INTRODUCTION

In the course of writing this book, I began to realize that it was, in part, a semiconscious homage to Holmes Welch’s very fine *Buddhism under Mao*. While I cannot claim that author’s experience or breadth of knowledge, I intend that this offering will, however imperfect, stand as a memorial to the many Cambodian Buddhist monks and laypeople, both named and unknown, who lost their lives or had their futures traumatically altered by the tragedy that overwhelmed their country in the 1970s. The choice to present periodic lists of personal names and places in the form of a litany reflects this. Although this may appear repetitious, it has been done for a specific purpose and, I hope, will require no apology.

The period covered in this study extends to either side of Democratic Kampuchea, the catastrophic regime that exercised power in Cambodia from April 1975 until January 1979. Early in my research Ven. Tep Vong, the country’s most senior monk, sought to convince me that any inquiry into the crimes committed on such a massive scale by the communists should not neglect the significance of the overthrow of Sihanouk in March 1970. This perspective derives, in part, from Tep Vong’s own role as a significant participant in the People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), Democratic Kampuchea’s successor regime. But it would be remiss of me to ignore another essential ingredient in his thinking. This is linked to a traditional Buddhist perception that the security of the state requires the protective presence of a monarch carrying out his responsibilities in accord with the Buddha’s teachings. Whatever members of the international community and the Cambodian intelligentsia of the late 1960s may have thought, the vast bulk of the Cambodian population, especially those living in the countryside, regarded Sihanouk as precisely such a righteous ruler. His ousting as head of the state, then, was envisioned in cosmological terms, and Buddhist traditionalists interpreted his downfall in an apocalyptic manner. Through
this one act the entire structure of Cambodian political life, together with the natural environment in which it was situated, would be fatally disrupted.

As a scholar of Buddhism, I am not unsympathetic to this reading of Cambodia’s recent history, but I think that there are other equally important reasons for beginning a study of Buddhism under Pol Pot at a much earlier stage than the start of the Democratic Kampuchea period. The most significant of these is that almost immediately after Sihanouk’s fall the new government of the Khmer Republic began to lose large swaths of the country to the communist insurgents who would come to be known as the Khmer Rouge. As the Lon Nol–led regime continued its fitful existence, so the proportion of the country under Phnom Penh’s control shrank rapidly to little more than some of the major towns and the road corridors connecting them with the capital.

Meanwhile, in the “liberated areas” controlled by the Khmer Rouge the extreme policies that were to come to the outside world’s attention in the late 1970s were already being tried out. Manipulation and repression of the Buddhist monastic order, allied to a cruelly antipathetic attitude to the faith and practice of the laity, commenced in some regions of the country almost five years before the beginning of Democratic Kampuchea. If we are to understand the regime’s mature policy on the question of religion, we must begin our study at its very inception.

The Democratic Kampuchea period was relatively short-lived. It came to an end, at least as far as the control of Phnom Penh and the apparatus of national government was concerned, in early January 1979, when the National Front for the Salvation of Kampuchea, supported by the military and political resources of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, invaded the country. The PRK was established soon after and lasted until the end of the following decade, when, largely as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Vietnam was obliged to withdraw its economic support.

Given the horrors of the previous period, it might be supposed that the PRK would have garnered an overwhelming degree of popular support. But this was not so, for the new government was backed by a neighboring state that had come to be regarded by many as Cambodia’s traditional enemy. For this reason the PRK had to work hard to establish its legitimacy, and one of the means by which this was accomplished was a relatively rapid reestablishment of the Buddhist monastic order (saṅgha). But since this had to be accomplished within a communist framework, the various pre-1970 freedoms could not be easily condoned and the reborn saṅgha was placed
under some of the same severe restrictions previously imposed upon it by the Khmer Rouge. The ending of the Democratic Kampuchea period, then, does not represent a decisive rupture with the past, at least as far as the treatment of Buddhism is concerned, and this is the principal reason that this study takes us through to the end of the 1980s.

It is important to recognize that Buddhism in Southeast Asia has never been a disembodied conceptual system devoid of purchase on historical and political reality. Neither can it be regarded as a purely passive entity, a mere uncomplaining recipient of actions initiated by powerful individuals or corporations located beyond the religious domain. Both positions are caricatures that relate to Western conceptions of the nature of Asian religiosity rather than to social reality. They are also connected with a reluctance to accept Buddhism as a localizable “total fact.” What I mean here is that when we look at Buddhism, we tend to focus on its philosophical and scholastic superstructure while ignoring the ways in which it has operated on a far wider level to sustain and inform the cultures with which it formed a whole. It has achieved its sociocultural character by the provision of educational and welfare facilities, certainly. But it has also acted through more direct involvement in the apparatus of state.

Buddhism has never been an entirely otherworldly religion of “Being-within-itself,” nor are Buddhists a “people outside history.” This Hegelian and Weberian imaginaire is premised on a modern and essentially European conception of a separation between church and state, yet it has been influential in the discounting of Buddhism’s political dimension. This is surprising, given that, as individuals possessed of mobility, moral authority, and traditional learning, Theravāda monks have been significant figures in the exercise of political power. Throughout the last two centuries such figures were active in campaigns to both accelerate and hinder the transplantation of modernity in Southeast Asia. They also acted as effective creators of new social organizations and political institutions.

It has become a commonplace to claim that the passivity inherent in Theravāda Buddhism, especially its monastic segment, has made it ripe for cynical and consistent exploitation by successful power holders. I do not wish to entirely deny this assertion, but it is only a part of the picture, and this book would give only one side of the story if it stood merely as a catalogue of atrocities directed against the monastic order by the Khmer Rouge. Certainly, I intend to supply this information in significantly greater and more accurate detail than attempted by any previous writers. But I wish to balance
my account with a demonstration, admittedly controversial for some, of the ways in which Buddhist categories were also imported into the ideology and practice of the Cambodian revolutionary movement. It is a modest aspiration that, in so doing, this work will prompt future scholars to pay more serious attention to the indigenous factors that constituted the worldview of one of the most destructive political regimes of the modern period.

By emulating and seeking to surpass the disciplined morality of the saṅgha, the Khmer Rouge created a moral and social order based on an inversion of Buddhist virtues. This new dispensation rapidly undermined the traditional authority of the Buddhist monk and evoked fear and trembling in the hearts of those who continued to value Buddhist ideals. Many did not survive the terrible events of the late 1970s, and Buddhism as an institution was completely destroyed by the time that Pol Pot fell from power. But it remains a moot point whether all aspects of religion were annihilated during Democratic Kampuchea.

As Albert Camus eloquently noted many decades ago, for totalitarian regimes mass murder transmogrifies into the only sign of the sacred possible in a completely desacralized cosmos. More prosaically, a small body of monks did survive the period with their vocations intact, Buddhist symbols maintained their protean character, and apotropaic elements deeply embedded in Cambodia’s religious continued to provoke meaningful responses even in the most extreme circumstances. All of these factors would ultimately ensure Buddhism’s relatively rapid reestablishment.

The persecution of Buddhism is not a modern phenomenon. According to legendary sources contained in the Aśokāvadāna, the tradition was suppressed by Puṣyamitra Śuṅga (r. 185–151 BCE) quite soon after its first ascent to prominence in ancient India. This ruler’s motivations are unknown, but he is said to have attacked monasteries, destroyed stupas, put bounties on the heads of monks, and ordered their execution (Strong 1983). During this unstable period in its early history, the fear of persecution appears to have combined with core doctrinal notions stressing the omnipresence of impermanence in such a way that Buddhism developed into a religion that accepted the necessity of periodic phases of decline (Chappell 1980), and prophecies, attributed to the Buddha, that predicted various calamities adversely affecting the practice of religion are found in almost all Buddhist cultures.²

A number of factors have fostered negativity toward Buddhism from its inception until the present day. One of the more enduring of these is straightforward doctrinal antipathy, a significant element in the history of South
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and East Asia, where Buddhist monks have been obliged to compete in a multireligious marketplace in which Brahmanism, Daoism, Confucianism, Islam, and Christianity have variously occupied prominent and occasionally hostile positions. Social and political critiques have also been widespread. Complaints that monks contribute nothing to society, that they undermine its social institutions, that they are too influential, that they seek to overthrow the established order, or that they are unpatriotic are nothing new. Xenophobia and nationalism may also play important roles in fostering hostility toward a religion that has its origins in India.

State persecution on economic grounds has also been a significant factor in most of the regions in which Buddhism has flourished. A common pattern is that a period of general prosperity leads to expansion in the religious sphere and to a subsequent concentration of wealth within the saṅgha through a growth in lay donations, typically taking the form of increased landholding and commercial activity. But the saṅgha has often stood outside the system of taxation, so this process has tended to decrease the revenues available to rulers. This change in the power relationship between saṅgha and state may easily be deemed unpalatable by the latter.

A simple solution for improving the overall rate of economic performance is to confiscate monastic lands and return monks to the lay life. But in Asia such activity is often given a Buddhist justification: the ruler is engaging in a “purification” of the saṅgha in an attempt to root out unsuitable or heterodox elements. Four separate emperors persecuted Buddhism in China between the fifth and tenth centuries for such reasons. The best-known of these events is the Great Suppression of 845 CE, conducted during the reign of the Tang emperor Wuzong, who, having just concluded an expensive military campaign, had powerful reasons for replenishing his treasury (Ch’en 1956). Coincidentally, at almost exactly the same time, the Tibetan king Langdarma (r. ca. 838–841) launched a campaign against Buddhism—defrocking monks and closing monasteries—possibly because he belonged to a different religious persuasion (Karmay 2003). But Langdarma’s victory was short-lived. He was assassinated by a Buddhist monk.

All of the elements of traditional anti-Buddhism successfully migrated into the modern period, although now they were supplemented by a scientific and rationalist spirit imported from the European Enlightenment. As James Ketelaar (1993, 14) notes, with specific reference to the Japanese context, “it would be much easier to compose a list of those who were not ardently opposed to Buddhism in the nineteenth century.” During the Meiji restoration,
moreover, a campaign to “abolish Buddhism and destroy Śākyamuni” (haibutsu kishaku) in the joint names of Shintō and modernism nearly succeeded in bringing about the tradition’s total eradication in Japan. The level of bloodshed during the campaign fortunately was not high. The same cannot be said of Stalin’s almost complete liquidation of the Mongolian monastic order during the 1930s (Bawden 1989; Moses 1977), which when taken together with the events of the Chinese Cultural Revolution are probably the closest historical parallels to those with which this book is concerned.

Before the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Communist Party’s policy was “to protect Buddhism, while at the same time keeping it under control and utilizing it in foreign policy” (Welch 1972, 1). A Chinese Buddhist Association ensured that the country’s Buddhists would “participate, under the leadership of the People’s Government, in movements for the welfare of the motherland and the defence of world peace; . . . help the People’s Government fully to carry out its policy of freedom of religious belief; . . . link up Buddhists from different parts of the country; and . . . exemplify the best traditions of Buddhism” (quoted in ibid., 20). This all sounded quite laudable, but we must bear in mind that “defending world peace” actually involved providing concrete support for the Korean War, while contributing to the “policy of freedom of religious belief” meant that Buddhist monks were expected to stop preaching in public places.

Subsequently monks were transformed into fully contributing members of the economic realm as the Party passed a number of agrarian reform laws, the last of which, in 1950, decreed that monastic lands should be confiscated. As a consequence, around 90 percent of China’s approximately half a million monks disrobed in the 1950–1958 period. From the early 1950s, Buddhist monasteries were beginning to be used for non-monastic purposes, while monks were encouraged to cleanse their beliefs of “pessimism and escapism” by learning the basic elements of Marxism-Leninism. As a result the saṅgha was obliged to reduce or entirely abandon traditional religious practice, and the intensity of lay Buddhist activity also massively contracted.

In Tibet the policy on religion was pursued in its purest form, an international report of 1960 observing that the Chinese intended to “allow only that degree of freedom of religious belief which was compatible with complete acceptance of communism, in short, none at all” (my italics; International Commission of Jurists 1960, 14). The same work opined that the communists intended to weaken Buddhism in Tibet as a prelude to its total eradication.
But there is some evidence that monks “of the poorest class” may have been treated less severely than those from well-to-do families, and the report’s authors made the point that a case can be made, as the communists themselves did, that most of the measures need not be regarded as “necessarily directed against religious belief” as such (ibid., 36).

In 1940 Mao had written that communists “may form an anti-imperialist and anti-feudal united front for political action with certain idealists and even with religious followers, but we can never approve of their idealism or religious doctrines.”6 A significantly restricted form of Buddhism, then, might be employed to convince the people of the Party’s bona fides. But in the long run no form of Buddhist-Marxist syncretism would be tolerated, in part because belief in the inerrancy of the Party line, and in the quasi omniscience of Mao, would soon begin to take on an almost religious quality (MacInnes 1972, 286–287). The door was now open for the Cultural Revolution, the initial phases of which were taken up with violent though sporadic attacks on religious institutions. This practice was followed by a more coherent policy of persecuting “counterrevolutionary” groups, such as the Buddhist saṅgha, so that by September 1966 virtually all monasteries in China had closed, the first time that this had happened since 845 CE.

I shall attempt to argue that the path taken by the Khmer Rouge in its approach to the religious question had a logic largely determined by the indigenous cultural context. But the reader will have little difficulty in detecting parallel patterns and processes across the two communist states. The degree to which the mode of suppression during Democratic Kampuchea was determined by the events of the Cultural Revolution is, however, in need of further investigation. One observation we can make with absolute confidence is that neither regime was successful in transforming into an enduring reality its desire for the construction of a new society freed from the shackles of religion. The Chinese leadership began to dissociate itself from the worst consequences of such an extreme policy as the Cultural Revolution, which was running out of steam. From the early 1970s “the frenzy of destruction” diminished, even though “the political terror could not be resolved until the death of the senile Chairman in 1976” (Reinders 2004, 194). We begin to detect some limited, officially controlled reordinations of previously disrobed Chinese monks soon after. Although the mechanisms driving the process were rather different in Cambodia, movement in the same general direction occurred there, and the Buddhist monastic order gradually
reemerged, admittedly still with many restrictions, following hard on the invasion of the country by a neighboring communist state.

A Note on Sources

Ideally the writing of this book and the research on which it is based should have been conducted at a point somewhat nearer to the events it seeks to describe. Although by the late 1970s I was beginning to develop an interest in the state of contemporary Buddhism in Asia, Cambodia was at that time still part of a French field of academic influence, and significant knowledge of its distinctive form of Theravāda was largely hidden from English-language scholarship. Indeed, I accepted the very infrequent and rather sketchy media accounts of what was happening to organized Buddhism under the Khmer Rouge at face value, and it was only much later that I started to realize that the situation was more complex. In particular I came to suspect that statistics concerning the number of monks liquidated and pagodas destroyed that started to emerge in the aftermath of Democratic Kampuchea might have been plucked out of thin air, often in an attempt to reinforce some specific ideological line.

This book represents a belated effort to look into the matter in more detail, but I would fall at the first hurdle if I did not make clear the problematic nature of much of the primary source material that I present. When researching an earlier book, *Cambodian Buddhism: History and Practice* (2005), I had made some initial attempts to interview surviving members of the saṅgha regarding their experiences under the Khmer Rouge. These early probings made me realize that a far more rigorous effort would be necessary to build up an accurate and properly nuanced picture of the history of Buddhism between 1970 and the end of the communist period, not the least because a discernible process of mythification about the recent past was already well under way in Cambodian society. Although I was relatively unfamiliar with fieldwork when I started out, I quickly discovered what anyone experienced in conducting personal interviews with witnesses to traumatic events already knows—an interviewee’s impressions can be astonishing sharp and vivid in some respects but vague in the extreme as far as supporting details are concerned. This makes such tasks as trying to establish a chronology of events, for example, very problematic. And the setting of specific incidents against an objective calendar may be even more
confusing. That many of my informants were monks or Buddhist laymen
and laywomen of advanced age and, in some cases, declining mental facul-
ties further complicates the matter.

No interview, however lucid, coherent, and convincing, can stand as
evidence in isolation. It must be weighed against the utterances of other
informants and used only when a certain configuration of veracity emerges.
It seems to me that there is as much art as there is science to this activity, and
I would be foolish not to admit that I have occasionally been convinced of the
honesty of an informant’s account by strongly subjective factors. But I have
been fortunate in being able to correlate, and in many cases verify, the results
of my interviews with materials collected by Ben Kiernan, Chantou Boua,
Sharon Brown, and others in 1986 during a US Social Science Research
Council’s Indochina Studies Program project coordinated by David Hawk,
a former executive director of Amnesty International USA and a founder of
the Cambodian Genocide Commission.8

I have been able to significantly complement the insights gained from
interview sources by drawing on the enormous collection of unpublished
materials now held at the Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam).9
The size of this archive makes it more than likely that I will have missed
much relevant material, and on this ground alone the picture that I present
must be regarded as provisional. But there are other methodological com-
plexities that make it necessary to take a cautious line. One of the obvious
problems when drawing inferences from documentary sources of the kind
held at DC-Cam is that we often require a far better insight into the circum-
stances and context in which they were composed before we can be certain
of their significance. But this is not always possible.

The most prominent of these difficulties relates to the “confession”
transcripts and attached interrogator reports extracted from prisoners of the
state security organization of the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK)
at the notorious Tuol Sleng prison in Phnom Penh, also known as Office
S-21. These statements were invariably collected as part of the process that
led to the torture and execution of individuals as enemies of the revolution
and of Angkar, its controlling revolutionary organization. It can be confi-
dently asserted that these documents were composed under the most extreme
duress of a kind and horror that can only be dimly imagined. Indeed, one
often feels an intense sense of voyeuristic unworthiness when simply read-
ing and commenting upon them. An initial and entirely natural response to
the information contained within these documents would be to bracket it out of any equation related to historical and legal reliability. But this appears to me to be an overreaction, for there is much material here that, with careful contextualizing and cross-referencing to other sources, may enrich our understanding.

Other DC-Cam documents with specific relevance to this study were composed in less disturbing conditions, but they also raise significant questions concerning objectivity. In this category we must include diverse sources such as Lon Nol government intelligence reports and items of Khmer Rouge correspondence, such as reports from low-ranking cadres to officials, directives from superiors to their subordinates, and requests for information or assistance—this last category is sometimes called the Khmer Rouge telegrams. Also available are large quantities of biographical writings that record personal details of Party members or of prisoners; reports and minutes of various CPK political and military committees; the personal notebooks of some 520 CPK cadres, soldiers, and other officials; copies of three Democratic Kampuchea–period Party magazines; and around 95 films and instructional videos produced by the regime or, in some cases, by visiting film crews from friendly communist states.

Foreign source materials, especially those detailing official connections between Democratic Kampuchea and China and Vietnam, provide additional insights into the period, as do post–Democratic Kampuchea, Khmer-language materials such as the vast quantity of survivor petitions—also called the Renakse (rañasirsa, or “front”) documents—that were addressed to PRK officials after the fall of Pol Pot. We should add to these the increasing body of survivor memoirs, both published and in draft form, many of which tell the harrowing stories of individuals who were mere children during Democratic Kampuchea, and the growing collection of DC-Cam interview transcripts and mapping reports. It is clear that all such materials can be relevant in gaining a better understanding of the fate of Buddhism during the period, but it is equally the case that they must be used with considerable care.

Finally, the records of the 1979 trial of Pol Pot and his associates cannot be ignored. On 15 July 1979, only seven months after the overthrow of Democratic Kampuchea, the country’s new People’s Revolutionary Tribunal passed its first law (Decree Law No. 1), designed to pave the way for the trial of what was termed “the Pol Pot and Ieng Sary clique” on a charge of genocide. The definition of genocide was drawn quite widely and
did not correspond with the terms of the 9 December 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, although it did include reference to the “smashing” of religion (Heder and Tittemore 2004, 11n17). As far as Buddhism was concerned, five charges were specified by the tribunal:

1. That at the same time that they were emptying Phnom Penh, the revolutionaries moved swiftly to destroy the central bureaucracy of Buddhism. It was asserted, for example, that the Mahanikay saṅgharāja (chief monk), Ven. Huot Tat, and other monks in his entourage were taken to Oudong by car on 18 April 1975 and promptly eliminated.

2. That between 17 and 19 April 1975 all centers of Buddhist culture and learning throughout the country were closed down, resulting in the destruction of the country’s cultural patrimony.

3. That the followers of Pol Pot “insulted, tortured and persecuted, individually and collectively, more than 100,000 monks among which were the order’s influential backbone of between four and five thousand senior monks and lay religious specialists (achars).”

4. That everyone who refused to abandon his or her religion was exterminated.

5. That the revolutionaries totally abolished the functions of Cambodia’s wats and destroyed precious objects and relics. (Groupe de Juristes Cambodgiens 1990, 218–219)

The tribunal was a brief affair, lasting a mere five days, between 15 and 19 August 1979. The principal defendants were believed to be in hiding in Thailand and did not participate in the proceedings. No evidence was put forward on their behalf, and key figures in the legal process had declared Pol Pot and Ieng Sary guilty before the trial began. They were, indeed, found guilty of a wide range of crimes that went well beyond the normal definition of genocide, and were sentenced to death in absentia. An order was also given for the confiscation of their property. The trial clearly suffered from many shortcomings. Furthermore, many of the documents and testimonies submitted to the tribunal appear to be compromised by factual errors. Nevertheless, some of this documentation is relevant to the theme of this study and may also be consulted with care.