

# Cambodia remembers the Great Joyful Proclaimer

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AND SAM RITH

Cambodia's legendary Buddhist peacemaker, Samdech Preah Maha Ghosananda, whose Sanskrit name means The Great Joyful Proclaimer, died on March 13 in a hospital in North Hampton, Massachusetts, from complications following a stroke. He was 81.

At a ceremony held on March 18 at Wat Sampeov Meas, four-time Nobel Peace Prize nominee Ghosananda was remembered for his courage, holiness, wisdom and warmth. He had, in the words of former assistant Heng Mony Chenda, "an eternal smile."

Speaking in reverential tones, religious and civil society leaders in attendance recalled Ghosananda's charisma and honesty with high praise — and the deep respect reserved for only the most august. Patti Curran, who met Ghosananda in 1993, described him as "a man of loving-kindness and a pure heart."

Others described his devotion to peace and an otherworldly capacity for forgiveness — even against the Khmer Rouge regime that killed his entire family.

"I do not question that loving one's oppressor may be the most difficult thing to achieve, but it is the law of the universe that hatred and revenge is a self-perpetuating cycle," Ghosananda once wrote. "Reconciliation does not mean we surrender the wisdom of our rights and conditions. Wisdom and compassion must walk together. Without one, you are walking on one leg."

Arlys Herem, who first marched with Ghosananda in 1991 as an NGO volunteer, said she will never forget "his warmth, his smile, his peace." His actions inspired a generation of activists.

"We have lost a great Buddhist name; we've lost our Gandhi," said Kek Galabru, founder and president of rights group Licadho at the ceremony. "He had a great heart, and presence. He had no negative thoughts. He taught that when there is no hatred, there is hope. He always said that with peace and joy and love we would survive. He was one who brought us hope when there was none."



Ghosananda, who was said to be fluent in 15 languages, became famous in the early 1980s for his work in Cambodian refugee camps, establishing temples for the Cambodian diaspora and for his later Dhammayietra peace walks through war-torn country.

"He's an Arhant, which I'd compare to a saint," said Mony Chenda, now director of Buddhism for Development. "We started working together in 1987 in the refugee camps along the Thai border. The first thing he did in the camps was save Cambodian refugees from the Thai authorities and police. I saw him plead with soldiers not to be so hard on Cambodians. He told the people not to lose hope, and to some day return to Cambodia."

Ghosananda was lauded at the memorial ceremony in speeches and funerary chants by Great Supreme Patriarch Tep Vong, Cambodia's top Buddhist leader, and

Supreme Patriarch Bou Kri, head of the Dhamyuth Order.

"Maha Ghossanda is the one peace activist that we really have in Cambodia — all Cambodian citizens, have heard Maha Ghosananda's advice about peace," said Chhorn Eam, secretary of state at the Ministry of Cults and Religious Affairs, on March 21. "He taught that when our mind is at peace, our family is also at peace; when our family is peaceful, our society is peaceful; and when our society is at peace, our nation is at peace."

But despite praise from top Buddhist clergy, Ghosananda generally worked outside of Cambodia and rarely stayed in his homeland for long periods. Religious analysts told the *Post* that he was not instrumental in rebuilding Buddhism inside Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge, as this was handled by the Vietnamese-installed government of the People's

Republic of Kampuchea (PRK).

"He was an international man," Mony Chenda said. "He was borderless. His philosophy was borderless and his love and compassion were borderless. He looked at enemies and friends as the same thing. All he talked about was peace. He's really not been well-observed in Cambodia."

Still, his teachings, peace marches — and his book *Step by Step: Meditations on Wisdom and Compassion* — have gained him a polytheistic following. He met Pope John Paul II, the Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi and the former leaders of the Khmer Rouge.

"We are very sorry about the death of Maha Ghosananda because he was very intellectual and he found peace not only for Cambodia, but all over the world — the world acknowledged his achievements," said So Sarith, director of Wat Lanka's Lon Nget

Buddhist high school. "He [was] a top monk. Very famous. We should take him as the example, he knows a lot of dharma especially peace dharma, and he has given his whole life to Buddhism."

A press statement released by the Son Sann Foundation following Ghosananda's death described the Dhammayietra as "one of the landmarks in Cambodia history." The statement called Ghosananda "the pride of the Cambodian people, upholding what is right and just to do, the light of hope shining out in the dark hours of Cambodian history."

According to Mony Chenda, Ghosananda was a free monk who never spoke about politics.

"He was not a leader," Mony Chenda said. "He never asked anyone to follow him."

But so many did — step by step.

## A busy monk's life

**1926:** Born Takeo Province, later reduces his age by three years to attend Catholic School, according to a longtime friend.

**1943:** Initiated into Cambodian Buddhist Order.

**1953:** Studied at Nalanda University in Bihar State, India.

**1969:** Received doctoral degree from Nalanda University, title "Maha Ghosananda" bestowed. Entered hermitage of Thai meditation master Achaan Dhammadaro.

**1979:** Met first influx of Cambodian refugees entering Sakeo camp following expulsion of Khmer Rouge regime from power.

**1979:** Established temples in refugee camps on the Thai-Cambodia border.

**1980:** Represented Khmer nation-in-exile as consultant to the United Nations Economic and Social Council.

**1981:** Founded Buddhist temples in Cambodian resettlement communities in North America, Europe and Australia.

**1983:** Met Pope John Paul II in Rome to discuss religious basis for world peace.

**1988:** Becomes a Supreme Patriarch (in exile) of Buddhism in Cambodia.

**1988-1991:** Led contingents of Bud-

dhist monks to United Nations-sponsored Cambodian Peace negotiations, proposing a compromise and reminding national leaders that "Peace is our common goal."

**1992:** Received the title Samdech Preah from then-Prince Sihanouk in Phnom Penh, popularly known as Samdech Song Santepheap (Lord Monk of Peace) in Cambodia.

**1992:** Led the First Dhammayietra Walk for Peace and Reconciliation for one month through northern Cambodia during the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC).

**1992:** *Step by Step: Meditations on Wisdom and Compassion* by Maha Ghosananda was published by Parallax Press, USA and has since been published in Khmer, Thai, Spanish and Portuguese.

**1992:** Awarded Rafto Foundation Prize for Human Rights, Bergen, Norway.

**1993:** Led Second Dhammayietra through area of civil war before first Cambodian elections, encouraging citizens to overcome fear of political violence and intimidation and exercise their right to vote.

**1993:** Named honorary leader of

Ponleu Khmer, citizens' advisory council to the Cambodian Constitutional Assembly.

**1994:** Led Third Dhammayietra through the war-torn western province of Cambodia. The walk was caught in crossfire between government and rebel forces and two peace walkers were killed.

**1993:** Led contingent of highest-ranking monks to peace negotiations held under the auspices of King Sihanouk in North Korea and to a second round of negotiations later in Phnom Penh.

**1993:** Nominated for 1994 Nobel Prize for Peace by US Senator Claiborne Pell.

**1995:** Nominated for Nobel Prize for Peace for a second time by US Senator Pell and an anonymous laureate.

**1995 — January:** Dedicated Disabled Persons' Center, Phnom Penh.

**1995 — May-June:** Led Fourth Dhammayietra for Peace and Reconciliation in Cambodia, walking from the Thai border to the Vietnamese border. Continued calls for peace negotiations and educating public about the dangers from land mines and unexploded ordinance.

**1995 — September:** Led International

Peace Day Ceremonies, during Cambodian Festival of the Dead, for a ban on land mines.

**1995 — October:** Attended United Nations Review Conference on Conventional Weapons to present the suffering of ordinary people due to land mines and plea for a total ban on them.

**1996:** Nominated for the Nobel Prize for Peace for third year in a row, by American Friends Service Committee.

**1996 — February:** Led Ban Mines Week parade in Phnom Penh.

**1996 — April:** Attended United Nations Review Conference on Conventional Weapons, Geneva, to again plead for a total ban on land mines.

**1996 — May-June:** Led the Fifth Dhammayietra for Peace and Reconciliation in Cambodia, focusing on deforestation and the link between the military, illegal logging and the on-going civil war. Drew a link between healthy forests and the life of the Buddhist order. Members of the Peace Council joined the walk.

**1996 — December:** Met with members of the Khmer Rouge to arrange a

route for the 1997 Walk for Peace and Reconciliation in Cambodia. Was patron of conference on Buddhism and Peace in Battambang, Cambodia, which was organized by the Buddhism for Development group and was attended by representative of different militant forces.

**1997:** Nominated for the Nobel Prize for Peace for a fourth time, by an anonymous former Nobel laureate.

**1997 — March-April:** Led the sixth Dhammayietra through areas of Cambodia which were, until a few months before, under the total control of the Khmer Rouge. The walk successfully concluded at the Angkor period ruins of Banteay Chhmar.

**1997 — May:** Invited by the Dalai Lama to co-lead an ecumenical service for Tibet at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC.

**1997 — June:** As a patron of the organization, he attended the International Network of Engaged Buddhists conference in Kanchanaburi province, Thailand, which brought together Buddhist social activists from throughout Asia and around the world.

**1997 — August:** After the coup in July he led the first mass event calling for an end to the use of violence in Cambodian power struggles.