

Luig, U. (2011, in press). Transforming personal suffering into models of self – help and social engagement: nuns in rural Cambodia, Battambang province. Guillou, A. Vignato, S. (Eds.). *Helpers being helped*.

Ute Luig

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.