



Buddhist monks at one of the remnants of the Angkor Empire.

the Buddhism of Cambodia

Cambodia's unique style of Buddhism is deeply embedded in the nation's psyche. Inpa Eliezer explores the religion which lies at the nation's heart.

With a population that is 90% ethnic Khmer, Cambodia is the most homogeneous country in South East Asia. Language, culture and religion are much the same throughout the country. They are a people who are intensely proud of the Angkorian era (9-13th century AD). Their history underscores their identity as one people despite the fact that the country plummeted to its worst state of civilisation in the last three decades.

The nation has changed dramatically in recent times, and whether one calls it modernisation or globalisation, it is all happening in Cambodia with the input of the international community seeking to set the country on the path of recovery and development. The influence, or should one say, the pressure from the outside world has brought about immense changes, ranging from a new constitution (in 1993) to mobile phones in teenagers' hands.

A nation's heart

Changes will remain external and superficial, even temporary, unless the heart and mind-set of Cambodia undergoes reconstruction. This nation has the Angkorean crown for its head, and for its heart – her religion. This religion is enshrined in the constitution and is incessantly reinforced through

every government communiqué, the header carrying the words, 'King, Nation, Religion'.

What is this religion? It is a unique blend which we may call Buddhism by rule of thumb, but to get locked into such a tag is to miss the facets and fascinations of its eccentricity. For one thing, the Cambodian world is incredibly and inherently spiritual. In every nook and corner they can see spirits in varying proportion and power. Some are *devadas* (angels) while others are *kamauch* (ghosts). The rare *baisach* ghost comes when a cat jumps three times across a corpse prior to burial. This dangerous ghost sucks blood out of people. *Neak-ta* is probably the most sought after spirit because it is believed to endow one with *ancestral power*.

This spiritism, somewhat detached from the official religion, is clearly evident through the tiny shrine-houses erected in the yards of homes in Cambodia. Then you have the makeshift shrines erected for *neak-ta* among trees, riverbanks and in any mysterious or outlandish place. Even though Buddhist *Wats* (pagodas/temples) are scattered throughout the country, life revolves around *neak-ta* because it is easily accessed to meet ones' immediate needs. Ironically, shrines of *neak-ta* may even be found within the premises of Buddhist wats.

Spirits dominate the lives of people, instilling them with fear even though some ghosts are understood to be good. With costly sacrifices and rituals the spirits are appeased to keep them from bothering you with bad dreams and sicknesses. On the other hand the 'good' spirits may be solicited to assist in ones' business and such matters. The offering, ranging from a bunch of bananas to a pig sacrifice, will depend on the nature of the problem and the type of spirit it is attributed to.

Making merit

Where is Buddhism in Cambodia? It is best displayed in the wats – nearly 4000 of them built since the 14th century when monks from Sri Lanka brought the religion to a nation beginning to disintegrate militarily, economically and socially. Until then Hinduism was the major religion, coexisting with the old animistic religion. If animism was the undergarment now Theravada Buddhism came on as the outer coat, and so the wats and the monks started dominating community life. However, the wats did not facilitate worship but became the focal point for *merit-making*. This is where Buddhism affected the psyche the most.

In the core of Buddhism rests the teaching that a person's good and bad

What do Buddhists believe about . . .

Buddhism differs around the world although there are common doctrines:

God

Guatama Buddha (born in Nepal in about 560BC) never declared himself to be divine although in many countries he is venerated as if he were divine and prayers are offered to him. In some Buddhist-influenced languages there is no word for God.

Revelation

The Buddha did not claim divine sources for his teachings but rather saw his teachings as providing an example for fellow monks.

The human condition

Buddha declared four 'noble truths':

- Suffering is universal
- The cause of suffering is selfish desire

➤The cure for suffering is elimination of selfish desire

➤Elimination of selfish desire comes through pursuing eight disciplines.

Salvation

Buddhism, like Hinduism, teaches that when a person dies their soul returns in a new body through a process of rebirth (*reincarnation*). All people carry the consequences of previous lives (*karma*).

Those who pursue eight disciplines – the Noble Eightfold Path – will achieve ultimate enlightenment, or nirvana. Their soul will be released from the endless chain of re-births. Some believe this to be a state of nothingness with no further sense of self while others view it as a state of rest and happiness.

From *Connecting Across Cultures*, David Claydon, Acorn Press, 2000

deeds from a previous life predetermine his/her fate for the present life according to the *law of karma*. This is the law of cause and effect, and a person can't change their situation but should be resigned to his/her destiny. This life, depending on how much merit or demerit one acquires will predetermine not only one's fate for the next life but also the form of rebirth – whether he/she is born as a human or as an animal. Buddhism takes a pessimistic view of the world and advocates that the goal of life is to move through numerous cycles of birth, death and rebirth, constantly climbing the ladder through merit, towards the ultimate state of *nirvana* – a state of nonexistence which represents an escape from the cycle of karma.

Facing death

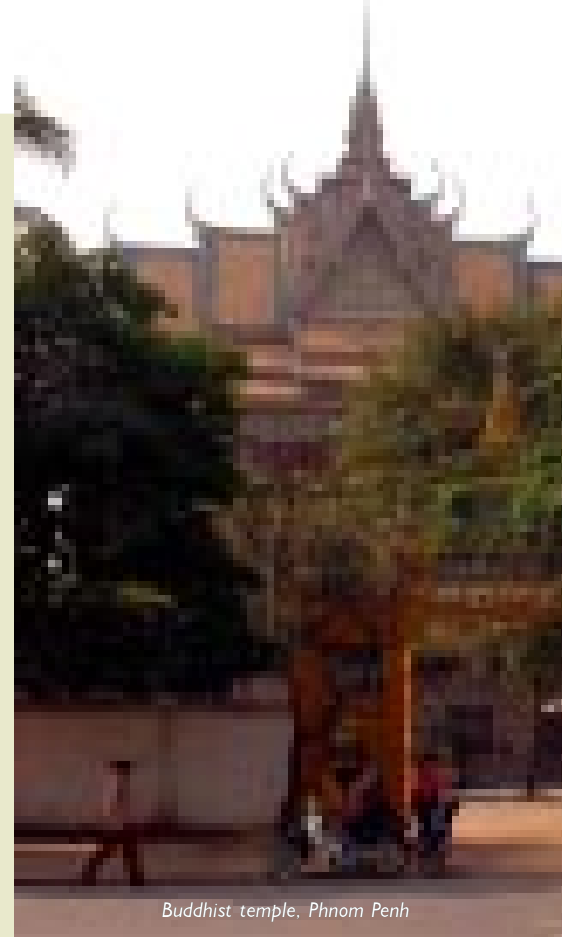
Nirvana does not dominate the Cambodian psyche; the cycle of rebirths, is important to some degree. It is really the notion of merit-making which seals Cambodian people to Buddhism. Why? Because they have faced the daily reality of fear as they are bombarded by spirits. It is unimaginable to face death with the likelihood of ending up in the realm of spirits/ghosts. Cambodian people hold a clear concept of heaven and hell, very similar to the Judaic/Christian view. If their immediate need is to be unfettered from the spirits it is understandable how

they yearn to avoid hell. Thus, most Cambodians understand the core of Buddhism in the simple words, "Do good deeds, get good". Merit is gained chiefly through undertaking numerous *Boeun* (rituals/ceremonies) associated with the wats rather than through one's ethical life.

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These *Boeuns* are not pure Buddhist ceremonies but reflect practices coming from Hinduism, animism and ancestor worship. Further deviation from Buddhism becomes evident in the purpose for which they participate in these ceremonies – often it is to transfer merit to ones' dead parents or ancestors to move them upward from hell.

A classic example of such a ceremony is the *Pchum Boeun*. The government affirmed its importance by declaring the ceremony a national holiday. During this season those in hell are released for a period. It is thought that ghosts visit the wats and it is considered prudent for children to give the necessary offering to the wat. If not, these ghosts may leave



Buddhist temple, Phnom Penh

behind a curse and something bad could happen to the negligent. Here again one can see how spirits/ghosts and fear oppress the lives of people in Cambodia.

Jesus the saviour

The Cambodian people need to know about the meritorious act of Jesus to move us from hell to heaven. It is a *Boeun* of atonement he did for us on the cross. They not only have the concept of heaven and hell, they are also accustomed to the idea of transferring merit. Moving on they need to grasp that this saviour is also the Lord of their life. It is not easy for them to move from the ideas of many powers (spirits) to One Almighty God. This is where the creation narrative is so important. They need to hear about the power of God of which the creation continues to testify. God's authority over all spirits, and our derived authority, need to be grasped. The call and challenge to the Church is not an overnight job – it is a painstaking process where creativity and prayer need to come together.

Inpa Eliezer (left) teaches Theological Education by Extension in Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

