

Videos to Foster Social Renewal in Cambodia

Alan Channer

Genocide, revolution and 25 years of war have devastated the fabric of Cambodian society. Millions perished in the killing fields; millions more live with the memory of trauma. Amidst this pain, many Cambodians have turned to their traditional religion, Buddhism, as a source of solace and dignity.

Approximately 3000 Buddhist monasteries (wats) were desecrated or razed during the Khmer Rouge revolution (1975-1979). At the time of the UN-sponsored elections in 1993, all of these wats were being rehabilitated, often by impoverished villagers.

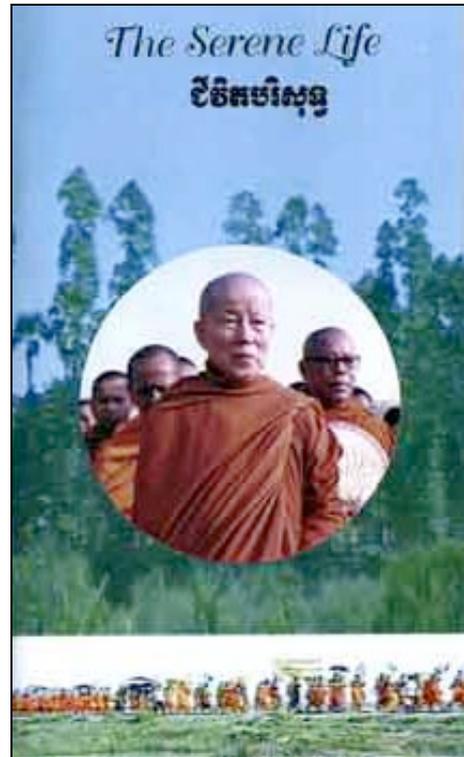
It was in this context, in the fall of 1993, that I and my colleagues were invited by Kassie Neou, director of the Cambodian Institute of Human Rights, to make educational films in the Khmer language. Modern educational materials demonstrating the relevance of Buddhist values to the reconstruction of civil society in Cambodia were non-existent; Neou believed that video could be a powerful medium of advocacy, since battery-powered VCRs are present even in remote jungle areas.

Our two-man team arrived in Cambodia in January 1994, possessing very little knowledge of the Khmer language but with faith in participatory approaches to filmmaking. We spent the first two months talking to people—familiarizing ourselves with recent history, deepening our understanding of the culture, learning the language, and, as film-makers, watching day-to-day life. Some of the Cambodians we got to know became key collaborators.

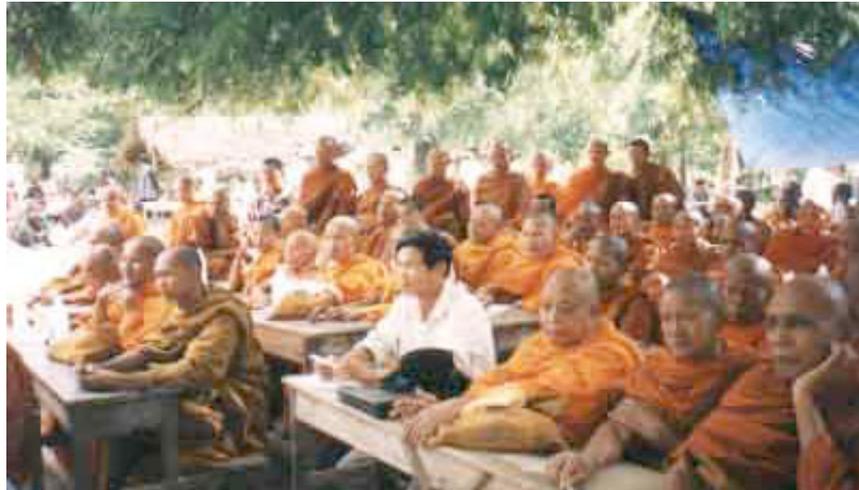
Our initial concept was to shape film vignettes of people who were rebuilding their lives and communities. We soon discovered that this was not a viable approach for outsiders. It was difficult for us to grasp how one Cambodian really perceived another; as foreigners we were always treated with politeness, rather than exposed to the truth. As outsiders to the genocide, we were unable to comprehend its legacy in people's lives.

We were on the point of giving up when we came across a contemporary Cambodian poem expressing the link between culture and dignity. The poem asks whether the smiles on the Buddha images, the *bodhisattvas* (enlightened ones), and the *apsaras* (celestial dancers)—carved on the statues of Cambodia's medieval temples—might ever reappear on the faces of the Cambodian people after their many sufferings. The poet was happy for us to illustrate his poem on film, provided that he remain anonymous.

The Venerable Heng Monychenda, a Buddhist monk and initiator of an NGO called Buddhism for Development, encouraged us. He said: "You must make a film which heals the heart. This is what people want. You can do this by making them laugh or making them cry. As foreigners it is too difficult for you to portray Cambodian humor. But you can move people and make them cry." Professor Chheng Phon, Minister of Culture from 1980 to 1990, said: "You must make a film which speaks from the heart of Cambodian culture; which is a work of art. Only then can it be unifying."



We began work on a script that included verses on healing and compassion from the Buddhist scriptures. We illustrated it with contemporary images of Cambodian life and culture. A Cambodian translator offered his services to the project without charge. Chheng Phon and several other Cambodians pointed out sequences that revealed a Western bias, suggested new sequences to film, and helped us shape the final product, which became known as *The Serene Smile*. We then began work on a second, complementary film to illustrate, in a more practical way, the links between Buddhist values, peace, environmental protection, and community development. This became known as *The Serene Life*, and it featured, in particular, the *dhammayietras* (peace marches)—the most sustained mobilization of Buddhist monks and nuns for a social cause in the history of Cambodian Buddhism—initiated by the Patriarch Venerable Maha Ghosananda.



We discovered a partner in the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAF) of Germany, which was seeking to foster a “socially engaged and development-oriented” Buddhist ethic. The KAF purchased 400 video copies and presented them to all senior Buddhist monks and to every member of the Cambodian parliament. Together with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and three Cambodian non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the KAF organized premieres of both films in Phnom Penh’s most prestigious venues. Seven hundred Buddhist monks and nuns attended, and several cabinet ministers spoke before the films. The events were extensively covered in the Cambodian press, and the films were subsequently screened repeatedly on national television. King Norodom Sihanouk wrote: “These two very beautiful films show that Cambodia is not only a country prey to war and unending violence, but also a place where the great virtues of Buddhism—tolerance, non-violence, and compassion—are practiced.”

Our initial hope was that indigenous channels would carry the videos throughout the countryside, and this did happen. Donor agencies—notably Oxfam, Catholic Relief Services, *Co-opération Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité*, and the Japan Shotoshu Relief Committee—together purchased more than 500 copies to disseminate to monasteries, local NGOs, and district hospitals. Between 1995 and 1997, the annual *dhammayietras* distributed copies of both films to many of the provincial monasteries.

We attended several showings organized by rural NGOs, and heard reports from many others. One elder in Kandal province said of *The Serene Smile*: “This shows our national culture and soul. It shows the errors of our past and the good side of Cambodia.” Another elder in a district of Battambang province where Khmer Rouge guerrillas were still active said: “This reminds us of the time when we lived in peace—and of dignity. After food, dignity is what we need.” Older villagers often asked for the videos to be shown more than once, so that younger people, who have known only war and revolution, could comprehend that there is dignity in being Cambodian.

In 1997, Maha Ghosananda presented *The Serene Life* to the commander of a battalion of former Khmer Rouge soldiers who had defected to the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces. The video was subsequently used in a training program for these soldiers run by the Khmer

Institute of Democracy. Both films were requested in English and French by Cambodian associations in the United States, France, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

The project's impact was due, I think, to our training in participatory research methods and to the strong motivation of the Cambodians involved with the project. Cambodian culture has within it the power to heal the wounds of the country's recent history. We became witnesses to that fact—and channels for the preservation of ethical and spiritual values which have stood, and will continue to stand, the test of time.

*Dr. Alan Channer is a researcher and film producer based in London. Inquiries about the purchase of *The Serene Smile* and *The Serene Life* can be made through info@fltfilms.org.uk*

[Cultural Survival Quarterly - Boston, USA](#)