



# Maha Ghosananda

## The Buddha of the Battlefield



Santidhammo Bhikkhu

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were released and slaughterhouses, fish markets, and butcher shops were closed throughout Burma.

Prime Minister U Nu also ordered the construction of an artificial "cave" – a vast jumble of boulders on the outside concealing within a vast blue, gold, and scarlet auditorium capable of seating 15,000. In this "cave" gathered 500 monks who chanted through the last of 1,600 hours of recitation of the entire canon of scriptures.

### Nichidatsu Fujii

At various times during his years in India, Maha Ghosananda studied with the Japanese monk Nichidatsu Fujii in his ashram near Bodhgaya. The ashram looks out over Griddhakuta where, according to legend, Lord Buddha preached his message of world peace.

Nichidatsu, both a protégé and colleague of Mahatma Gandhi and founder of the Nipponzan Myohoji Buddhist order, had a profound influence upon Maha Ghosananda. The Japanese monk had moved to India from Japan in 1930 after having taken a vow to dedicate his life to reestablishing Buddhism in India. He was 46 years old. That same year Gandhi launched his famous Salt March, an undertaking that grew into a mass movement of nonviolent liberation of India from British rule. Gandhi was repeatedly imprisoned for a succession of nonviolent confrontations with British authorities.

In 1933 Nichidatsu met Gandhi for the first time and was invited to spend a few months with him at this Wardha Ashram. During this time Nichidatsu was deeply influenced by Gandhi's teachings of nonviolent direct-action known as *Satyagrahi* or "soul force."

As the nonviolent Indian independence movement progressed throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Nichidatsu had ample opportunity to observe the power of nonviolent action to transform

nations and empires. He was later to employ these same strategies in a life-long struggle against atomic weapons, in particular, and war in general. Horrified by the specter of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Nichidatsu dedicated the rest of his long life to the propagation of world peace and disarmament, especially of nuclear weapons.

In 1954 in Japan, Nichidatsu inaugurated the first peace pagoda and then launched his anti-nuclear-weapons movement. He then began constructing peace pagodas around the world, both to give physical expression to his desire for world peace after the devastations of World War II and to provide focal points for the creation of coalitions from which people could be mobilized for actions on behalf of world peace.

Ghosananda was aware of and frequently participated in these activities.

Nichidatsu emphasized nonviolence as the foundation for the struggle for world peace.

In a speech he gave in 1956, which is representative of the teachings Ghosananda received from him, Nichidatsu said, "When one becomes directly involved in politics, the just religion is obscured. Religion should be separate from politics, economy, and force. The Lord Buddha was a prince, but it was only in leaving the throne that he was able to deliver the genuine teachings of peace. Politics is deeply influenced by the interests of the nation. Religion should not represent interests or rights. It is an original state of existence," he said.

"Civilization is neither to have electric lights, nor airplanes, nor produce nuclear bombs," Nichidatsu continued. "Civilization is to not kill people, not destroy living beings, not make war. Civilization is to hold out all respect and affection for one another."

During the time he spent in India with Nichidatsu Fujii, Maha Ghosananda deepened his understanding of the social application of Buddhist teachings in building peace and reconciliation.

"The time has come!" Nichidatsu taught. "The time has come when we can no longer contain the urge to do something, but rush out of our houses. Time has come to look up to heaven, prostrate ourselves to the earth, voice our grief and share it with everyone."

Nichidatsu said the person acknowledged as a saint is "the person who actually practices the moral code. Individuals grow peaceful and societies show healthy development in an era when the moral code is upheld. In an era which the moral code is neglected, ridiculed or destroyed, individuals become corrupt and societies become chaotic," with the result that violence and murder becomes the norm.

"Believing in violence as omnipotent is a characteristic of such an era, and murder and destruction are the skills of those times," he said.

Nichidatsu declared that "heaven and earth change places in the Era of Decline of the Dhamma. A state of perversion is created where people lose sight of the Buddha, which should be the sacred object of faith." Money becomes the new "God on earth" as a result, he said.

Nichidatsu denounced the growing "cold war" between communists and capitalists, a war that was soon to result in the utter devastation of Cambodia: "Whether it is the highly advanced science and technology, or the politics and economics of liberalism or communism that employs science and technology, the way to prevent humanity from self-destruction is not found in any of these doctrines advocated, or in any of the new weapons they produce. The pathway to prevent humanity from self destruction can only be found in the moral code and religion, which are deemed superfluous and are cast aside as antiquated by the modern civilization. But it is the religious belief that has the power to purify and transform even the evils that cannot be restrained by the moral code."

Nichidatsu denounced heartless technological progress. "Science and technology led to the discovery of the atomic and hydrogen bombs, and a democratic nation used them for murder and warfare....The production and use of atomic and hydrogen bombs are a great disgrace to human civilization. The moral code will criticize this as an indelible disgrace on the United States."

Nichidatsu held up spirituality as the antidote for the materialism of the modern world. Religion is the great light of the world in this dark age of modern civilization, he said. True spirituality is to cherish life, "a fundamental prohibition of murder itself, which is the greatest tragedy of all tragedies in the human world.

"This fundamental prohibition of murder is the basis for an ultimate civilization of humanity, which has never been given heed by science, economics or politics," he said.

"This fundamental prohibition of murder is the major issue that extends through and beyond politics, economics and science. This is the ultimate issue that must be addressed in order to deliver humanity from its otherwise potential of extinction." The words of this elder Japanese monk were seared into Ghosananda's heart.

Ghosananda also learned from Nichidatsu the importance of walking among the people every day. For both Nichidatsu and Gandhi, walking was an implied rejection of the technological developments that had enslaved India and that led to world wars and atomic nuclear conflagrations. Walking also provided a face-to-face encounter with the common people.

Back in Japan as a young monk, Nichidatsu had practiced the ascetic walking practice known as *kaihogyo*, in which the monk spent a thousand days walking in the mountains of Japan, beating a drum and chanting. He would routinely walk 40 kilometers a day. "The true monk does not stay in one place," he taught Ghosananda. The Cambodian Theravada tradition embraced a similar practice, known as *thudong*, in which the monk spends a good part of his life walking in the forests, practicing meditation in imitation of the Buddha.

The lessons Ghosananda learned from Nichidatsu helped him in his mission to restore Cambodian Buddhism twenty years later. This skill of spiritual-walking would be useful two decades later, when Ghosananda rose to global prominence as an advocate of peace and reconciliation in post-war Cambodia.

*Sources: Quotes from Nichidatsu Fujii are from a speech he gave on August 6, 1956, published in many forums and on-line. I quote from it as representative of the teachings Ghosananda would have received from his mentor.*

*Note that I cannot identify the Nalanda University at which Ghosananda studied according to the published biographies such as Ghosananda.org website and others.*

## Meditation in the Forest



Maha Ghosananda received doctoral degree from Nalanda University and was awarded the title "Maha Ghosananda" in 1969. The term *maha* (meaning "great") refers to a monk who is a Pali expert, a monastic scholar. For the rest of his life, Maha Ghosananda would joke that "PhD means Person Has Dukkha," a sly comment on his fifteen years of study for his own PhD.

In Thailand he entered the forest hermitage of Thai meditation master Venerable Dhammadero at Wat Chai Na just outside Nakorn Sri Dhammaraj in southern Thailand. In Dhammadero's wat, Maha Ghosananda learned a meditation method that emphasized *sati-sampjāna* - "mindfulness and clear comprehension"

Christopher Titmuss, a western Buddhist teacher, was studying meditation at Wat Chai Na when Venerable Maha Ghosananda arrived in 1972. "Ghosananda wore the yellow robes of the city Buddhist monk rather than the brown robes of the forest monk," Titmuss recounted. "He carried two small bags, one hanging from each shoulder. He walked gracefully, slowly and with remarkable serenity. He was a handsome man in his early '40s."

Ghosananda was assigned a brick *kuti* (hut) next to the *sala* (assembly hall). Titmuss often visited Ghosananda, who "spoke to me in English with a smattering of Thai, French, plus a little Sanskrit and Pali. He smiled and laughed and held my hands as we spoke. He seemed to ooze the divine abiding of *mudita* (joy), that is the profound depth of appreciative joy and happiness that goes in all direction, inwardly and outwardly."

Titmuss said that Maha Ghosananda was recognized as being different from others and treated differently by the teacher.