

Religion, Peacebuilding, and Grassroots Social Activism in Cambodia: The Legacy of Mahā Ghosānanda's Dhammayietra

Yen Sokne*

Department of Philosophy, University of Delhi, Delhi 110007, India.

ABSTRACT

Mahā Ghosānanda's Dhammayietra offers a case through which to examine the relationship between religious practice and grassroots peacebuilding in Cambodia. This paper asks how the peace walks connected Buddhist ethical commitments with public participation and how their legacy can be assessed from documentary evidence. It uses qualitative historical and thematic analysis of peer-reviewed scholarship, published participant accounts, institutional reports, and public peace archives. The analysis focuses on the first walk in 1992, subsequent encounters with armed conflict and international supporters, and documented activities after Ghosānanda's death in 2007. The findings identify a recurring combination of walking, blessings, material support, and community education. These practices made peacebuilding accessible through familiar religious relationships while depending on the work of organizers, nuns, lay participants, and external supporters. Later accounts also reveal financial constraints and the political vulnerability of public religious action. The paper argues that Ghosānanda's legacy is best understood as a practice of compassionate public engagement that could be continued and adapted by others. Documentary evidence establishes the occurrence and interpretation of these activities more securely than their lasting social effects. The conclusion therefore distinguishes continuity of practice and public memory from unverified claims that the Dhammayietra independently produced national reconciliation or political peace.

Keywords: Mahā Ghosānanda, Dhammayietra, Cambodia, religious peacebuilding, grassroots activism, engaged Buddhism

INTRODUCTION

The first Dhammayietra took place in 1992 during the return of Cambodian refugees from camps along the Thai border. UNHCR's historical account places the organized repatriation between March 1992 and May 1993.¹ The Cambodia Peace Gallery presents the inaugural walk as an effort to confront fear and initiate reconciliation while conflict and landmines continued to endanger communities.² This setting raises a practical research problem: how can a religious procession contribute to peacebuilding when a political settlement has yet to make everyday encounters secure? The question concerns what people did together and the meaning of those actions, as well as the limits of their effects.

Existing scholarship already provides substantial explanations of the movement. Poethig interprets the

Dhammayietra through the connections between refugee return, religious mobility, and transnational Buddhist and interfaith networks.³ Dosch situates Cambodian peace initiatives within relationships between civil society and foreign donors, distinguishing local initiatives that attracted support from projects more directly shaped by external funding.⁴ Hsu's analysis of the term "engaged Buddhism" cautions against describing Asian Buddhist action through a simple opposition between an allegedly withdrawn tradition and modern social engagement.⁵ These studies establish that the walks require attention to historical relationships and institutions, beyond a biographical account of their best-known leader.

This paper brings those concerns into a focused examination of grassroots participation and legacy. Grassroots activism is understood here as organized public action involving people at community level in

Relevant conflicts of interest/financial disclosures: The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

responding to shared problems. Participation can include supplying food, hosting walkers, organizing activities, or teaching, as well as joining a procession. Peacebuilding refers to efforts to support less violent relationships and the conditions for coexistence. These working definitions allow religious activities to be examined without assuming that every ritual produces reconciliation or that every participant shares the same political commitments.

The central question is how Ghosānanda's religious leadership became a practice that others could support, perform, and adapt. The objectives are to explain the relationship between Buddhist practice and community participation, identify the organizational relationships that sustained the walks, and assess what later documentation establishes about their continuation. The proposed contribution is an interpretation of legacy as the transmission of public practices and responsibilities. The analysis treats evidence of activities, participants' interpretations, and claims of lasting impact as different forms of evidence. It therefore does not attribute Cambodia's political transition to the Dhammayietra or present a national assessment of its effectiveness.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study uses a qualitative documentary case analysis. Its materials are selected published texts concerning the Dhammayietra and the interpretation of Buddhist peacebuilding in Cambodia. Searches combined the names "Maha Ghosananda" and "Dhammayietra" with terms including "peacebuilding," "Cambodia," "grassroots," and "engaged Buddhism." Academic publications were located through journal and university records. Institutional sources were located through the World Faiths Development Dialogue, Georgetown University's Berkley Center, the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, the Cambodia Peace Gallery, and UNHCR. The selection is purposive and does not constitute a systematic or exhaustive literature review.

Materials were included when they documented a relevant activity, described participants' roles, or supplied a scholarly interpretation needed to examine religion and peacebuilding. The historical focus begins with the 1992 walk. Later evidence includes the 2010 World Faiths Development Dialogue country report,⁶ participant accounts of the 2012 walk, and

the 2016 report of archival transfer to a peace museum project. Scholarly discussion published in 2021 and 2022 informs the interpretation of reconciliation and the category of engaged Buddhism. The study does not infer the movement's current operational scale from these earlier documents.

Relevant passages were read for the connections between religious practice, participation, and organization. An initial description of each activity was separated from the source's explanation of its significance. Accounts were then compared around public nonviolence, the contribution of community members, external support, and continuity beyond the founder. Table 1 summarizes selected events and states the limits of the conclusions they support. Where reports differ over numbers of walkers or the distances travelled, those figures are excluded because the present argument does not require them.

Source position matters. A participant's description of a school visit can document what that observer witnessed, but cannot establish learning outcomes across all schools. An organizer's interpretation can disclose the aims of an activity without proving that those aims were achieved. A museum exhibition can show how peacebuilding is publicly remembered, while selecting material that emphasizes achievement. Accordingly, corroboration concerns particular activities rather than an assumption that all accounts are independent. The research draws on published documents and contains no new interviews, participant observation, surveys, or human-subject experiments. Its conclusions are interpretive and historical; they are not causal estimates of the Dhammayietra's impact.

RESULTS

The 1992 Walk and the Meaning of Public Return

The inaugural walk accompanied the transition from border-camp life towards return to Cambodia. The Peace Gallery's account identifies refugees, religious participants, international supporters, and local people as involved in the procession.² The analytical significance lies in the form of return. Joining or receiving the walkers offered a public occasion for meeting others during a period of insecurity. This interpretation concerns an opportunity created by the procession, rather than a finding that all participants

overcame fear or that their relationships were permanently repaired.

The difference between a political agreement and a public encounter is important. Repatriation could move people across a border while leaving questions about belonging and trust unresolved. A peace walk addressed those questions through visible conduct: participants could approach a village, accept hospitality, and express commitments in a recognizable religious setting. Such acts provided occasions on which peace could be demonstrated and discussed. Whether a particular encounter changed later conduct remains an empirical question requiring evidence beyond the existence of the walk.

Religious Practice and Community Participation

A contemporary account published in *The Mindfulness Bell* reports Ghosānanda's association of peace work with peace within the person.⁷ This statement supplies an ethical orientation for examining public action. It proposes that the manner in which someone acts is relevant to the peace they seek. The documentary analysis interprets that orientation as a responsibility carried into encounters with others, without treating inner tranquillity as sufficient to resolve a public dispute.

The practical form of those encounters is visible in Jenny Cimaglia's account of joining part of the 2012 Dhammayietra in Oddar Meanchey. She describes roadside blessings, villagers supplying food and water, a vehicle collecting donations, and visits to schools. Lessons connected the five precepts with familiar situations and included hygiene and environmental messages.⁸ These observations identify several ways of participating. Walking was one contribution; sustaining and receiving the procession were others. The account documents educational activity and hospitality during the observed segment, while providing no assessment of subsequent behaviour among pupils or villagers.

These activities connect religious relationships with the material requirements of activism. A procession depends on meals, accommodation, transport, and coordination. Contributions from local people can make those requirements possible and give communities an active role in an event that otherwise appears centred on monks. This reading also directs attention

to who provides that labour and who decides how resources are used. Visible participation alone does not establish equal authority among the people involved.

Organization and Cooperation Across Boundaries

Poethig identifies the Coalition for Peace and Reconciliation as an organizational setting for the first walk and stresses its Buddhist and interfaith relationships. Her analysis connects the movement's public religious identity to networks formed beyond Cambodia's borders.³ The movement consequently cannot be explained by personal charisma alone. Religious leadership required arrangements through which a message could be translated into a route, supplies, and coordinated public conduct.

The Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies documents the participation of an international interfaith pilgrimage in the 1995 Dhammayietra.⁹ This is evidence of cooperation across religious and national boundaries. Such cooperation could give a local action additional participants and support, but its presence does not establish diplomatic influence. Dosch's discussion is useful here because it separates the origin and ownership of initiatives from the source of their funding.⁴ Receiving international resources need not mean that a community action was conceived externally; nor does a local origin remove the need to examine the conditions attached to support.

Exposure to Violence and Political Constraints

The risks of public action are recorded as well as its aspirations. The Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies reports that a monk and a nun were killed when the 1994 procession encountered crossfire.⁹ Religious visibility did not guarantee physical protection. The deaths make it necessary to assess courage alongside obligations towards participants, including the information and practical conditions under which they accepted risk.

Laura Hodges's account of the 2012 walk records an organizer's concerns about reduced donations and reluctance to participate because the event was perceived as political. She also describes the involvement of women religious and volunteers.¹⁰ These are reported perceptions and observations, rather than independent measurements of political interference or funding trends. They nevertheless complicate an account of religious activism as insulated from power. A public commitment to peace can

attract political interpretations even when organizers describe their purpose differently. Table 1 brings these documentary observations together.

Table 1: Documented Activities and Limits on Interpretation

Year	Documented activity	Limit on inference
1992	First walk during refugee return. ^{1,2}	Returnees and walkers are distinct populations; participation does not establish reconciliation.
1994	A monk and a nun killed in crossfire during the walk. ⁹	Religious visibility did not prevent armed violence.
1995	International interfaith pilgrims joined the Cambodian walk. ⁹	Cooperation is documented; diplomatic influence is not measured.
2012	Border route, village blessings, school lessons, and concerns about funding. ^{8,10}	Accounts cover brief segments; educational outcomes and funding trends are not independently measured.
2016	Archives transferred to a peace museum project; a further walk announced. ⁹	Archival transfer is recorded; an announcement does not verify completion of a walk.

Continuation and Public Memory After 2007

Peter Gyallay-Pap's 2007 remembrance records Ghosānanda's death and his relationship with Buddhist educational assistance in Cambodia.¹¹ The 2012 participant accounts provide direct evidence that later organizers and walkers continued activities associated with the Dhammayietra.^{8,10} Continuity here means that identifiable practices occurred after his death. It does not imply uninterrupted growth or that the movement retained the same capacity and membership.

The World Faiths Development Dialogue report connects Ghosānanda's influence with subsequent peace work and describes Bob Maat's role in a Dhammayietra centre.⁶ In 2016, the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies reported receiving archives from Venerable Tola and Bob Maat for its peace museum project. The same report announced a further walk.⁹ Archival transfer is a recorded action; the announced walk is evidence of intention. Keeping that distinction prevents an announcement from being treated as proof that an event was completed. The museum and Peace Gallery material also establish that the walks became a subject of public remembrance. Their preservation creates a resource for later inquiry, rather than settling questions about the movement's effects.

DISCUSSION

Compassion as a Public Responsibility

The findings support an interpretation of religious peacebuilding in which conduct gives practical expression to an ethical commitment. Compassion becomes publicly relevant when it shapes how people

approach a frightened community, accept support, or respond to a dispute. In the Dhammayietra, the ethical message was carried through activities that people could recognize and perform. This helps explain the relationship between personal discipline and public participation without assuming a direct progression from a peaceful individual to a peaceful state.

The interpretation also clarifies a limit. A blessing, meal, or lesson may open a relationship, but the obligations arising from that relationship can persist after the procession leaves. Questions about livelihood, safety, or access to land require attention to the conditions that produce suffering. Compassion understood as public responsibility therefore includes listening to those concerns and considering what action is feasible. This is a normative implication of the analysis, not evidence that every Dhammayietra participant fulfilled those responsibilities.

Anderson's account of nonviolence training in Cambodia shows how Buddhist ideas were used by trainers to discuss conflicts faced by activists, including disputes affecting rural livelihoods.¹² The example provides context for interpreting religious education as potentially relevant to concrete social problems. It does not demonstrate that those training activities were directed by Ghosānanda or that all Cambodian activism descended from the Dhammayietra. A careful account of legacy must distinguish an identifiable influence from a broad similarity of ethical language.

Grassroots Agency and the Conditions of Support

The case suggests that grassroots participation should be assessed through responsibilities as well as attend-

ance. Someone who prepares food or arranges accommodation contributes to the possibility of an encounter. A person who teaches, organizes a route, or explains the walk's purpose exercises a different responsibility. Recognizing these contributions avoids treating communities as passive recipients of a leader's message. It also creates a more demanding question about agency: whether participants could influence priorities and raise concerns, rather than only supplying labour.

The published accounts do not provide a complete account of decision-making within the movement. Hodges's report supplies evidence of women religious participating, but participation by itself cannot establish equality in leadership.¹⁰ The appropriate conclusion is that a fuller history should examine the contribution and authority of nuns and laywomen directly. Their labour and experiences should not disappear within a narrative organized solely around prominent male religious figures.

International cooperation presents a related issue. Dosch's analysis makes it possible to consider donor support alongside local initiative, without equating external funding with external authorship.⁴ The interpretation proposed here is that accountability should be assessed through the decisions made: who selected priorities, whose concerns could alter them, and to whom organizers explained their use of resources. These questions are relevant even when cooperation is generous and goals are shared. They specify what would need to be investigated before describing an initiative as fully owned by local communities.

Nonviolence and the Politics of Reconciliation

The exposure of walkers to violence challenges the assumption that spiritual authority can reliably protect activists. Continuing a procession may express commitment, but that decision also affects participants with different resources and vulnerabilities. Evaluating the practice therefore requires attention to consent, preparation, and the possibility of withdrawal. The sources used here do not establish the adequacy of those arrangements. The analytical point is that responsibility for peace includes responsibility towards the people asked to enact it.

Political meaning also cannot be determined solely by an organizer's stated intention. A route through con-

tested territory, a refusal to endorse hostility, or cooperation across national boundaries can acquire significance in a struggle over authority. The 2012 reports document both a border-oriented peace message and concern over how the event was perceived.^{8,10} The resulting interpretation is that nonpartisanship is a practical commitment that must be negotiated in particular circumstances. It is not evidence that religious action exists outside politics.

Reconciliation raises a further question about justice. DeAngelo's ethnographic research examines how some Cambodian survivors and deminers understand relations with former enemies through Buddhist concepts, including *mettā*, or loving-kindness. She also cautions against assuming that such relationships entail a refusal of individual accountability.¹³ Her work concerns experiences beyond the Dhammayietra and is used here as an interpretive comparison. It helps explain why encountering a former adversary humanely cannot be taken as evidence that a harmed person has forgiven them or abandoned a claim to justice.

On that basis, compassion should not be used to prescribe silence to victims. A peacebuilding practice can invite less hostile encounters while allowing people to disagree about responsibility, punishment, and restitution. The Dhammayietra sources establish aspirations towards reconciliation more readily than they establish the terms on which particular communities accepted it. A defensible account of religious peacebuilding must leave room for those differences and for people who choose not to participate.

Assessing Legacy and the Limits of the Evidence

Hsu's critique of "engaged Buddhism" cautions against making social engagement appear alien to earlier Buddhist life.⁵ Applied to this case, the term is useful only if it helps identify particular practices and relationships. It should not replace an account of how the walks were organized or imply that Ghosānanda invented Buddhist concern for society. The present analysis locates his legacy in a recognizable form of public action whose performance required others and whose purposes could be adapted to later circumstances.

Legacy can therefore be investigated through several concrete questions. Did later participants retain the name and practices of the walks? Did organizations preserve records or carry elements of the peace work

into education? How did later accounts explain the founder's importance? The documents examined here provide affirmative evidence for selected instances of continuation and remembrance. They are less adequate for assessing the scale of influence across Cambodia, the experiences of people who rejected the walks, or the duration of any change in relationships.

Ngarm and Miletic's study of Cambodia's peace process places religious peace initiatives within a wider set of efforts and describes their possible contribution to rebuilding social connections.¹⁴ That broader perspective supports caution about assigning national outcomes to one movement. Political negotiations, material reconstruction, and other forms of civic action operated alongside religious initiatives. The present study cannot isolate the contribution of the Dhammayietra from those processes.

The principal limitations follow from the documentary selection. Much of the material is available in English and represents scholarship, peace organizations, or participants sympathetic to the initiative. Commemorative sources can give greater visibility to success and exemplary leadership than to disagreement. The accounts describe different occasions and cannot be combined into a uniform measure of impact. Future research would benefit from Khmer-language records and oral histories with organizers, women participants, host communities, and critics. Such work could examine how participants understood risk and whether educational or interpersonal effects continued after a walk.

CONCLUSION

The Dhammayietra connected religious practice with grassroots peacebuilding through public encounters that communities could join and sustain. Its ethical commitments were expressed in walking, hospitality, teaching, and cooperation. Ghosānanda's leadership mattered within an organizational and social practice that depended on the contribution of others. The evidence of later walks and archival preservation supports a legacy of continued practice and public remembrance, while leaving the extent of lasting social change unresolved.

This case contributes to the study of religion and social activism by showing how the practical responsibilities of participation can be examined alongside a religious leader's message. A careful evaluation must

also consider political interpretation, the distribution of authority, and obligations towards people exposed to risk. Compassionate engagement offers a basis for approaching others humanely; claims about reconciliation require evidence of how those encounters were understood and what followed from them. Future historical and field research can develop that evidence without making the founder's reputation a substitute for evaluation.

REFERENCES

1. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Flight from Indochina. In: The state of the world's refugees 2000: fifty years of humanitarian action. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2000. Chapter 4. Available from: <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/3ebf9bad0.pdf>
2. Cambodia Peace Gallery. Reconciliation and healing [Internet]. Battambang: Cambodia Peace Gallery; [date unknown] [cited 2026 Oct 10]. Available from: <https://cambodiapeacegallery.org/exhibitions/reconciliation-and-healing/>
3. Poethig K. Movable peace: engaging the transnational in Cambodia's Dhammayietra. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 2002;41 (1):19–28. doi:10.1111/1468-5906.00097.
4. Dosch J. The role of civil society in Cambodia's peace-building process: have foreign donors made a difference? *Asian Survey*. 2012;52 (6):1067–1088. doi:10.1525/as.2012.52.6.1067.
5. Hsu AO. Coming to terms with “engaged Buddhism”: periodizing, provincializing, and politicizing the concept. *Journal of Global Buddhism*. 2022;23 (1):17–31. doi:10.26034/lu.jgb.2022.1991.
6. Delaney A, Scharff M. Faith-inspired organizations and development in Cambodia. Washington (DC): World Faiths Development Dialogue; 2010. p. 137–138. Available from: <https://s3.amazonaws.com/berkeley-center/101209CambodiaReport.pdf>
7. The Mindfulness Bell. Announcements: Ghosananda receives human rights award [Internet]. The Mindfulness Bell. 1993 Mar; (8) [cited 2026 Oct 10]. Available from: <https://www.parallax.org/mindfulnessbell/article/announcements-13/>

8. Cimaglia J. The Dhammayietra: patience, compassion, understanding, and a border conflict (Part 1) [Internet]. Washington (DC): World Faiths Development Dialogue, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University; 2012 Mar 26 [cited 2026 Oct 10]. Available from: <https://berkeley-center.georgetown.edu/posts/the-dhammayietra-patience-compassion-understanding-and-a-border-conflict-part-1>
9. Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies. CPCS receives first Peace Museum archives [Internet]. Siem Reap: Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies; 2016 [cited 2026 Oct 10]. Available from: <https://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/cpcs-receives-first-peace-museum-archives/>
10. Hodges L. The Dhammayietra: sharing stories of hardship and hope (Part 2) [Internet]. Washington (DC): World Faiths Development Dialogue, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs, Georgetown University; 2012 Mar 30 [cited 2026 Oct 10]. Available from: <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/the-dhammayietra-sharing-stories-of-hardship-and-hope-part-2>
11. Gyallay-Pap P. Cambodia's Gandhi: tribute to a peacemaker [Internet]. Inquiring Mind. 2007 Fall;24 (1) [cited 2026 Oct 10]. Available from: https://inquiringmind.com/article/2401_25_gyallay-pap_cambodian-gandhi/
12. Anderson S. Engaged Buddhism: learning non-violence in Cambodia [Internet]. The Mindfulness Bell. 2003 Jun; (34) [cited 2026 Oct 10]. Available from: <https://www.parallax.org/mindfulnessbell/article/engaged-buddhism-learning-nonviolence-in-cambodia/>
13. DeAngelo D. Resilient relations: rethinking truth, reconciliation, and justice in Cambodia. *Journal of Global Buddhism*. 2021;22 (1):173–189. doi:10.5281/zenodo.4727589.
14. Ngarm SP, Miletic T. Cumulative impact case study: Cambodia's post-war struggle for peace. Reflecting on Peace Practice Project. Cambridge (MA): CDA Collaborative Learning Projects; 2009 Aug. p. 34–35, 43–44. Available from: <https://www.cdacollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Cumulative-Impact-Case-Study-Cambodias-Post-War-Struggle-for-Peace.pdf>

HOW TO CITE: Yen Sokne, Religion, Peacebuilding, and Grassroots Social Activism in Cambodia: The Legacy of Mahā Ghosānanda's Dhammayietra, *Int. J. Sci. R. Tech.*, 2026, 3 (10), 889-895. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23391837>