

Buddha's teachings and the struggle for freedom in Cambodia

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I write often that our future and what we do are not dictated by what we know. It is how we think, more than what we know, that determines the quality of our life and the quality of anything we do.

I also write often that though our brains can store countless facts and data, similar to keeping rocks in a box, that information is good and useful only if we can explain, interpret, evaluate, compare, and relate it to other facts and other situations around us, which requires critical thought, a capacity that can be taught and learned.

And Lord Gautama Buddha (563 B.C.-483 B.C.) was not only one of the world's great critical thinkers, he was also an activist from whom we can learn a lot.

Officially, 96.4 percent of the 14 million Cambodians are Buddhist; and there are more than 4,000 Buddhist monasteries scattered across the country, housing more than 50,000 monks. Theoretically Cambodians are followers of Buddha. Are they? What did Buddha teach about thought, action, and change?

I have written about a prominent Buddhist monk in Phnom Penh who questioned quietly how many monks (and how many Buddhists) really understand Buddha's teaching. I have also mentioned a Khmer scholar who asked in his writing whether Khmer Buddhist beliefs are only "skin deep", and pleaded for some serious "soul searching" amongst the Khmer Buddhists.

These are important points, because a misunderstanding of Buddha's teaching could hinder Cambodia's development and Cambodians' struggle for rights and freedom. Personally, I believe a correct application of Buddha's teaching could advance Cambodians' search for rights and freedom.

Buddha's teachings: Are Cambodians learning?

As Buddha himself said, "However many holy words you read, however many you speak, what good will they do if you do not act upon them?" The German playwright, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote, "Knowing is not enough, we must apply. Willing is not enough, we must do."

So in my writing, I have reiterated Buddha's words from 2,500 years ago: "We are what we think... What we think, we become" and "He is able who thinks he is able". This latter quote should humble us today as specialists encourage positive thinking and the development of a "yes, we can" attitude to help make problems easier to solve and predicaments easier to cope with.

An activist, Buddha said man is responsible for what he becomes and that he is not a product of karma: Man can improve his life here and now, and not wait for the next life. "I do not believe in a fate that falls on men however they act; but I do believe in a fate that falls on them unless they act." "I never see what has been done; I only see

what remains to be done.” “Pay no attention to the faults of others, things done or left undone by others. Consider only what by oneself is done or left undone.”

So, what should man do? “To be idle is a short road to death and to be diligent is a way of life,” Buddha said, and therefore, “Work out your own salvation. Do not depend on others... No one saves us but ourselves. No one can and no one may. We ourselves must walk the path.” In other words, man can do something to improve his lot in life and not to count on others.

These are themes I have emphasized in my writing. Think positively, dream big, imagine the world we want to see, demonstrate a can-do attitude, and take the first step, however small.

While Buddha says, “An idea that is developed and put into action is more important than an idea that exists only as an idea,” he also warned, “One thought leads to heaven, one thought leads to hell.” So we learn how to think and apply the thought that leads to heaven!

Buddha’s principles of “Four Reliances”

And so, Buddha provided man with a guide in the principles of “Four Reliances”: First, to rely on the spirit and meaning of the teaching, not the words; second, to rely on the teaching, not on the personality of the teacher; third, to rely on the wisdom in the teaching, not the superficial interpretation; and fourth, to rely on the essence of our own pure Wisdom Mind (obtained through the eightfold-path), not on judgmental perceptions.

One lesson taught by Buddha, which I never tire of repeating, is his emphasis on “reason” and on accepting and living up to that which is to “the good and benefit of one and all”.

“Do not believe in anything because you have heard it. Do not believe in anything simply because it is spoken and rumoured by many. Do not believe in anything simply because it is found written in your religious books. Do not believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. Do not believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it.”

What we do today matters most

Buddha’s “Do not dwell in the past, do not dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment,” were not meant to discard the past as a lesson. He never tells man not to learn from the past, but he tells man not to be stuck in the past, not to live in it because it locks him in and provides him with no way to move forward. What has happened, happened, there is nothing one can do to change that. And he says, “Nothing is permanent.”

He warns us not to waste time dreaming about a future that is yet to come, but to focus on the importance of today: We have 24 hours to do something today, here and

now, to avoid the pitfalls of the past, and to affect the kind of future we want to see. Man, not karma, is responsible for the future. Think positively, think creatively and critically, and act now to build a new world.

“Each morning we are born again,” Buddha says, “What we do today is what matters most.”

Any individual with common sense can see how all the above—and many other teachings by Buddha not mentioned here—apply to the life of Cambodians in particular, as they face difficult times.

Learning to relate

Last month, at about the same time Cambodians celebrated the New Year 2555 of the Buddhist Era, the United States also celebrated the 150th anniversary of the American Civil War (1861-1865), the bloodiest conflict in its history. I used the occasion to write about how two general officers of two warring armies (which suffered 630,000 killed and more than one million injured) worked out in dignity and mutual respect the terms of surrender and organized a moving ceremony of disbanding the defeated army with “honour answering honour”.

As the Civil War ended, the United States motto, *E pluribus unum*—Out of many, one—became alive, the many states of the United States became one nation, peace and reunification subsumed years of animosities, and the American Nation became stronger and united.

I do not know what lessons Cambodian readers may have drawn from that article, but the picture of two adversaries coming to deal with one another with integrity and humanity at the conclusion of the Civil War was a far cry from Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge victors executing the vanquished and turning the country into killing fields.

The divided warring states of the United States were able to reunite and rebuild, whereas the four warring Cambodian factions, even blessed with the 1991 Paris Peace Accord, were cowed into submission by Prime Minister Hun Sen and his ruling Cambodian People’s Party.

Cambodians who oppose Hun Sen’s autocratic regime can learn from India’s political and spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi, who observed, “A small body of determined spirits fired by an unquenchable faith in their mission can alter the course of history.”

Gandhi, 5 feet and 3 inches, and weighing a mere 100 pounds, told the world, “You can chain me, you can torture me, you can even destroy this body, but you will never imprison my mind.”

And Gandhi’s mind was made up and unshakable. Gandhi was determined to lead his people in a non-violent struggle to end the British Empire’s rule over India. He and his people won.

As US President John F Kennedy said, “A man may die, nations may rise and fall, but an idea lives on.” Ideas were what interested Buddha.

Thomas Jefferson was only 32 when he wrote in the 1776 Declaration of Independence, a sentence that has inspired men and women around the world: “We believe these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...” The declaration became one of the world’s most admired historical documents.

Fifty-six Americans—lawyers, jurists, merchants, plantation owners, farmers—signed the Declaration. They knew what would become of them should they be captured by the British and charged with treason. As the story is told, of the 56 signers, five were captured and tortured until they died; nine fought and died in the Revolutionary War; 12 had their homes ransacked and burned; two lost their sons in the War; another had two sons captured.

Nearly one hundred years after independence, Americans fought between themselves over the issues of human rights and slavery. The Civil War over, the fight for equal rights never stopped. American children go to school, learn the sacredness of the self-evident truths. And today’s Americans continue their relentless fight to ensure that the self-evident truths live on.

The struggle of the Cambodians

As self-described followers of Buddha’s teaching, Cambodian democrats who are generally Buddhist, should be successful in their struggle, the goals of which are clear and worthy: Keep the Cambodian nation from being overtaken by expansionist neighbours; protect the country’s national independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity; protect and defend the individual rights and freedoms of the Cambodian people in accordance with the Khmer Constitution and all relevant international conventions to which Cambodia is a party.

Yet Cambodian democrats are in disarray. Individually and as opposition parties they fight and tear at one another more ferociously than they fight the dictatorial regime in power. When Cambodian democrats call for national unity, they generally mean unity behind their respective leadership and party.

Cambodians of my generation, many of whom remain politically active in Cambodia, learned in elementary school that “Samakki chea kamlaing,” or “L’union fait la force” –or “Unity makes strength”. It is a common precept. Among Cambodians of all generations however, Buddha’s teachings provide the foundation for unity across political parties. The teachings illuminate an apolitical way forward.

How far the strand of Cambodian authoritarianism extends can be worrisome. I find it astounding that some Cambodians find it appropriate to raise doubts about people and pejoratively brand them, because they hold different political opinions and methods for dealing with problems.

I would not have believed this until in an e-mail someone I do not know charged that I am a “Vietnamese who pretend(s) to be Khmer... to destroy Khmers” because of my criticism of Hun Sen’s autocracy, asserting that I have not written on the most recent Khmer-Thai spat over Preah Vihear Temple, nor have I written about Kampuchea Krom, and that right now is not the time to criticize Hun Sen but to unite all Khmers

against Thailand's aggression!

I recall Buddha's words: "There is nothing more dreadful than the habit of doubt. Doubt separates people. It is a poison that disintegrates friendships and breaks up pleasant relations. It is a thorn that irritates and hurts; it is a sword that kills."

The "Lotus" Movement

I have previously written about the Cambodian "Lotus" movement: A movement of Cambodians of different political viewpoints from different areas of the world, who joined in Paris to demand Vietnam's withdrawal from Cambodia and that Hun Sen step down.

A few days ago, a Khmer statement, "Our Determination," in my inbox, made me smile. I liked it. Here's my translation of it:

"If we don't want dictatorship, let's not moan and groan.

"If we don't like foreign domination, let's not whisper.

"If we have problems bringing down a dictatorship, let's not shed our tears in solitude.

"If we have problems evicting the foreign aggressors, let's not talk quietly.

"If we have our political or personal differences, let's not tear each other apart.

"We have had to struggle against such difficulties since the Fourteenth Century, and our Preah Bat Thoammoek never listened to our cries.

"Henceforth, we shall protest often and regularly through non-violent actions,

"To disintegrate the dictatorship, and evict the foreign aggressors from our Motherland!"

To those soothing words, I say, Amen!