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The Monk in Khmer Society

The Living, Role and Participation

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Abstract

Buddhism is very important and valuable religion for Cambodian people since Cambodia has received and practiced it. Cambodian people started to believe and follow the teachings[1] of Lord Buddha by seeing the great benefit of practicing Buddhism. Many people became Buddhist, monk and novice. They try to practice and spread Buddhism throughout the country, especially the monks[2] who are the most important one in upholding and promoting Buddhism. They play very crucial role in adopting and propagating Buddhism due to they are closed to the Buddha's teachings. They can learn and practice Buddhism easier than lay people therefore Buddhism has rooted in the heart of Cambodian people and it continues to flourish in Cambodia from time to time.

In all periods of history Khmer monks not only play the important role for Buddhism but also for Khmer culture and tradition as well as the social life of people. The Khmer monks have many kinds of role and duty such as they have to take care and develop pagodas which is the shrine place for venerating *(ārama)*, they have to learn and practice the teachings of Buddha *(dharma-Vinaya)*, moreover they have to take care of Khmer and Buddhist tradition and they have to provide the good education to the people most importantly they act as the moral teacher and demonstrate the heavenly and happy ways to people.

This text is the study about Khmer monk and it has three main points for discussing and noting. First one it shows about monk's life, secondly the monk's role and thirdly the duty in helping to solve the political crisis in the country. This text will focus on study and discuss of Khmer monk in present situation. It will reflect on living, the role and joining of the monks in Khmer society.

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[1] WalpolaRahula, **What the Buddha Taught**, (Taipei: The Corporate Body of Buddhist Education, 2005), p. 6.

[2] **Monks** here refer to the monks *(Bhikkhu)* and novice *(samanera)* who follow Theravada Buddhism.

Introduction

Cambodia is a one of the Theravada Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia. This country is full of surprised and interesting thing. It is a place that Buddhism has been well observed in ages. King *Ashoka* sent missionaries[3] to the land of *Suwannaphumi*, which has sometimes been identified as the mainland Southeast Asian region of Mon *(now a state in Myanmar, the state of Mon)* and Khmer *(now Cambodia)* people.

Theravada Buddhism has existed in Cambodia since at least the 5th century. It has been the Cambodian state religion since the 13th century *(excepting the Khmer Rouge period)*, and is currently estimated to be the faith of 95% of the population. The cornerstones of Cambodian Buddhism are the Buddhist monks *(bhikkhu) and* the pagoda (wat*)*. Traditionally, each village has a spiritual center-a wat-where from five to more than sixty monks and novices reside. The number of monks varies according to the size and need of the local population. Buddhist monks in Khmer traditionally were called upon to perform a number of functions in Khmer life from past up to now. They participate in all formal village festivals, ceremonies, marriages, and funerals as well as politics. The monks are often healers and, in traditional Khmer culture, they are the practitioners whose role is closest to that of modern psychiatrists for the individual and psychosocial trauma in the Cambodian Context[4]. The monks traditionally occupied a unique position in the transmission of Khmer culture and values. On the other hand, Khmer monks provided a living model of the most meritorious behavior a Buddhists could follow. They also provided the laity with many opportunities for gaining merit. For centuries monks were the only literate people residing in rural communities; they acted as teachers to temple servants, to novices, and to newly ordained monks. Until the 1970s, most literate Cambodian males gained literacy solely through the instruction of the Sangha.

In the recent years most Khmer monks have joint the politics for calling for justice, peace and happiness of people, for example this year Khmer monks are allowed to join the election and many monks

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[3]ឆវិន សរៈខាំ **ប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រនៃព្រះពុទ្ធសាសនានៅប្រទេសកំណើត** ប្រែសម្រួលដោ លោកគ្រូ អគ្គតេជោ នៅសាខន ពោធិពុម្ព ម៉ែងហាវ ភ្នំពេញ ព.ស ២៥៥០ គ.ស ២០០៦ ទំព័រ ១៨០.

[4]**ការស្វែងយល់ពីការប៉ះទង្គិចផ្លូវចិត្តនៅកម្ពុជា** ភ្នំពេញ មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលអភិវឌ្ឍន៍សង្គម (ម.អ.ស) ឆ្នាំ ២០០៧ ទំព័រ ១៥.

joint the protest against injustice and corruption by calling for freedom and justice in Khmer society.

Khmer monks not only lead the religious activities such as ceremonies but also play important role to demonstrate the happy way to people and bring harmony and peace for society as well as the country therefore monk have major functions for Cambodian life.

The life of monk in Cambodia

Cambodia is good for becoming the Buddhist monk[5], and many lay people join monkhood by own selves and support their relatives to become a novice or monk in countryside, cities and towns throughout the country. After they become monk, they are known as bonze sand all Cambodian men over the age of 20 serve sometimes as the bonze. This is seen as a rite of passage into adulthood in Cambodia.

In Cambodia becoming a Buddhist monks means to joining a Buddhist community—the Sangha. The purpose of the Sangha is to study and practice the Buddha's teachings,[6] and whenever possible, to share them with others. Traditionally in Cambodia, one stays in the monkhood for one, two years or for a whole life in pagoda after becoming ordained according with their decision. However, as monastic communities are still in development in many parts of the world, this is not always possible. In some cases, one can also reside within a pagoda under the guidance and protection of the chief of pagoda. One can become a monk for one, two, three or seven days when their own relatives die.

Living in pagoda also means that they share their resources, their habits, their practice and their personalities. Living in a pagoda one can face many difficulties, particularly in order to protect their ordination, the *code of conduct (Vinaya*) for monastic life that is very explicit in how they live in the pagoda. Buddhist monks in Cambodian live in the pagodas *(wats),* which contain residences and a hall for eating house and for classes. They live a regulated lifestyle in the pagoda: there are no fewer than 227 rules to observe, eating after midday, sleeping on a too-comfortable bed, participating in entertainments such as dancing are all forbidden. Monks are also not supposed to participate in politics, though this has changed over time; since the 1980s some Buddhist monks in Cambodia have taken active role in politics.

Khmer monks follow Theravada Buddhist tradition. They respect the rule *(Vinaya*), as laid down by

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[5] Buddhist monk refers Bhikkhu *(Pāli)*, is a fully ordained.

[6] The four Noble Truth.

the Buddha, in its many practical rules define the status of a monk as a mendicant and gives a monk a source of contemplation on what things are really necessary. They need to go for alms that Khmer Buddhists offer such as the four requisites[7], food, clothing, shelter and medicines. These are what lay people can offer for them as a practical way of expressing generosity,[8] making merits and appreciation of their faith in the Buddhism. The monks depend on lay people. They know the practicing Buddhist studies for Sangha as an act of faith and respect to the Sangha. Khmer Monks respond by sharing merit, spreading good will and the teachings of the Buddha to all those who wish to hear, irrespective of personal feelings.

Monks perform ceremonies at occasions such as births, deaths and weddings, and more broadly they play a role in ministering to the people's social and emotional needs, just like in other religions. In the mornings, monks leave the pagoda and walk the streets for alms-giving. The lay people wait for the monks for offering them gifts of food, and the monks give them a blessing and merit in return.

The Role of Khmer Monk

From past up to now the monk still have played important role in Khmer society. The monks have many roles in Buddhism and Khmer society. The monk is the public individual and cornerstone for people. They have to act for general. After being the monk or novice, they are different from normal people. They have to stay in Buddhist community pagoda. The monks have to take care the pagoda by constructing of the buildings, cleaning and protecting of all things belong to Sangha in the temple, for example when the buildings are old or broken, they have to mend or rebuild them again. They can tell lay people to support in developing of pagoda. The monk has the duty to protect and develop in order to make the wats pleasant pagoda *(ārama*).

The duty of the Khmer monks they have to take care of Khmer tradition and Buddhist tradition. As we know in Khmer rouge regime,[9] the Khmer and Buddhist tradition were destroyed but after this regime they are reborn and developed again by Khmer monks. Until present day although some tradition are starting to lose due to the globalization modern but the monks have the duty to give the good advice and

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[7]Catupacaya (Pali) refers food, clothing, shelter and medicines.

[8] ភិក្ខុ ហេង មណីចិន្តា (ឥន្ទបញនញោ) **ព្រះបាទធម្មិក**ការផ្សាយរបស់ព្រះពុទ្ធសាសនាដើម្បីអភិវឌ្ឍន៍ ភ្នំពេញ ឆ្នាំ ១៩៩៥ទំព័រ ១១០

[9]ហេង ហុង **ឯ! លោកជំខ្មែរ** ភ្នំពេញ ឆ្នាំ ១៩៩៧ ទំព័រ ៧០

sermon leading to care about Khmer tradition. For instant we can see in recent year some young girls start to wear the mini skirt in public but when they go to temple or meet the monks they always change the dress and wear the dress of Khmer tradition, especially in all kinds of traditional ceremonies such as when they make celebration in the local place.

The Khmer monks are pattern of good conduct and morality for Khmer people. All people always respect and support to monks all the time therefore monks have to practice Dhamma-Vinaya strictly since the day of ordination as monks and novice by putting their effort in study dharma and practice. If they are old they will study and practice about *Vipassanadhura*[10] but if they are young they will practice *ganthadhura* as we know there are two *Dhuras*, two kinds of study in Buddhism.

In all temples they have time table to study depending on the rule of pagoda or the rule of Shangha. Some pagodas have Pali scholar Dharma school. This way is to force the monks and novice to study the teachings of Buddha and practice for own happiness and supporting the people. As we know the pagoda is center of people from various sides in the villages as well as Khmer society. Khmer monks act as the teacher of morality. In the ways of Khmer people and their standard of living they have to practice the conduct of Buddhism such as five precepts. In the name of Buddhist at least they have to hold *Sila* or five precepts. Some people are very busy and some are difficulty in earning to live, therefore they don't have the time to find to understand about Buddhism enough. All monks have to give them good advice, the sermon and the teachings of dharma in temple or schools. For instant Khmer monks go to teach dharma in public school in Buddhist holyday and give the sermon in all kinds of are many. When they people have celebrated ceremony. They always invite the monk to pray sermon, therefore the monk can give the good advice and the lay people can got the good advices.

The last of Khmer monk's roles is to assist the mind of people and develop the harmony. The monks who help people by giving Dhamma *(good advice)* when the people have problems, they always start with their thinking sometimes with unreason that make them doubtful, worried and suffered. When they meet the problems like this they go to pagoda and enter to the *Upothotha*hall[11] to pray for solving the

[10]Vipassana means insight into the true nature of reality. vipassana meditation uses mindfulness to eliminate pain, attain happiness and see life clearly or insight meditation.

[11] In khmer *Upothotha*hall called Viheara.

problems. Some people ask the monks the way out so the monk always helps to change their disorderly thinking in mind by explaining the cause and reason according to Buddha teaching and their experiences after that they will be better. On the other hand, in the daily living some people usually make argument to each other like some people have the different idea, opinion and side that there are some argument exist. Although there are problems but when they go to the pagoda and listen to the monks, they will give up the differences and make the harmony. For instant in this recent year the political situation in Cambodia make them different side, different party, different idea by their supporting own groups or party. They often say that "we are belonging to this party…that party", so sometimes it is cause to make argument to each other. But when listen to the monks they start to give up those things and think about harmony of nation, tradition and happy living, therefore when they go to the temple they will become relative and friend in the one nation with the birth and death.

There are many various kinds of the role and duty of Khmer monks such as the monks have to take care of pagoda and make it as ārama, the monks take care of tradition and Buddhism, the monks provide the good education by acting as the moral teacher and demonstrate the heavenly and happy ways to people, the monks practice dhamma-vinaya and the monks take care of mind and develop the harmony of people.

The life with daily activity of monks

There are many Buddhist activities and tradition activities[12] including the daily activity. In the whole year, there are many activities take place in this temple such as *khmer* New Year *(Bunchulchhnamthmey), Magha Puja, Visakha Puja, Asalaha Puja*, Buddhist lent *(culvansa), Kathen* and some special ceremonies like Money flower ceremony *(Bunpka)*. So the temple gets many activities for the monks and novice.

[12]Dr. PraYoon Saengsai, **Buddhist Festival and ceremony**, (Khon Kaen: international program, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University khon Kaen Campus, 2552 B.E.) , p. 7.

The daily activities for Khmer monks in each pagoda are particular and regular. From the morning until night there are several activities. In a day on the early morning, there is a morning chanting (4:30 am to 5:30 am) leading by chief of Pagoda[13] and then around 6:00 am all monks and novices have the breakfast, the Khmer porridge[14] that is prepared by novice or pagoda boys and then they go to learn *Pali* or *Vinaya*. After studying they will go for alms at about 9:30 am, it usually take an hour for going for alms at the villages. After that about 10: 00 am they return to the temple and then they have the lunch together at Sala Hall at 11:00 am.

In all pagodas most of monks and novices are Buddhist students so they have to go to school, from morning to mid-day and after lunch will go again. Normally at 5:00 pm most of monks and novices come from the school so the bell is rung at 5:30 pm for preparing to join the evening chanting. The evening chanting is started at 6:00 pm and finished at 7:00 pm. the monks and novices chant at the *Uposatha* hall altogether. The schedule can be set differently by the chief of monks in the pagodas.

After finishing the evening chanting, they return to their own hut *(Kutis)* and then they relax and study. Some monks study until 10:30 pm and some study until 12:00 pm and at last they get sleep until midnight. For the special day, like the Buddhist holy day and the day off, some activities are changed and the monks and novices can join many activities in Buddhist holy day, after returning from going alms, but mostly they don't go for alms on Buddhist holy day and all the monks and novices go to *Sala* Hall for joining the lunch.

The duty of Khmer monks in helping to solve political crisis in the country

Cambodian monks are the pattern of Cambodian life, while most Cambodians follow Theravada Buddhism, and the religion has been a source of guidance and national identity, political engagement has taken on different forms throughout the country's troubled history. Almost of Khmer people respect and trust in the monks. They consider the monks as the persons who can give merits, good advice and lead

[13] **ពុទ្ធសាសនា និងការអភិវឌ្ឍន៍សង្គមខ្មែរ** ភ្នំពេញ ការផ្សាយរបស់ពុទ្ធសាសនាដើម្បីអភិវឌ្ឍន៍ក្នុងកិច្ចសហប្រតិបត្តិការជាមួយក្រសួងធម្មការនិងសាសនា និងពុទ្ធសាសនបណ្ឌិត ឆ្នាំ១៩៩៦ ទំព័រ ១៤៦

[14] Generally Khmer monk always take the porridge for breakfast.

them to happiness in this life and next life. They believe that the monks who are intelligent, brave and wise at all due to monks follow the teachings of Buddha. When the monks tell, teach and lead them. They always follow their advices therefore the monks are believable and reliable for them.

In Khmer the monks are the important refuge of mental thinking by leading to calm and happiness of mind. The monks are the leader of doing goodness and teaching the wrong and right ways to people. Sometimes the monks lead to find the justice for people in the villages or community when they get the injustice. For example recently the monks lead and join to help the people who suffer from injustice of private company and powerful people such as Venerable Loun Sovath, he always calls for Cambodian human rights[15] and justice of land disputes. He play role as human defenders who appealed to international community to pay more attention to local people's fight for rights and freedom. They also urged their countrymen to keep fighting against repressive government.

The monks live with happiness, pain and suffering of the people. They think when people are happy they will be happy but when people are in pain, difficulty and suffer they will be too. They said that "We've been eating our people's food, and now our people, our nation, is experiencing injustice, so we can stand and help them," and they also join the protest such as sitting on a couch inside a pagoda near the Council of Ministers in Phnom Penh.

Looking at the joining to uphold the rights of Khmer monks, they join to choose the leader in the recent election. The law and rule of Khmer monks show that sometimes the monks have the right to vote but sometimes they are prohibited to vote like in five years later, The Great Supreme Patriarch Tep Vong barred monks from voting, only to overturn the ban ahead of the 2008 election. In the meantime, however, monks were prohibited from joining protests via a prakas signed by Non Nget and the Minister of Cults and Religions in June 2007. Coming up 2013 all monks are allowed to have the right to join the election. Supreme Patriarch Tep Vong, head of the country's largest Buddhist sect, retracted his order last year. When asked why, he said, "it is important for democracy" for monks to vote and he allowed Cambodian Buddhist clergy to join the voting. Monks were constitutionally allowed to vote, but many who tried were blocked by local officials or threatened with expulsion from their pagodas.

In the Cambodia context that is related to the monk leader in finding the peace, It was around this

[15] **ពុទ្ធសាសនានិងការអភិវឌ្ឍន៍សង្គមខ្មែរ** ភ្នំពេញ ការផ្សាយរបស់ពុទ្ធសាសនាដើម្បីអភិវឌ្ឍន៍ក្នុងកិច្ចសហប្រតិបត្តិការជាមួយក្រសួងធម្មការនិងសាសនានិងពុទ្ធសាសនបណ្ឌិត ឆ្នាំ១៩៩៦ ទំព័រ១៥៦

time that one of Cambodia's most famous proponents of "engaged Buddhism," Maha Ghosananda, who died in 2007, began to lead annual peace marches across the country. In the biography, Ghosananda walked against war, landmines and other scourges. He was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work. But historians say that the UN-backed elections in 1993, when monks were granted the vote for the first time, created a new sort of politicization. Like many noble ideas outlined in the UN blueprint for Cambodia, suffrage for monks didn't work out as planned, and the problem flared up every five years when national elections rolled around.

Around the political situation, the monk have join to perform their role in choosing the leader[16] that why make them supported and held the different parties. In the note, the top monk, the monk officers and powerful monks support the government and normal monks and Buddhist student monks support the opposition party, therefore they always have the different ideas. Meanwhile other groups of monks from two groups do not support both sides but try to help all kinds of people. So in the present time the Khmer monks not only play the important role for Buddhism but also perform the role in political situation and crisis in the country.

Conclusion

The main points of study on the Khmer monk are to focus on the living, the role of Khmer monk and the duty in helping to solve political crisis in the country in present situation. It reflects clearly about their living, the role and participating in the Khmer society.

For the life of monk in Cambodia, they have to live in the pagodas. Sometimes they can face many difficulties. They depend on four requisites, food, clothing, shelter and medicines that Khmer Buddhists[17] offer and they respond by sharing merit, spreading good will for them in the return. Khmer monk has to take care the pagoda by constructing and building, cleaning and protecting. They take care of the value[18] of Buddhist tradition and Khmer culture, tradition. The Khmer monks are pattern of good conduct and

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[16]ឥន្ទបញ្ញោ **ព្រះបាទធម្មិក** កិក្ខុ ហេង មណីចិន្តា ភ្នំពេញ ការផ្សាយរបស់ព្រះពុទ្ធសាសនាដើម្បីអភិវឌ្ឍន៍ ឆ្នាំ ១៩៩៥ទំព័រ ៤៣

[17] Ven. Dr. Phangcham, **Living Buddhism**, (Phnom Penh: English Language school, 1990), p. 649.

[18]**ពុទ្ធសាសនានិងការអភិវឌ្ឍន៍សង្គមខ្មែរ** ភ្នំពេញ ការផ្សាយរបស់ពុទ្ធសាសនាដើម្បីអភិវឌ្ឍន៍ក្នុងកិច្ចសហប្រតិបត្តិការជាមួយក្រសួងធម្មការនិង សាសនា និងពុទ្ធសាសនបណ្ឌិត ឆ្នាំ១៩៩៦ ទំព័រ ១៥១

morality for Khmer people. They practice *Dammar-Vinaya* strictly. Khmer monks act as the teacher of morality[19] and develop the harmony by giving good advice, the sermon and the teachings of Dharma to lay people.

For the activity, traditionally Khmer monks always perform Buddhist New Year, *Magha Puja, Visakha Puja, Asalaha Puja,* Buddhist lent, *Kathen* and Money flower ceremony. In daily activities they practice the duty particularly and regularly by joining the morning chanting, evening chanting, cleaning the ground of pagoda and going for alms.

In the present political situation, Khmer monks have joint politics for calling for justice, peace and happiness of people and joint the protest against injustice and corruption by calling for freedom and justice in Khmer society. The monks are believable and reliable, they are important refuge of mental thinking leading to calm and happiness. They are the leader of doing goodness and teaching the wrong and right ways to people. They are not only leader of the religious activities but also play important role to demonstrate the happy way, harmony and peace in the country.

The monks also join to hold the rights to choose the leader in the election, although sometimes the law and rule has prohibited to vote. The monks support and hold the different parties. Some monks support the government and some monks support the opposition party, meanwhile other monks are the middle way but try to help both sides in order to make the country calm and peace like the democratic countries.

Thus Khmer monks perform many of functions in Khmer society such as they are often healers, the practitioners and modern psychiatrists. They take care and transmit of Khmer culture and values. On the other hand, they provided a living model of the most meritorious behavior and many opportunities for gaining merit to people and they help to solve the political situation and crisis in the country, therefore the Khmer monks have many kinds of role and duty in leading, teaching and demonstrate the heavenly and happy ways to people.

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[19] Ven.Dr.Phangcham, **Living Buddhism**, (Phnom Penh: English Language school, 1990), pp. 64-65.

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នានាជម្មសង្គហៈ រាជធានីភ្នំពេញ ឆ្នាំ ២០០១

ឥន្ទបញ្ញោ កិក្ខុ ហេង មណីចិន្តា **ព្រះបាទធម្មិក** ភ្នំពេញ ការផ្សាយរបស់ព្រះពុទ្ធសាសនាដើម្បីអភិវឌ្ឍន៍ ឆ្នាំ១៩៩៥

លោកញាណ ភឿន និងលោកសុខ ហយ **លំអានទំនៀម ខ្មែរបុរាណ ភាគ ២** ភ្នំពេញ ព.ស ២៥៥១ គ.ស២០០៨

នវពុទ្ធសាសនិកក្នុងសករាជថ្មី ភ្នំពេញ ការផ្សាយរបស់មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលព្រះពុទ្ធសាសនាថ្ងៃអាទិត្យ ព.ស២៥៤៨គ.ស.២០០៥

ឆវិន សរៈខាំ **ប្រវត្តិសាស្ត្រនៃព្រះពុទ្ធសាសនានៅប្រទេសឥណ្ឌា** ភ្នំពេញ ប្រែសម្រួលដោ លោកគ្រូ អគ្គតេជោ នៅសាខនរោងពុម្ព ម៉ែងហាវ ព.ស ២៥៥០ គ.ស ២០០៦

ទស្សនៈ សម្តេចព្រះសង្ឃរាជ ជួន ណាត ចម្លងដោយបណ្ណាគារត្រៃរតន៍ ព.ស ២៥៤៦ គ.ស ២០០២

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