

## Buddhism

Theravada Buddhism is the religion of virtually all of the ethnic Khmer, who constitute about 90 percent or more of the Cambodian population. Buddhism originated in what are now north India and Nepal during the sixth century B.C. It was founded by a Sakya prince, Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 B.C.; his traditional dates are 623–543 B.C., also called the Gautama Buddha), who, at the age of twenty-nine, after witnessing old age, sickness, death, and meditation, renounced his high status and left his wife and infant son for a life of asceticism. After years of seeking truth, he is said to have attained enlightenment while sitting alone under a bo tree. He became the Buddha—"the enlightened"—and formed an order of monks, the sangha, and later an order of nuns. He spent the remainder of his life as a wandering preacher, dying at the age of eighty.

Buddhism began as a reaction to Hindu doctrines and as an effort to reform them. Nevertheless, the two faiths share many basic assumptions. Both view the universe and all life therein as parts of a cycle of eternal flux. In each religion, the present life of an individual is a phase in an endless chain of events. Life and death are merely alternate aspects of individual existence marked by the transition points of birth and death. An individual is thus continually reborn, perhaps in human form, perhaps in some non-human form, depending upon his or her actions in the previous life. The endless cycle of rebirth is known as samsara (wheel of life). Theravada Buddhism is a tolerant, non prescriptive religion that does not require belief in a supreme being. Its precepts require that each individual take full responsibility for his own actions and omissions. Buddhism is based on three concepts: dharma (the doctrine of the Buddha, his guide to right actions and belief); karma (the belief that one's life now and in future lives depends upon one's own deeds and misdeeds and that as an individual one is responsible for, and rewarded on the basis of, the sum total of one's acts and omissions in all one's incarnations past and present); and sangha, the ascetic community within which man can improve his karma.

The Buddha added the hope of escape—a way to get out of the endless cycle of pain and sorrow—to the Brahmanic idea of samsara. The Buddhist salvation is nirvana, a final extinction of

one's self. Nirvana may be attained by achieving good karma through earning much merit and avoiding misdeeds. A Buddhist's pilgrimage through existence is a constant attempt to distance himself or herself from the world and finally to achieve complete detachment, or nirvana.

The fundamentals of Buddhist doctrine are the Four Noble Truths: suffering exists; craving (or desire) is the cause of suffering; release from suffering can be achieved by stopping all desire; and enlightenment--buddhahood--can be attained by following the Noble Eightfold Path (right views, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration), which constitutes a middle way between sensuality and ascetism. Enlightenment consists of knowing these truths. The average layperson cannot hope for nirvana after the end of this life, but can--by complying, as best he or she is able to, with the doctrine's rules of moral conduct--hope to improve his or her karma and thereby better his condition in the next incarnation.

The doctrine of karma holds that, through the working of a just, automatic, and impersonal cosmic law, one's actions in this incarnation and in all previous ones will determine which position in the hierarchy of living things one will occupy in the next incarnation. An individual's karma can be improved through certain acts and omissions. By following the five precepts or commandments, a Buddhist can better his or her karma. These commandments are: do not kill, do not steal, do not indulge in forbidden sexual pleasures, do not tell lies, and do not take intoxicants or stupefying drugs or liquors.

The most effective way to work actively to improve one's karma is to earn merit. Any act of benevolence or generosity can gain merit for the doer. Cambodian Buddhists tend to regard opportunities for earning merit as primarily connected with interaction with the sangha, contributing to its support through money, goods, and labor, and participating in its activities. Some of the favorite ways for a male to earn merit are to enter the sangha as a monk (after the age of twenty) or as a novice, or to live in the wat as a temple servant; in the case of a female (usually the elderly), the favorite way is to become a nun. Other activities that gain merit include sponsoring a monk or novice, contributing to a wat, feeding

members of the sangha at a public meal, and providing food for either of the two daily meals of the sangha.

In his first sermon to his followers, the Buddha described a moral code, the dharma, which the sangha was to teach after him. He left no designated successor. Indian emperor Asoka (273–232 B.C.) patronized the sangha and encouraged the teaching of the Buddha's philosophy throughout his vast empire; by 246 B.C., the new religion had reached Sri Lanka. The Tripitaka, the collection of basic Buddhist texts, was written down for the first time in Sri Lanka during a major Buddhist conference in the second or first century B.C. By the time of the conference, a schism had developed separating Mahayana (Greater Path) Buddhism from more conservative Theravada (Way of the Elders, or Hinayana--Lesser Path) faction or Buddhism. The Mahayana faction reinterpreted the original teachings of the Buddha and added a type of deity called a bodhisattva to large numbers of other buddhas. The Mahayana adherents believe that nirvana is available to everyone, not just to select holy men. Mahayana Buddhism quickly spread throughout India, China, Korea, Japan, Central Asia, and to some parts of Southeast Asia. According to the Venerable Pang Khat, Theravada Buddhism reached Southeast Asia as early as the second or third century A.D., while Mahayana Buddhism did not arrive in Cambodia until about A.D. 791. In Southeast Asia, Mahayana Buddhism carried many Brahman beliefs with it to the royal courts of Funan, of Champa, and of other states. At this time, Sanskrit words were added to the Khmer and to the Cham languages. Theravada Buddhism (with its scriptures in the Pali language), remained influential in Sri Lanka, and by the thirteenth century it had spread into Burma, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, where it supplanted Mahayana Buddhism.

#### Cambodian Adaptations

Cambodian Buddhism has no formal administrative ties with other Buddhist bodies, although Theravada monks from other countries, especially Thailand, Laos, Burma, and Sri Lanka, may participate in religious ceremonies in order to make up the requisite number of clergy. Cambodian Buddhism is organized nationally in accordance with regulations formulated in 1943 and modified in 1948. During the monarchical period, the king led the Buddhist clergy. Prince Sihanouk continued in this role even after he had abdicated and was governing as head of state. He appointed both the heads of the

monastic orders and other high-ranking clergy. After the overthrow of Sihanouk in 1970, the new head of state, Lon Nol, appointed these leaders.

Two monastic orders constituted the clergy in Cambodia. The larger group, to which more than 90 percent of the clergy belonged, was the Mohanikay. The Thommayut order was far smaller. The Thommayut was introduced into the ruling circles of Cambodia from Thailand in 1864; it gained prestige because of its adoption by royalty and by the aristocracy, but its adherents were confined geographically to the Phnom Penh area. Among the few differences between the two orders is stricter observance by the Thommayut bonzes (monks) of the rules governing the clergy. In 1961 the Mohanikay had more than 52,000 ordained monks in some 2,700 wats, whereas the Thommayut order had 1,460 monks in just over 100 wats. In 1967 more than 2,800 Mohanikay wats and 320 Thommayut wats were in existence in Cambodia. After Phnom Penh, the largest number of Thommayut wats were found in Batdambang, Stoeng Treng, Prey Veng, Kampot, and Kampong Thum provinces.

Each order has its own superior and is organized into a hierarchy of eleven levels. The seven lower levels are known collectively as the thananukram; the four higher levels together are called the rajagana. The Mohanikay order has thirty-five monks in the rajagana; the Thommayut has twentyone . Each monk must serve for at least twenty years to be named to these highest levels.

The cornerstones of Cambodian Buddhism are the Buddhist bonze and the wat. Traditionally, each village has a spiritual center--a wat--where from five to more than seventy bonzes reside. A typical wat in rural Cambodia consists of a walled enclosure containing a sanctuary, several residences for bonzes, a hall, a kitchen, quarters for nuns, and a pond. The number of monks varies according to the size of the local population. The sanctuary, which contains an altar with statues of the Buddha and, in rare cases, a religious relic, is reserved for major ceremonies and usually only for the use of bonzes. Other ceremonies, classes for monks and for laity, and meals take place in the hall. Stupas containing the ashes of extended family members are constructed near the sanctuary. Fruit trees and vegetable gardens tended by local children are also part of the local wat. The main entrance, usually only for ceremonial use,

faces east; other entrances are located at other points around the wall. There are no gates.

Steinberg notes the striking ratio of bonzes to the total population of Cambodia. In the late 1950s, an estimated 100,000 bonzes (including about 40,000 novices) served a population of about 5 million. This high proportion undoubtedly was caused in large part by the ease with which one could enter and leave the sangha. Becoming a bonze and leaving the sangha are matters of individual choice although, in theory, nearly all Cambodian males over sixteen serve terms as bonzes. Most young men do not intend to become fully ordained bonzes (bhikkhu), and they remain as monks for less than a year. Even a son's temporary ordination as a bonze brings great merit to his parents, however, and is considered so important that arrangements are made at a parent's funeral if the son has not undergone the process while the parent was living. There are two classes of bonzes at a wat--the novices (samani or nen) and the bhikkhu. Ordination is held from mid-April to mid-July, during the rainy season.

Buddhist monks do not take perpetual vows to remain monks, although, in fact, some become monks permanently. Traditionally, they became monks early in life. It is possible to become a novice at as young an age as seven, but in practice thirteen is the earliest age for novices. A bhikkhu must be at least twenty. The monk's life is regulated by Buddhist law, and life in the wat adheres to a rigid routine. A bhikkhu follows 227 rules of monastic discipline as well as the 10 basic precepts. These include the five precepts that all Buddhists should follow. The five precepts for monastic asceticism prohibit eating after noon, participating in any entertainment (singing, dancing, and watching movies or television), using any personal adornments, sleeping on a luxurious bed, and handling money. In addition, a monk also is expected to be celibate. Furthermore, monks supposedly avoid all involvement in political affairs. They are not eligible to vote or to hold any political office, and they may not witness a legal document or give testimony in court. Since the person of a monk is considered sacred, he is considered to be outside the normal civil laws and public duties that affect lay people. Some of these practices have changed in the modern period, however, and in the 1980s Buddhist monks have been active even in the PRK government.

Women are not ordained, but older women, especially widows, can become nuns. They live in wat and play an important role in the everyday life of the temple. Nuns shave their heads and eyebrows and generally follow the same precepts as monks. They may prepare the altars and do some of the housekeeping chores.

### Role of Buddhism in Cambodian Life

Buddhist monks traditionally were called upon to perform a number of functions in Cambodian life. They participated in all formal village festivals, ceremonies, marriages, and funerals. They also might have participated in ceremonies to name infants and in other minor ceremonies or rites of passage. Monks did not lead the ceremonies, however, because that role was given to the achar, or master of ceremonies; the monk's major function was to say prayers of blessing. They were often healers and, in traditional Khmer culture, they were the practitioners whose role was closest to that of modern psychiatrists. They might also have been skilled in astrology. The monk traditionally occupied a unique position in the transmission of Khmer culture and values. By his way of life, he provided a living model of the most meritorious behavior a Buddhist could follow. He 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.

After independence from France, young Cambodian intellectuals changed their attitude toward the clergy. In describing a general shift away from Buddhism in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, Vickery cites the early work of anthropologist May Mayko Ebihara and his own observations. He suggests that the Khmer Rouge was able to instill antireligious feelings in younger males because the latter were losing interest in becoming monks even during their teenage years, the traditional temporary period of service. The monks themselves had abandoned some of their traditional restrictions and had become involved in politics. At intervals during the colonial period, some monks had demonstrated or had rebelled against French rule, and in the 1970s monks joined pro-government demonstrations against the communists. Anticlerical feelings reached their highest point among the Khmer Rouge, who at first attempted to indoctrinate monks and to force them to pass

anticlerical ideas on to the laity. Under the Khmer Rouge regime, monks were expelled forcibly from the wats and were compelled to do manual labor. Article 20 of the 1976 Constitution of Democratic Kampuchea permitted freedom of religion but banned all reactionary religions, that were "detrimental to the country." The minister of culture stated that Buddhism was incompatible with the revolution and was an instrument of exploitation. Under this regime, to quote the Finnish Inquiry Commission, "The practice of religion was forbidden and the pagodas were systematically destroyed." Observers estimated that 50,000 monks died during the Khmer Rouge regime. The status of Buddhism and of religion in general after the Vietnamese invasion was at least partially similar to its status in pre-Khmer Rouge times.

According to Michael Vickery, who has written positively about the PRK, public observance of Buddhism and of Islam has been reestablished, and government policies allow Cambodians freedom to believe or not to believe in Buddhism. Vickery cites some differences in this reestablished Buddhism. Religious affairs are overseen by the PRK's Kampuchean (or Khmer) United Front for National Construction and Defense (KUFNCD), the mass organization that supports the state by organizing women, youths, workers, and religious groups. In 1987 there was only a single Buddhist order because the Thommayut order had not been revived. The organization of the clergy also had been simplified. The sangharaja (primate of the Buddhist clergy) had been replaced by a prathean (chairman). Communities that wanted a wats had to apply to a local front committee for permission. The wat were administered by a committee of the local laity. Private funds paid for the restoration of the wats damaged during the war and the Khmer Rouge era, and they supported the restored wats. Monks were ordained by a hierarchy that has been reconstituted since an initial ordination in September 1979 by a delegation from the Buddhist community in Vietnam. The validity of this ordination continues to be questioned. In general, there are only two to four monks per wat, which is fewer than before 1975. In 1981 about 4,930 monks served in 740 wats in Cambodia. The Buddhist General Assembly reported 7,000 monks in 1,821 active wats a year later. In 1969 by contrast, observers estimated that 53,400 monks and 40,000 novice monks served in more than 3,000 wats. Vickery sums up his observations on the subject by noting that, "The

government has kept its promise to allow freedom for traditional Buddhism, but does not actively encourage it."

Martin offers another, more pessimistic, view of the religious situation in the late 1980s. In a 1986 study, she asserts that the PRK showed outsiders only certain aspects of religious freedom; she also states that the few wats that were restored had only two or three old monks in residence and that public attendance was low. The monks were allowed to leave the wats only for an hour in the mornings, to collect their food, or during holy days. Lay people who practiced their faith were about the same ages as the monks, and they were allowed to visit the wats only in the evenings. A government circular had also instructed civil servants to stop celebrating the traditional New Year Festival. Some traditional Buddhist festivals still were tolerated, but the state collected a 50 percent tithe on donations. Martin believes that Buddhism was threatened externally by state repression and by nonsupport and internally by invalid clergy. She noted that the two Buddhist superiors, Venerable Long Chhim and Venerable Tep Vong, were both believed to be from Vietnam. Venerable Tep Vong was concurrently the superior of the Buddhist clergy, vice president of the PRK's Khmer National Assembly, and vice president of the KUFNCD National Council. She quoted a refugee from Batdambang as having said, "During the meetings, the Khmer administrative authorities, accompanied by the Vietnamese experts, tell you, 'Religion is like poison, it's like opium; it's better to give the money to the military, so they can fight'."

Buddhism is still strong among the various Cambodian refugee groups throughout the world, although some younger monks, faced with the distractions of a foreign culture, have chosen to leave the clergy and have become laicized. In the United States in 1984, there were twelve Cambodian wats with about twenty-one monks. In the 1980s, a Cambodian Buddhist wat was constructed near Washington, D.C., financed by a massive outpouring of donations from Cambodian Buddhists throughout North America. This wat is one of the few outside Southeast Asia that has the consecrated boundary within which ordinations may be performed.

Most of the major Cambodian annual festivals are connected with Buddhist observances. The chol chnam (New Year Festival) takes place in mid-April; it was one of the few festivals allowed under the

Khmer Rouge regime. The phchun ben, celebrated in September or in October, is a memorial day for deceased ancestors and for close friends. Meak bochea, in January or February, commemorates the last sermon of the Buddha. Vissakh bochea, in April or in May, is the triple anniversary of the birth, death, and enlightenment of the Buddha. The chol vossa takes place in June or in July; it marks the beginning of a penitential season during which the monks must remain within the temple compounds. The kathen marks the end of this season; celebrated in September, it features offerings, especially of robes, to the monks. The kathen was still celebrated in the PRK in the late 1980s.

Cambodian Buddhism exists side-by-side with, and to some extent intermingles with, pre-Buddhist animism and Brahman practices. Most Cambodians, whether or not they profess to be Buddhists (or Muslims), believe in a rich supernatural world. When ill, or at other times of crisis, or to seek supernatural help, Cambodians may enlist the aid of a practitioner who is believed to be able to propitiate or obtain help from various spirits. Local spirits are believed to inhabit a variety of objects, and shrines to them may be found in houses, in Buddhist temples, along roads, and in forests.

Several types of supernatural entities are believed to exist; they make themselves known by means of inexplicable sounds or happenings. Among these phenomena are khmoc (ghosts), pret and besach (particularly nasty demons, the spirits of people who have died violent, untimely, or unnatural deaths), arak (evil spirits, usually female), neak ta (tutelary spirits residing in inanimate objects), mneang phteah (guardians of the house), meba (ancestral spirits), and mrenh kongveal (elf-like guardians of animals). All spirits must be shown proper respect, and, with the exception of the mneang phteah and mrenh kongveal, they can cause trouble ranging from mischief to serious life-threatening illnesses. An important way for living people to show respect for the spirits of the dead is to provide food for the spirits. If this food is not provided, the spirit can cause trouble for the offending person. For example, if a child does not provide food for the spirit of its dead mother, that spirit can cause misfortunes to happen to the child.

Aid in dealing with the spirit world may be obtained from a kru (shaman or spirit practitioner), an achar (ritualist), thmup (witch, sorcerer or sorceress), or a rup arak (medium, usually male). The

kru is a kind of sorcerer who prepares charms and amulets to protect the wearer from harm. He can cure illnesses, find lost objects, and prepare magic potions. Traditionally, Cambodians have held strong beliefs about protective charms. Amulets are worn routinely by soldiers to ward off bullets, for example. The kru are believed to have the power to prepare an amulet and to establish a supernatural link between it and the owner. A kru may acquire considerable local prestige and power. Many kru are former Buddhist monks.

Another kind of magical practitioner is the achar, a specialist in ritual. He may function as a kind of master of ceremonies at a wat and as a specialist in conducting spirit worship rituals connected with life-cycle ceremonies. Rup arak are mediums who can be possessed by supernatural beings and communicate with the spirit world. The thmup are sorcerers who cause illnesses.

Fortunetellers and astrologers--haor teay--are important in Cambodian life. They are consulted about important decisions such as marriages, building a new house, or going on a long journey. They are believed to be able to foretell future events and to determine lucky or unlucky days for various activities.

Villagers are sensitive to the power and to the needs of the spirit world. According to observations by an American missionary in the early 1970s, villagers consulted the local guardian spirit to find out what the coming year would bring, a new province chief held a ceremony to ask the protection of the spirits over the province, and soldiers obtained magic cloths and amulets from mediums and shamans to protect them from the bullets of the enemy. Before embarking on a mission against enemy forces, a province chief might burn incense and call on a spirit for aid in defeating the enemy. Examples of Brahman influences were various rituals concerned with the well-being of the nation carried out by the ruler and the baku (a Brahman priestly group attached to the royal court). These rituals were reportedly stopped after Sihanouk's ouster in 1970.