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Transforming personal suffering into models of self –help and social engagement: nuns in rural Cambodia, Battambang province¹

**“The suffering of Cambodia has been deep
From this suffering comes great compassion
Great compassion makes a peaceful heart
A peaceful heart makes a peaceful person
A peaceful person makes a peaceful family
A peaceful family makes a peaceful community
A peaceful community a peaceful nation
And a peaceful nation makes a peaceful world
May all beings live in happiness and peace”**

Maha Ghosananda, 1992, 28

I. Introduction

After a brutal civil war the reign of Lon Nol was followed by the terror regime of the Khmer Rouge which are held accountable for 1,7 mill. dead². The experiences of violence, hunger, social and political conflicts were responsible for the breakdown of Khmer society. Post-conflict Cambodia is a conflict-ridden society in which the cleavage between the rich and the poor is constantly increasing. Because of the manifold problems social reconstruction and reconciliation are key notions of civil society. They are on the agenda of the state as well as of local and international NGOs. International agencies try to implement Western oriented ideas of development which are not always congruent with the values of Khmer society.

A counterweight in this process is Theravada Buddhism which after some time of hesitation by the People’s Republic of Kampuchea was declared again the national religion of Cambodia in 1988 (see Löschmann 2006-07). Vast amounts of money are spent by local communities as well as by the Khmer communities from overseas for the restoration and/ or construction of new pagodas. Although the revitalization process that Buddhism has undergone after its oppression by the Khmer Rouge is impressive, it has never regained the importance it enjoyed prior to the 1970s. In Battambang alone, 1000 monks³ have disrobed in the last years which continue a “process of secularization” that was already discussed by Ebihara in 1968. Because the necessary balance between the number of monks and *wats*⁴ in relation to the local population⁵ who has to sustain them, is often ignored, a shortage of

¹ This paper is based on 6 months of field research in 19 wats in Battambang and its hinterland as well as on a detailed analysis of the local NGO, Mother Karuna Foundation which is a sub-branch of the Buddhist for Development. I interviewed altogether 16 nuns, some of them several times; all the interviews had to be translated from English into Khmer. I especially thank my field assistant Sin Nareth for her support.

² For a detailed assessment of this period see Chandler 1991, Kiernan 1996, Hinton 2005

³ Interview with Ministry for Cult and Religion in Battambang ,19.12.2010.

⁴ A *wat* is a complex of several buildings with diverse functions, interspersed with gardens and fruit trees, and always with a large pond. Most important is the sanctuary that is the *vihear*, which houses one or several Buddha statues and objects of veneration. Nearby is the *sala*, a big hall for ceremonies of various natures which also serves as the dining hall for the monks. These central buildings are surrounded by several *stupas*, small temples for the ashes of the dead which sometimes include also Chinese graveyards. Adjoining to these buildings of veneration are the houses for the monks on one side, and some fewer buildings, very often less well constructed for nuns which are situated at the periphery of the wat. They are sometimes in close proximity to some more or less dilapidated houses for the very poor which are inhabited by some families, but often also by school- and *Pagoda boys* who have no material means themselves. All these buildings are

monks in the future is feared. The old split in the *sangha* (priesthood) between “modernist and traditionalist” (see Harris 2005, Hansen 2007) has also continued. While the majority of the *sangha* is occupied with the reconstruction of the *wats*, the dissemination of Buddhist knowledge and the sumptuous celebrations of religious ceremonies, a minority, the so-called socially engaged Buddhists stress the necessity of socio economic development in close cooperation with Buddhist values and beliefs. Heng Monychenda, a former monk and founder of the NGO Buddhist for Development (BFD) has argued that “*spiritual and economic development should not be separated into two separate realms. In Buddhism, one is not more important than the other. We have a saying, ‘Nama-rupa’, which means that mind and matter have to go together. Mind affects matter and matter affects the mind*” (quoted from an Interview of Monychenda with Michael Bodakowski, Berkeley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, 11.11.2009, see also Sin Kong 2010). Socially engaged monks, who very often represent the young generation, play important roles in this process; equally important is the engagement of groups of nuns whose contributions however are less well known and of lesser interest⁶. They draw their legitimation for their social work from teaching the dhamma and by giving advice on meditation. Although these practices are pursued by monks as well as by an ever increasing group of very popular lay preachers, my argument is that the nuns are much closer to the everyday problems of the villagers. Being the lowest in the religious hierarchy they not only share the experience of marginalisation and social estrangement with many villagers but represent at the same time successful models of self help.

My paper is divided into three sections. In the first part I give a short overview on gender relations inside Theravada Buddhism and on the structural marginalisation of nuns. Secondly, I describe different biographical trajectories from suffering to self realisation. The description of life in a classical *wat* should draw attention to the multifaceted tasks that nuns fulfil in the everyday running of a *wat* and its multiple functions. In the third and last part I analyse their engagement as social workers in the context of the Mother Karuna Foundation which is a subproject of the BFD.

2. Gender inequality in Theravada Buddhism

In the beginning of 2000 Cambodia had 20.000 nuns compared to 58.828 monks in 2005 as quoted by Ledgerwood (2008, 149). This numerical proportion underwrites the marginal position nuns hold in to-day’s Cambodia despite the fact that women play a major role in the revitalization of Buddhism by offering money, material support or by relentlessly organizing religious ceremonies. In most ritual ceremonies women of middle and old age prevail as spectators and organizers whereas only very few, normally old men do attend. Yet, regarding status, authority and power it is the men and more precisely the monks (*bikkhu*) who are in a position of superiority.

As nuns (*bikkhuni*) have no right to be ordained in Cambodia – in contrast to other Theravada countries like Sri Lanka – they can never attain the position of monks. In the strict sense they are not really nuns, who have to follow 311 precepts, but as Guthries (2004, 134) points out female ascetics with a long tradition of existence. To mark this difference nuns are not called *bikkhuni*, but *don chee* or *tun ji*⁷. They shave their heads, take on white robes and hold 8 to 10 precepts which implies that they are not allowed to kill, to steal, to marry, to lie, to drink intoxicating beverages, to eat in the afternoon, to listen to music, go dancing or attend performances, decorating the body, sleep on beds or sit in high chairs, and touch money (see MeasYang 1978, 22). Many *don chee* live in *wats* but are also allowed to stay with their families if they so wish. Those *don chee* who observe only the first five precepts differ from the first in that they do not shave their hair and wear a black *sampat* (long one-piece skirt). Sokroeun calls them *upasika*, a term which I will adopt.

surrounded by a wall of stone and/or cement with sometimes beautiful decorations and two carefully constructed openings of high aesthetic standards.

³ Interview with representatives of the Ministry for Cult and Religion in Battambang, 19.12.2010.

⁶ An exception to this rule is the research undertaken by Aing Sokroeun who however worked in different provinces. Despite some minor discrepancies her results are comparable to mine in many respects.

⁷ I choose the popular English spelling instead of a correct Khmer transcription. In order to facilitate the reading of the text I also continue to speak of nuns instead of female ascetics and I equate nuns with the concept of *don chee* albeit remembering the difference.

Although nuns have created for themselves some sort of ordination (see Sokroen, 2006-07) which I would prefer to call a ritual of initiation in order to avoid confusion it has not changed their status of marginality. Unequal gender relations are that fundamental that they override categories of age. Old nuns, even when much more experienced and possessing greater knowledge of the scriptures than young monks are always treated as second to them. They may be respected by part of the laity as religious devotees but will never gain the acclaim and the reverence shown to monks. Others even treat them in a pejorative manner due to their imagined poverty and lack of education or call them “failures, outcasts or eccentrics” (Guthrie 2004, 135). Guthrie (ibid, 134) has argued that this degradation is of recent origin, since “*tun ji* is an inverted form of the term for grandmother” while the word *ji* is a prefix of deference that “in pre-Angkorian time meant ancestor, ancient one”.

The lack of ordination has consequences for the nun’s spiritual as well as for their every day life. It inhibits them to perform religious rituals which are always overlooked by the *achar*⁸ and the monks. This lack of ritual competence which is at the same time a lack of ‘symbolic power’ disadvantages them in the economy of merit⁹. They receive smaller amounts of money and, if at all, smaller presents from the congregation for the labour they offer. On the other hand, they can’t transform their religious devotion into merit in the same way as monks do who not only increase their own merit but also that of their parents through their ordination. Thus nuns have less “symbolic capital” in Bourdieu’s understanding than monks to invest for merit making. To increase one’s merit is central to the Buddhist belief system, since it decides about the development of the individual *karma*. All believers, if male or female, try to increase their *karma* for a better position in their next life. But despite their devotion the economy of merit even reinforces the nun’s position of marginalization. First because of the ruling that they have to be reborn as males in order to reach *nirvana* and secondly because of the in-built structural inequality in the system as a whole. Guthrie’s question (ibid, 133) then remains – why do women engage themselves in a system that only accords them a subordinate position?

3. Reasons for becoming a nun

Becoming a nun in modern Cambodia is in no way attractive for young girls except for the very poor or psychologically distressed. In contrast to most of the younger monks who join the *wats* in search of better and/or higher education, nuns are offered no educational improvement. I encountered only one nun who spoke English but none who was attending an English course which for many monks was quite common. Thus life in the *wat* offers the nuns neither the chance for a career inside nor outside the *wat*. It is therefore not surprising that there are very few young nuns in most pagodas. Old nuns do outnumber younger ones in a considerable manner. The young nuns in my sample belonged to the category of distressed persons. Their reasons to become *don chee* were directly related to either being bewitched, to be orphaned or because of problems they had with their parents or with their husband. All of them had experienced a severe life crisis which they felt unable to solve by themselves. They looked for psychological and practical help which they foremost expected from the nuns who in some cases had persuaded them to accept help and join a *wat* or the Mother Karuna foundation. To be counselled and advised by older nuns gave them a feeling of safety and of home. They valued these psychological offers more than the disadvantages which the status of *don chee* implied, like not being able to marry, not to have children or to have to do hard work including working in the field as contract labour.

The experience of distress and suffering as a reason to become *don chee* is in no way limited to young nuns, but is widespread among middle aged and old nuns who in their youth were confronted with the terror of the Khmer Rouge. Nearly all of them had lost either some members of their families or even their whole family. Apart from being confronted with the destruction of family and kinship ties, all of them had suffered from hunger, overwork¹⁰ and lack of medicine like the rest of the populace. Without any resources to lie upon they had decided to become *don chee* and all of them had managed to put their broken lives together again (see case no.1). Others had joined the community of nuns out of sheer poverty. And their expectations of at least having a shelter – how miserable it may be – and

⁸ *Achars* are responsible for performing the ceremonies; very often they are former monks.

⁹ I take this term from Gutschow 2004

¹⁰ *Angkar* made me work like a cow, complained M because I had to plow large tracts of rice fields as a woman.

not going hungry all the time were always fulfilled. In the course of time some found their relatives again who supported them with some food and gave them company once a while. A particularly moving scene was the housing arrangement of two old *upasika* in Wat Samraoun Knong, being 78 and 86. They, who apparently had been friends since long ago shared a tiny room in a wooden hut on stilts with a pig underneath.

Another important motive to look for shelter in a *wat* was the wish to have more time in old age to study the dhamma and increase one's balance of merit (see case no.2). This wish is for older men and women alike and constitutes a typical characteristic of life cycle planning in Cambodia. When children are old enough and duties - regarding work and career - are fulfilled both sexes turn to religion. It is as well a preparation for improving one's karma as a reflection about the past. Not all of these elder devotees become necessary *don chee* but can remain *upasika*. Their vocation gives an answer to Guthrie's question, referred to above, why women support a system which only offers them subordinate roles. Taking into account their wish to practice asceticism which Cambodian women already did for hundred of years in order to improve their karma, reveals the very Westernized bias of this question. Despite *The Association of Nuns and Laywomen* (see Löschmann 2000) which are interested to improve the nun's social position most nuns I knew did not think in these categories. To become *don chee* meant for them to have a home, company, experience, share solidarity, and have fun together but also time for oneself and their inner development. Asceticism is a way to fulfil one's *conditio humana*, to be near the Buddha, at least to his words and scriptures.

But although Guthrie's argument for the longing of asceticism is corroborated by my data as well it is not an all exclusive argument as Guthrie wants us to believe. Rather many nuns are able to combine their search for a spiritual life and future salvation with an engagement as social worker. After years of suffering they want to change the direction of their life: to be no longer a victim but claim their subjectivity and use their resources in order to contribute to a new society. To achieve this transformation is not an easy process (see cases 3, 4 and 5). It depends on a variety of conditions which allowed them to exchange the spaces of sorrow or even death¹¹ which they encountered earlier on for a space of spiritual and social security, that is for a space where trust counts (*saddha*). They follow the idea of socially engaged Buddhism that the nation must heal itself through its own values and beliefs and not through those of others (see http://www.huffingtonpost.com/katherine-marshall/buddhism-for-development-_b_814969.htm). In contrast to those nuns who are satisfied with regaining their own life the socially engaged nuns had the chance to live in an urban environment which is more conducive for community building. In the following passages I will describe two of these "processes of healing" (oneself and the community) in different settings: Wat Andeork and the Mother Karuna Foundation.

4. *Remaking a World*¹²: Life in Wat Andeork, Crocodile Mountain

Wat Andeork is one of the most beautiful *wats* around Battambang. It is situated in the Crocodile Mountains which are part of a mountainous region that also includes Wat Sampeou, one of the few places where Buddhist monks resisted the Khmer Rouge and were brutally killed. Unfortunately I could not learn much about the *wat's* history except that the recent restoration of the dilapidated wooden structures was sponsored by affluent visitors, like overseas Khmer in the US and by his Excellency Num Thum. The budget for the *wat* comes from the local community and from outside sponsors. Andeork was already an important *wat* in the 1980s, figures range from 50 to 100 nuns, although they varied according to the season. One may guess that this rather big number of female inmates was a direct consequence of the suffering during the time of the Khmer Rouge. Many of the women who looked for shelter and spiritual support had lost their families and were no longer able to live alone. In this context Wat Andeork had become a place of rest where the downtrodden and rejected could find material support as well as religious counselling in the aftermath of the civil war and the Khmer Rouge regime.

Even during my visit in March 2010 the *wat*¹³ continued to fulfil this role. But having been restored recently, it was no longer predominantly a place for the poor, but still for those with problems.

¹¹ The term spaces of death is Taussig's 1987

¹² I take this title from Das, Kleinmann, Lock et.al. 2001

¹³ When I talk about Wat Andeork I only refer to the nuns and their living conditions since I interviewed only 2 monks there.

Boasting a beautiful *vihear*¹⁴ on top of the mountain it signalled from afar a place of welcome, spirituality and of wealth. At the foot of the mountain a big reception hall, facilities for cooking, stores and the dwellings of the nuns mark a female sphere of influence. In contrast to other *wats* the houses of the nuns are in a good condition, newly painted in bright blue colours. Many of them have a small garden with fruit trees and a variety of flowers. Climbing up the hill one will encounter the houses of the monks, built in concrete with tiled floors, and even higher up are the ceremonial buildings surrounding the *vihear*. An impressive library, and a garden full of animals sculptures which are very popular in many of the restored *wats* add further interest.

The spatial as well as the social structure of the *wat* exhibits the duality of gender in Buddhist practice which I discussed above. Some older monks, some of them with well-to-do careers in the past face larger groups of young monks, some of them just novices. Despite its reputation in Battambang to be a refuge for “young ladies with broken hearts”, all of the nuns I talked to were above 30 years of age, the majority being in their 50s or 60s. Many of them still had their families/children in the villages where they passed some of their time when they wanted. Equally children and relatives can at all times come and visit them. *Wats* in Cambodia are “open spaces”, where there is a constant coming and going.

Wat Andeork represents itself as a *spiritual center* that catered morally and physically for the surrounding villages. In addition to dhamma teachings, meditation and ritual activities in which some of the nuns did partake, like for e.g. in water splashing, some nuns also offered support to HIV/Aids patients, although in a limited way which cannot compare with the work of the nuns working for the BFD (see below). The *wat* is also part of a wider network, in which persons and objects circulate. Nuns as well as monks change their adherence from one *wat* to another; the reasons may be personal, but can also depend on demand of certain qualifications or on a shift in offers of education.

In 2010 the *wat* had 60 nuns who resided there permanently, being led by an energetic female leader between 50 and 60 years of age. According to my interviews she runs the *wat* on an authoritarian basis, only rarely consulting the other nuns when important decisions have to be taken. Her English was without fault, exemplifying that she was used to many important visitors. She spread an aura of activism and rigid effectivity which seemed rather unusual for the leisurely procedures found elsewhere. The leadership structure in other *wats*, like the one in Tampon, seemed to be less authoritarian. Consisting only of 8-10 nuns, in Tampon all *don chees* decided together about the division of tasks as well as about their spending of money and distributing of presents.

Life in Wat Andeork is regulated in a much disciplined way. Although their living conditions are better the daily routine of the nuns is very similar to other *wats*. It parallels life in Christian monasteries, being organized according to the motto of “ora et labora”. At 3.30 a.m. the nuns rise up, pray and meditate till 5a.m. when they start preparing food for the monks. The interaction between monks and nuns is characterized by an unquestioned authority of the monks that is also based on economic reasons. It is the monks, 40 altogether, who provide from the donations they received, part of the food and money for the running costs of the *wat* which entitles them from services of the nuns. Not all monks are idle. They contribute actively in building procedures of a new hall, but also clean their vassals and do their own washing. The tasks of the *don chees* consist mainly of shopping and cooking the food, cleaning and tailoring. Individual nuns also planted jasmine flowers and sunflowers in order to have a small income for themselves. Whereas both flowers are used for offerings to the Buddha, other nuns also cultivate and dry Frangipani blossoms which they sell either as medicine or for wellness (steam baths).

At noon (12.00 a.m.) the active working day is over, after having had their main meal between 10:30 and 11.00 a.m. When the nuns have done the dishes at noon they have time for themselves, being back at 2 p.m. when they pray and meditate. From 4 to 5 p.m. nuns are taught the *dhamma* by the monks either individually or in groups. This was actually the only occasion of which I learned that nuns were taught by monks. In other *wats* they are either taught by experienced nuns or do the reading privately. At 5 p.m. the working day for both sexes is over, everybody has now time for him/herself, studying more of the *dhamma*, conversing with each other or doing other private chores, like visiting friends or families. This working schedule is only changed when ceremonies have to be fulfilled outside, like

¹⁴ The *vihear* is the main temple dedicated to the Buddha

e.g. burials or when the *wat* prepares for the annual celebrations, like Khmer New Year, Pcoum Ben or Kathen, when large crowds of outside visitors are expected.

Wat Andeork is as far as I know the only *wat* in and around Battambang with such a large group of nuns. It still has a reputation to cater for (young) women in need. Although young girls are given first help and support, when they ask for, the official policy focuses on their going back home. Therefore the parents or relatives are directly informed that their daughter is in safety. This information is given – even against the will of the young women who often have fled their families due to familial or individual conflicts. Depending on their psychological conditions the young girls or women are allowed to stay in the *wat* till they feel better and are willing to meet their parents/ husbands or other relatives again. However, younger women were not allowed to stay when they had children. Sexual abstinence is strictly enforced. The argument against children which only extended to younger and not to older children is backed up by the worry about the *wat's* reputation and the fear to lose public support. Experienced nuns see it as their duty to offer social and moral counselling in order to reunite distorted families. In some cases their counselling proved successful; in other situations it was too late and the women did not return home.

If the young women opt to stay in the *wat* they are accepted as novices. They are provided with a female mentor and learn how to get accustomed with the rules of the *wat* and the rules of the Buddhist canon. Most of the nuns I could talk to respected only 5 or 8 precepts. In addition to their religious enculturation they were also given some rudimentary form of education regarding crafts, like needlework, or they spent their time with cooking or other household chores. Young women were also offered support in dhamma reading as well as in counselling by older nuns, as older monks did with younger monks. But apart from this religious and artisan tasks there were apparently no real chances for females to qualify for a better and more promising life outside the *wat*. Nuns had no chance to learn or improve their English which in present day Cambodia is one important precondition to find more than a menial job. This however might be a very Western conception to judge about the life and amenities in the *wat*. None of my interview partners mentioned this as a problem but conveyed to me that they were satisfied with their lives. For them the *wat* had become home, even if they still had their families living elsewhere. Thus, my mentor whose older daughter stayed in a nearby village explained to me that she wanted to stay only for a few days and then spent 19 years. None of these years did she want to miss and she felt particularly at ease since also her father had lived here for more than 10 years before he died.

Case Study 1:

Feeling at home and by herself was also the impression I got from A¹⁵ when talking about her life. She was 76 years old and lived already for more than 30 years in the *wat*. She had decided to become a nun after the Khmer Rouge had destroyed her whole family. During the time of *angkar*¹⁶ she had to work in a vegetable garden under very hard conditions. Although she was allowed to live with her husband who worked as a foreman during that time, she was extremely worried about her children which were separated from her. When the Khmer Rouge were defeated, A did not find back to her old self. She had no news about the whereabouts of her children and grandchildren and spent most of the time looking for them in and around Battambang. She said that she could not concentrate on anything else and that she was extremely nervous. Without giving it a name it was clear that she behaved like a mentally disturbed person. She therefore asked her husband to allow her to join Wat Andeork in order to find peace and get away from suffering. Because her husband had been a monk before the time of the Khmer Rouge he agreed that she left him for a life in the *wat*. Being exhausted from the worries and the pain she looked for a way of “life without suffering, away from suffering”. Although her husband died 10 years later and although A never got any message from her children, not knowing if they were killed or died of hunger and disease, she managed to control her anxieties and found the peace she looked for.

¹⁵ I do not refer to the proper names of the nuns in order to guard the privacy of her life.

¹⁶ I use here *angkar* as synonym for Khmer Rouge

Her life in the wat is simple, her main duties are in the kitchen, cleaning, preparing vegetables and doing part of the cooking. Being part of a rigid structure which however offers informal company of women as well as spiritual support by the monks she feels at home now. Due to listening to the dhamma she managed to relativize her suffering about her children. She learnt not to worry anymore about the past and the future, because the secret of happiness is to live in the present moment (see Ghosananda 1992, 32). She said that she feels like life had come back to her when she could think about her own problems again instead of constantly worrying about the whereabouts of her children. Her sadness about their loss will never end, but to the outside world she is able to represent the ideal of a woman who lives in peace with herself.

In the context of Cambodian suffering during and after the Khmer Rouge A's fate embodies a somewhat above average experience without being exceptional. The loss of her children invaded her whole body and could not be compensated by her marital life. Although her husband had been a monk his spiritual power was not sufficient to console her. A needed a place for herself which allowed her to distance herself from her tragic loss. Wat Andeork was a good choice for her needs because it offered her a protected room for recovery. Das, Kleinman and Locke et.al. (2001) have drawn our attention to the fact that the control of everyday life after traumatic experiences is a sign of an immense progress. The formalized structure of the *wat* and its ritualized time-scale enabled her to put the pieces of her life together again.

Case Study 2

Although A's story is conclusive and impressive in itself, B's life reminded me that the Buddha's teaching to detach oneself from the desires of life is rather difficult to realise. Whereas A's inner balance found expression in her calm movements and her controlled posture, B appeared as a more dominant person. While busying herself with pots and pans and commanding nuns and kitchen boys around she told me about her visits to India where she participated in conferences and in some guided tours. B had lived a rich and interesting life before she decided to become a nun and accumulate merit for her later life. Her husband had worked in the ministry of interior and she herself had been a successful business woman. She traded jewellery and rice on a big scale and narrated with some pride that she made big gains by holding the rice back when the supplies were good and selling it to elevated prices during times of need. To my surprise this very fact of exploitation did not make her feel ashamed, but on the contrary made her feel proud that this enabled her to give a very good education to her children – a fact which she told me as a form of moral achievement. Her son had become the provincial director of one of the biggest banks in Cambodia, while her daughter was still studying. Being caught in her own ambivalence if to study medicine, to marry or to become a nun like her mother, the mother advised her to study first. Only then could the daughter – according to her conviction – made a decision which was appropriate for her. B thus came from a totally different background and she was deeply embedded in Cambodia's capitalist society. Yet, her desire to join Wat Andeork was based on the wish to change her life and to forsake material interests. Being in her late 50s she thought time had come to better her *karma* and find peace in her inner self. But B conveyed the impression in our discussion that these goals were still far ahead. When she talked about the prosperity of her son – his salary of 1000 USD, his car, fashionable clothing etc – which infringes against *upekkha*¹⁷, she in no way condemned or distanced herself from his luxurious life style, but could hardly control her pride. His success apparently reminded her of her own success.

Talking about her own past, she made the listener part of her transactions, of her inner dynamic to increase her profit etc. B, in comparison to most other nuns of her age I had talked to, had not yet renounced her past; it was still with her and portrayed a very lively sense of her former identity. But although B seemed to be far away from the ideals of her new life she apparently did not feel dissatisfied or unhappy. As far as one could guess from outside, B had adapted to her new role which allowed her a somewhat elevated position among the nuns. On the one hand, she played a leading role in the kitchen, organizing and distributing food as well as commanding manpower. On the other hand, she was materially in a better position than many other nuns, since she was supported by her well-to-

¹⁷ Upekkha means the absence of desire of worldly goods

do son who had of late given her 150 USD. This allowed her more room for manoeuvring and the comfort to buy herself things she liked. Although the contexts of her life had changed, she had not entirely abandoned its old values and it would be interesting to know if she ever will. Yet her desire to give her life another meaning was there.

I narrated her life story in some detail in order to prove the wide variety of characters a *wat* does cater for. Both nuns, A and B – despite their very difference of experience and expectancy – used the partial isolation and remoteness of the *wat* to distance themselves from the very reason which made them suffer or at least uncomfortable. – be it the loss of children or the loss of meaning in their old life. Whereas A's peaceful heart makes a peaceful person, B's peaceful person makes a peaceful family considering her very rewarding relation with her children. In my last examples I now want to show how peaceful hearts make a peaceful community and for that matter consider the contribution of the nuns in a local NGO, called The Mother Karuna Foundation, a branch of the BFD.

4. Mother Karuna Foundation: Transforming personal suffering into social engagement

The BFD, founded in 1990 by Heng Monychenda, is considered one of the most successful Cambodian NGOs, employing ca. 150 staff and covering an estimated target population of 90.000 inhabitants in 7 provinces. (Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, Pailin, Oddor Meanchey, Siem Reap, Kampongthom, Preah Vihear, and Phnom Penh). It has a wide variety of projects ranging from improving agriculture, HIV/Aids programmes, care for orphans, offering credit facilities as well as environmental conservation among others. A daily radio programme connects “Buddhism with day-to-day issues of social and moral development, human rights, and issues of gender” (see <http://www.bfdkhmer.org/>). Whereas the content of the programmes does not differ much from other development agencies - : reducing poverty, organizing help as self-help, supporting programmes of sustainability – the difference lies in the way how they are undertaken. Monychenda and his team believe that socially engaged Buddhism is the best tool for reconciliation and reintegration of all Cambodians. “Put down the gun take up the Dharma” was introduced in 1996 national seminar conceived and conducted by BFD where all political groups agreed that weapons could not solve any problem but discussion and negotiation were the options” (see www.bfdkhmer.org/)

Although BFD understands itself as a Buddhist organization only few acting monks work for it but a number of nuns. Most of them engage themselves for Mother Karuna, a project, which focuses on women in need. It was founded by a former monk Takashi Harimoto from Japan together with Heng Monychenda. The foundation offer courses in sewing, preferably to young girls from poor families and widows in need of support. Their products are sold in local markets or hotels which gives them a small income of their own. While the leader of the sewing school is a female lay person, most of the workers are nuns or novices, led by a former monk. From the 16 nuns, 8 work in the centre where they care for orphans and the placement of foster children, the other 8 are engaged in 32 villages, working as counsellors in the HIV/Aids Programme as well as doing social work in the villages surrounding Battambang. In addition they offer courses in meditation and also run a weekly radio programme, teaching the dhamma to a wider public. In contrast to Wat Andeork the nuns of Mother Karuna are not part of a community of nuns in one particular *wat*, but do belong to several *wats* or are working “free lance”, living in their own homes and families. Their activism is based on an interesting combination of social/material engagement and spiritual support. They draw their legitimation from teaching the *dhamma* and from giving advice on meditation.

Before I describe their activity in greater detail let me first introduce one of the nuns responsible for the HIV/Aids -Programme.

Case Study 3

K, an extremely fragile person is between 40 to 50 years old and follows the 10 precepts. She is divorced and has a 26 year old son, who despite her efforts to give him a good education is jobless at the moment. K has joined BFD 10 years ago at a time when “she felt like floating in the river and the world became too big for her” (Interview from 10.11.2010). What had happened? K being borne an orphan since her parents died during the reign of the Khmer Rouge had lived a “normal” married life

for some years. Her husband was a village guard protecting the villagers against the return of the Khmer Rouge who even after their defeat exercised sporadic violence in the villages near Battambang. Like many other men in the area he went to Thailand working in the forest. When he returned he had changed, beating her on several occasions without any obvious reason. She recognised that he was "ill" and took him to Western oriented doctors as well as to a local doctor (*kru khmer*) who used "traditional medicine". The diagnosis was that "there is something bad on him" which meant that he was possessed by a bad spirit or ghost. K rejected the notion that he was mentally disturbed and she also ruled out that his violence had something to do with his experience under the Khmer Rouge. However, the treatment by the *kru khmer* was not effective since her husband continued to beat her at night, also menacing her several times with a knife. She fled to her neighbours and asked them for support, but when he also attacked them the neighbours asked her to stay away.

K left her husband with her then 5 year old son, selling tomatoes and other vegetables in markets in order to make a living. But the drama went on, since her husband went after her, leaving her without an abode where she could feel safe. One evening he managed to come into her house, tied her arms on her back, like the Khmer Rouge did with their prisoners, and then put a big knife on her throat. She cried with all the energy she had till her sister who lived next door could free her. The sister called the police who took her husband at gun point to the prison in Battambang where he was held in custody for some time. Terrified of the incident, which she relived again when telling the story, K fled to a wat in Banteay Mancheay which was hidden in the mountains. It was there when she decided to become a nun. She said that having no relatives except her married sister she had no place to go to. But it was not only safety and some form of material security that she was looking for, but she also needed comfort and understanding.

Meeting K at present, one would never guess, how much violence she has experienced, She is a calm person, radiating human understanding and indeed compassion. K could overcome her own problem by her belief in the karma. She does not question her hard life but accepts it with a kind of humbleness which nevertheless seemed to be based on a solid notion of her own worth. The teaching of *dhamma*, spreading the word of the Buddha is a vocation for her. She knows it liberating character through her own suffering and wants to share it with others. She frequently quoted the well known phrase by Mahaghosana " Hatred is never appeased by hatred, hatred is appeased by love" (ibid. 27). These texts give her hope. She is full of energy, organizes fieldtrips for the poor, and especially cares for HIV-patients.

4.1. Working with HIV-Patients

HIV-Aids is a relatively new disease in Cambodia: it spread in the wake of the UNTAC¹⁸ soldiers whose mission began in 1992. Although compared with African countries the ratio of infected persons - 3% in 1997 to 1.6% in 2006 - is rather low, but is conceived in the public and by the government as a fundamental threat to society. As in many other countries it is especially the poor who are victims of the disease. Mother Karuna has targeted the poor for their particular forms of intervention. I accompanied K together with another nun on two of her tours to different families. We first visited a widow who had been infected by her husband and afterwards a family with two small children. They lived outside of Battambang in one of the small villages along a dust road. Although the land where they had built a house out of cardboard and some iron roof pieces belonged to them, it was not big enough for producing food crops or at least some vegetables. The husband who very likely was infected by visiting a brothel had been the only breadwinner in the family. He had worked as a labourer helping here and there in the village but due to his bad health was no longer able to do so. His brother next door looked as poor as himself which meant that he and his family could not count on the support of relatives.

The two nuns working for Mother Karuna had made parcels for each of their clients consisting of basic food stuff like rice, salt, sugar, oil, some sardines and other items. Each parcel was worth 25USD and was delivered once a month. When our delegation entered the small hut, two deeply distraught adults received us, their small children hiding behind them. After the first wave of shyness had gone, K began her counselling. She was particularly concerned to admonish the couple not to accuse each other of being guilty but accept the situation as part of her *karma*. She especially addressed the wife to

¹⁸ Read: United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia

control her anger and transform it into respect for her husband as the head of the household. To control one's anger like all feeling is one of the very important teachings of the Buddha because "anger burns the mind and the body" (Mahaghosana ibid. 58). When we feel anger we can't control our mind and are unfree. Therefore K cited the loving kindness of the Buddha and the good fortune that results from such behaviour. The aim of her talk was to avoid conflicts between the couple and especially the outbreak of violence between them.

4.2. Sexual violence, alcoholism and poverty.

Case Study 4

Violence between husband and wife is a rather big problem in many families. According to Surtees (2003, 30) 15 to 25% of women are beaten by their husbands and 73, 9% acknowledge to know a family where the wife is abused. Many families are wrecked due to the scarcity of land and the resulting poverty, combined with alcoholism and the consumption of drugs. Surtees (ibid. 33) convincingly argues that domestic violence is not a private, but a social problem. Therefore interventions by NGOs or the state have to analyse the 'cultural terrain' as she puts it which necessitates taking cultural values into account. From this point of view nuns, like U, are ideally suited because of their familiarity with the situation. Without much training U knew that according to the woman's code (*chhap srey*) a divorce was the last option due to the stigma attached to it, the loss of land and of the bargaining power for women. She therefore concentrated all her efforts to reduce violence and make the couple stay together. When she first intervened, the marriage was at a breaking point. After beating his wife the husband ran away and refused to talk neither with his neighbours nor with her when she was called. Meanwhile he consented to listen to her advice – although he does not like the *dhamma* – and is ready to discuss the problems in the family with her. Like K in the HIV-cases U also warns the wife against stepping up the conflict which always results in new violence. She preaches her instead to remain calm, think of her responsibility against her children and avoid alcohol and drugs. U follows intuitively female gender roles which somehow mystify the image of the mother and the good wife (see Surtees 2003, 31). The teaching of the *dhamma* with its message of harmony, peace and loving kindness is in her view the right thing to do although she is aware of the husband's contempt for it.

Listening to her life story it becomes clear that U herself can understand that many people are not interested in the teaching of the *dhamma*. She was 22 years when the Khmer Rouge took over in Cambodia, being in the right age to be married. The local Khmer Rouge insisted that she had to marry one of her wounded soldiers. When she saw her assumed husband for the first time she was horrified because he had lost one leg. She ran away to her parents and told them that she will never consent to such a marriage but rather prefer to die. Her parents however, calmed her and assured her that the person who had brought her by horse whom she suspected to have to marry was not chosen to be her husband.

In fact her husband was also wounded, missing one foot, but she liked him from the beginning and therefore consented to marry him. After the usual mass marriage without any of those colourful ceremonies the Khmer love so much they quickly got used to each other. She raised 9 children in one of the most difficult parts of the eastern region, Mong Russey where hunger was endemic and violence widespread (see Haing Ngor 2003). Due to her most surprising statement that Pol Pot was not too bad because he forbid polygamy one might infer that she shared the political opinion about the Khmer Rouge with her husband. Buddhism did not mean much to her at this time. Another indication that she at least was sympathetic to the Khmer Rouge was that she had a somewhat better life than others in Mount Russey. The fact that she lost only one child out of nine is under these circumstances rather remarkable. It was not so much under the Khmer Rouge that she suffered a lot, but her problems started after their defeat. As a consequence of an accident she had and still has problems with her knees. The traditional healer she consulted was able to minimize her pain but could not hinder her leg to become stiff. Because of her difficulties in walking she became quarrelsome and dissatisfied with her life. It must have been in this state of mind when she remembered the *dhamma* and started studying it. It helped her to accept her fate. In her imagination she "remembers" her former life and pictures herself to either have broken the leg of a crab or of a frog and interprets her current pain as a just revenge for her misdeed. In reading the texts of the Buddha she finds comfort for herself which

she wants to share with others. It is not so much the zeal to convert her fellow villagers but rather to be able to alleviate their pain. The reading and teaching of the *dhamma* has given her life a new orientation and a better standing in the community. She recounts that when she walks through the village the bottles of alcohol are hidden because she preaches strict abstinence. She is proud that she has built up respect in her own family but also in the village community. The fact that the quarrelling couple has reunited again makes her happy because it is her success. Yet, she is also aware that not all problems can be solved with the *dhamma*. She could not stop one of her clients drinking herself to death although she did her best to convince this middle aged lady to abstain from alcohol. Being drunk every day her husband ran away and left her alone in the village without any support. U hoped that this was the occasion that she changed her life. But in vain, she was told by her that it was not her business, and that she drank her own money and not hers. Although her death made her understand the limits of her intervention U says she still likes her job. It helps to transcend her world of the village by participating in the workshops organized by the BFD. She is acquainted there with problems she had never heard of before, like being instructed into a community mental health programme or in the working of a transcultural psycho-social organization, like the TPO.

Teaching the *dhamma* has become cutting edge in Cambodia. It is done over the radio by prominent lay persons who are often disrobed monks as well as in most of the *wats* which have special preachers for giving dhamma talks in ritual ceremonies. But none of these preachers is so closely related to the local people and their problems like the nuns from Mother Karuna. This fact is very much borne out by the content of their talk. While the few official *dhamma* talks I recorded were rather abstract sermons focussing most of the time of giving respect to one's elder or scolding young monks for their unruly behaviour (concerning sex) the nun's teaching directly addresses the problem of the villagers. Since they live in the same commune and share the hardship in the living conditions they are not only able to much better understand the problems their neighbours encounter but are also more down to earth for suggesting solutions. Some of them have built up trust with their neighbours in long years of common residence which facilitates their interventions. And even those villagers who do not like them personally at least respect them due to their ascetic lifestyle. Although common agreement has it that these rules should be followed by everybody, most of the precepts are easily broken. U however told me that she stopped eating fish and chickens because of the killing (*ahimsa*) involved and that she never drunk alcohol again. The consequence with which she practiced this moral behaviour made people respectful towards her. U was quite clear that this kind of public appraisal gave her a lot of satisfaction which certainly was one of the reasons why she liked her 'job'. Another was without doubt the improvement of her *karma* that was responsible for her gratitude and commitment despite the many worries she herself had to face. Because her family had only 1ha of rice fields they faced hunger or money shortages in years when the harvest failed. The debts they had accumulated over years with the moneylenders dragged her down and this was the time when the *dhamma* helped her to go on with her own life.

4.3. Gaining confidence from the dhamma in case of death

On one of my excursions with K we visited an old lady who particularly struck me by the poverty in which she lived. She complained about her son who was a no-good and did not care for her despite her severe illness. Her only wish was to die and have a chance for a better rebirth. K visited her once a month to console her and affirm that listening to the dhamma was the best way to find peace. While listening to the text K read to her the old woman's face changed. It looked relaxed and at that very moment I believed her that she was ready to die.

Case Study 5

A similar story was told to me by M who was one of the senior nuns in Mother Karuna; being respected unofficially as their primus inter pares. Indeed, M was the 'heart of Mother Karuna'. Working as a nun for 28 years of which she dedicated nearly 20 to the BFD she did not only participate in shaping the goal of the foundation but also recruited many nuns into its rank. M was a born leader and I sometimes wonder why she had not looked for a career elsewhere. She had never been married and even withstood the order of the Khmer Rouge to accept an arranged marriage by them. Having the same fate as many others in coping with hunger, overwork and also with a life in the

forest, she became a saleswoman after the defeat of the Khmer Rouge in order to care for her mother and her brothers. While the eldest brother of her was killed in Vietnam where he underwent training to become a pilot, she was the only breadwinner in her family. Her resoluteness triumphed by becoming appointed village chief for altogether 6 years in her commune. It did not become clear why she then decided to become a nun, but rumours had it that she had problems with her breasts long ago. In the fall of last year her cancer became worse and BFD paid for a hospital in Phnom Penh.

After her return she told me that the belief in the *dhamma* and in meditation had saved her life. The Cambodian medical officer apparently did not give her enough anaesthesia medicaments so that she could hear him talk about unforeseen complications. Although worried M fell into a vigil coma and, as she told me, dreamt of giving a *dhamma* talk to some friends. When she awoke she was told to be in a hospital and not in the *wat*. But her memory of teaching the *dhamma* under such conditions gave her a lot of strength. When the doctor told her to disregard the 10 precepts because her body was too weak, she refused. She told him that would be to renounce her identity as a nun, but that it was just her very being a *don chee* which gave her the strength to master the cancer. In order to alleviate her pain and encourage herself she insisted that only her body was weak, but her mind was strong. She therefore tried to teach the *dhamma* to her co-patients when she herself did not feel too weak. The *dhamma* particularly stresses the mastering of the mind as the only to free oneself from suffering.

In the weeks that followed she had to undergo chemotherapy which made her body even suffer more. It was in these moments when meditation came in since body (*rupa*), mind (*nema*) and emotions can be controlled through proper breathing. Always a fervent admirer of this technique she now was confronted with the fact that her body was no longer able to sit in the proper position. With a great amount of discipline she changed to walking meditations in order to control her anxieties of an undue death. Being in her 50s her will to live was very pronounced and it seemed that she would win. Her behaviour in the face of death became something like a role model. M demonstrated that meditation and reading the *dhamma* possessed indeed real qualities of healing. It was her mind who triumphed – at least for some time – over her weakened and fragile body. The message of hope made her life but also those of the other older nuns easier.

5. Conclusion:

All my biographic examples show that those nuns who have suffered tremendously were in the long run empowered by their experience of suffering. Their form of healing which came about through the reading and listening to the *dhamma* as well as through meditation encouraged them to engage themselves for the communities they lived in. As Maha Ghosananda pointed out the Buddhist way of healing begins with the single person and then radiates into ever larger groups. Nuns play an important role in this process of reconciliation¹⁹ – be it inside families or even in the wider communities. It is the attitude of loving kindness on the one hand which helps to face the vagaries or impermanence of life, on the other it is the

conviction that mind can besiege body matters, be it physical or psychological pain. That meditation can liberate the mind from the hardships of everyday things is a proven remedy in Cambodia. The belief that it can eradicate pain and in an advanced stage allow a glance into a future life is a powerful weapon in the case of death. A place like Wat Andeork seems to be ideal for such an experience as it offers space to rest. Although the *wat* is in theory a place of equality, in practice hierarchy dominates.

Difference is produced in regard of authority which is based on a strong male bias, but also depends on experience, education and age among the nuns. Given the overall condition of Cambodian society this cannot be a surprise since a *wat* is not a liminal place, but deeply anchored in society. Although monks and nuns are separated from the daily routine of the villages around, there are numerous links which tie them to the people, either by their own family bonds or through counselling and ritual activities. The closeness of the relations is expressed by a symbolic contract between lay people and the sangha, including the nuns. It is the reciprocity of merit which ties them together. Whereas the villagers are responsible for the food of the monks the monks and nuns are responsible for the physical and spiritual well-being of the villagers. They relieve them from dangerous spirits threatening their land and families, give them advice regarding personal, familial or health problems, and overlook their rituals of passage, like birth, marriage and death. In this contract the nuns occupy a position in-

¹⁹ Reconciliation is here less understood in its political sense than in its more fundamental sense of healing: healing rifts or problems in families etc.

between: their commitment is less valued than the work of the monks, but their ascetic lifestyle – sexual abstinence, rigid food regulations, etc. – their inner calm and dignity puts them above the normal villagers. At least this is the picture that many nuns portrayed of themselves when they discussed their work as counsellors in the villages.

The socially engaged nuns chose the option to work for the community as already recommended by Buddha because of their inner vocation to help others. The very dialectic of suffering and healing that is inscribed into their personal history enabled them to transgress the limits of their own existence by transforming the evil they experienced into something good. This kind of transformation has become possible for them by putting the insight they gained from studying the *dhamma* into a lived practice. The path of loving kindness which is a key topos in Khmer Buddhist thinking became part of their habitus. It helps them to gain inner peace and a feeling of harmony which they strived for and enabled them to combine ideology with practice. Whereas all nuns share their interest and devotion to the reading of the *dhamma* as well as to meditation (*vipassanar*) their conception of “remaking the world” (see Das, Kleinman, Locke et.al. 2001) depends on the possibilities open to them as well as on the future of the local communities they inhabit.

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