>5</sup> John Marston and Elizabeth Guthrie. History, Buddhism, and New Religious movements in Cambodia, (printed in by O.S. Printing House, Bangkok. Thailand 2004) P.40

easy way for participants because almost all wats in Cambodia are located in middle of community.

The wat is the preservation site of Khmer culture and tradition. It is acceptable that since the past many documents either written on palm-leaves or papers have been stored in pagodas. Those documents have been written in relation to Khmer culture and traditions. Monks and clergymen have kept those documents for study and research purpose from one generation to another. During French colonial period, the French desired to romanize Khmer alphabets. However, monks and lay people disagreed with this purpose and fought against the French intention, bringing about what we called the Umbrella War of 1942<sup>6</sup>. During the Ang Mei reign, the Vietnamese also had the similar attempt as French had done but ended up with the same fate. With these two examples, one can see that literature is conserved in wat. Wat plays a priceless and vital role in preserving Khmer culture and tradition. Under any circumstance whether in time of wars, the wat has been the center of people gathering and conservation of Khmer culture and identity. The wat also functions as educational service and center. Formerly, all branches of national culture took shelter in pagodas. The wat is also the center of Khmer arts. Khmer people love art of their own. Beside studying literature, they (earned how to master skills like craftsmanship, carpentry, sculptures, drawing. Wat became the center of knowledge about various subjects. School originated from pagodas, named Salavatta. During the French colony (1863-1953), pagoda schools played a key role in educating and training Young people. Many people studied their literatures either physical or spiritual knowledge in pagodas. So Wat has become the center of multi-knowledge: theory (connaissance) and practices (Savoir faire) and education of ethics for the people and society. Those who left pagodas after their education always became the people of desirability for their community.

In the past, dispute resolutions also rested on the heads of pagodas, not communal chiefs as today. *Chao Adhikar* had great influence in villages since he was qualified with fundamental criteria such as wide knowledge of Tripitaka, cultures and community laws, teachers, advisors and so forth. This could be achieved through his transparency, justice, impartiality, and moral responsibility, patience, compassion, integrity. All these qualities of the pagoda chief monk could be attained through experience and hard-working and self education. These drew admiration and respect on the part

---

<sup>6</sup> Ian Harris, *Cambodian Buddhism, History and Practice*, (The Maple-Vail Book Manufacturing Group, The United States of America, 2005) P.137.

of lay people, making people dependent on the wat than communal chiefs to settle their disputes.

The wat is also the shelter for the children of the poor and the parentless. Khmer farmers who are poor and cannot afford to send their kids to schools for study always entrust those kids to the chief monk of the wat in their community. Although state schools are in existence many places, those kids have been seen living in wats under the guidance of monks. Monks are the second parents of those kids. Some poor children go to stay in pagodas and become public figures. Those figures are like our prime minister, Hun Sell, who was once a pagoda boy and now is our Cambodian prime minister.

When our nation was thrown into wars, there were no hospitals in villages. People who were attacked by diseases like fever, broken leg, and snake biting and so on usually went to pagodas for healings from *Chao Adhikar* or clergymen who could cure and heal their diseases. Because of this reason, monks at the time knew how to heal and make traditional herbal medicine. The Wat in the past was not merely the place for education but a health center and learning center as well. There were some people and monks who wanted to learn this skill and became the ones who could cure the sick. Here we can see the health of people is taken care by monks in pagodas. But now it is the burden of government responsible for this task. Although monks are not physicians any more, they also have built hospitals for lay people.

So far I have discussed the roles played by pagodas in Khmer communities in the past. However, since the loss of learned monks during the Khmer Rouge Regime, many great and intellectual monks were killed. This is a great loss to Theravada Buddhism in Cambodia. The Khmer Buddhist Sangha is reviving but still remains and in a weak state of physical, spiritual, and intellectual health since everything begins to develop barehanded. Buddhism was reborn and started progressing but on the physical forms only. Some responsibilities which used to be done by monks are now taken by government presently, for example health care and schools. Since the social services once earnestly performed by Buddhist monks are now seen to be replaced by government's role, this leaves the Khmer Buddhist community inactive in Khmer society. Additionally, due to the force of globalization, Cambodia needs to be open to other cultures. This is a chance for other religions to have missions operating in Cambodia and take charges of what Buddhist monks used to perform. Those religions are undertaking to do social services used to be performed by Buddhist monks. Furthermore, Materialism has blinded some Khmer people to forget the spirituality and the all-important scene behind the hard infrastructure.

The adherence to the disciplinary rules by some monks is also loose today. Due to the departure from the disciplinary rules, Buddhism is seen to lose popularity with laypeople. Moreover, the knowledge about Buddhism by both laity and monks is still low and not up to the standard and quality required.

Therefore, to reaffirm and revitalize the roles of Khmer Buddhism in society, some necessary measures need to be taken. Those are strengthening of Buddhist education throughout the country by expanding Buddhist primary, secondary and higher education, adherence to Dhamma and disciplinary rules, building monk human resources and effectiveness of leadership and monastic administration. Monks and government officials need to cooperate with each other to tackle the negative aspects taking place in Buddhism.

To conclude, Theravada Buddhism played a crucial role in Khmer society. It has been the center of education, culture, social service performance, recreation, orphanages etc. Many Khmer people owe much to the monastery for the memorable experiences it has given from childhood to adulthood to old age. To many Khmers, the disappearance of Buddhism means the absence of Khmer identity, like the Pol Pot regime. Although 95% of Cambodian people are Buddhists, this is only quantity. The quality is not up to the standard yet. Therefore, it is necessary to build monk human resources, strengthening moral conduct, and effective and productive management in the monastic administration.