

30 March 2007

Buddhist Leader's Body Subject of Global Dispute

By Michael Lafleur

CHELMSFORD — The preserved body of the Venerable Maha Ghosananda, an internationally acclaimed Buddhist monk and friend to the Dalai Lama and the late Pope John Paul II, now is the object of a global tug of war.

Maha Ghosananda died March 12 at a Northampton hospital near where he had lived for 27 years. His body was preserved by a Northampton funeral home and brought to the Trairatanaram Buddhist Temple on Quigley Avenue in North Chelmsford on March 18.

The monk, whose religious work and peace endeavors won him accolades as "the Cambodian Ghandi," now lies in state in the temple's main hall. Maha Ghosananda's body is also under 24-hour guard.

The U.S.-based Buddhist monk organization that owns the temple and paid for Maha Ghosananda's care is scheduling a two-day ceremony in his honor, April 7-8. Afterward it plans to bring his body to Pelham, where it can be the focal point of a world peace center to be built in his honor.

A rival group from Canada also wants Maha Ghosananda's body for transport to Cambodia.

In an interview from Montreal, the Venerable Hok Savann said he has the blessing of Cambodia's former king to bring the monk's body to his native country.

Because "more people can participate officially" there, Cambodia is a more appropriate location to display his body, Hok Savann said.

"We will let people in America conduct the service they have and after it is done, we should do another memorial service for him in Cambodia," he said.

The Canadian monk said he is willing to negotiate with members of the Community of Khmer Buddhist Monks Inc., which owns about 70 other temples across the United States in addition to Trairatanaram Temple.

The Venerable Natha Pandito—secretary general of the Maha Ghosananda International Buddhist Peace Foundation, which is planning the Pelham center—questioned Hok Savann's story. He said earlier this month that Hok Savann's supporters went to the Northampton funeral home and tried to claim Maha Ghosananda's body.

"That caused us a lot of headache and confusion here," Natha Pandito said.
"It's a very sad situation here."

Hok Savann denied the accusation.

He said Cambodian government officials would be contacting the U.S. Embassy in Cambodia to officially request that Maha Ghosananda be shipped to Cambodia.

That claim could not be verified yesterday.

Michael Ahearn, director of the Ahearn Funeral Home in Northampton, which prepared Maha Ghosananda's body, said no one tried to claim the body besides the Community of Khmer Buddhist Monks.

"I'm the only one at the funeral home they would deal with, and that never happened," Ahearn said. "I think what's happening is there is just so many people involved between the different monks."

Maha Ghosananda was born in Takeo, Cambodia. Published reports last week stated he was in his late 70s. Other sources, and monks at the Chelmsford temple, said he was born in 1913, and was 93 at the time of his death.

The U.S. monks said Maha Ghosananda had been a U.S. citizen since the late 1980s. They said the yearly peace walks he led throughout Cambodia from 1993 through 2002 were never supported by the Cambodian government.

"He was not welcome in Cambodia with his hard work for peace," Natha Pandito said. "They never honored his work and they were afraid of him and his influence. Now when he is dead, they act like they respected him. It's all untrue."

The Venerable Khon Sao, president of the Community of Khmer Buddhist Monks, said he has not received an official communication from anyone in the Cambodian government.

"If the government of Cambodia wants him back, they must talk with us," he said.

Khon Sao said Maha Ghosananda based his international mission from Leverett, a small town in western Massachusetts, and in Providence, R.I.

Natha Pandito said the international center, located on a large tract owned by his organization, would contain a library of Maha Ghosananda's writings and serve as an educational institution for speakers on international peace

issues. He said the United States is the most appropriate location for such a facility.

"Here is a free country, and in Cambodia, you cannot do anything," he said. "It would be a very strong base for us to go back and help our own country."

From 1975 until 1979, Cambodia was ruled by the brutal Khmer Rouge Communist regime, whose radical reign is blamed for the deaths of an estimated 2 million to 3 million Cambodians. The Khmer Rouge outlawed the Buddhist religion and killed all but about 3,000 of an estimated 60,000 monks in Cambodia.

Maha Ghosananda was the foremost architect of Cambodian Buddhism's rebirth from that low point.

He was in the midst of a long period of meditation in rural Thailand during the Khmer Rouge period. His entire family died in the Killing Fields. He rose to prominence by ministering to refugees who fled to United Nations camps in Thailand.

Maha Ghosananda later publicly forgave the Khmer Rouge regime and met with their remaining leaders, who had fled to the jungles of northwestern Cambodia after being chased from power by an invading Vietnamese army.

His famous Dhammayietra Walks for Peace and Reconciliation in Cambodia led him through minefields and strongholds controlled by various warring factions in Cambodia.

He met with world leaders, including the Dalai Lama and Pope John Paul II, and was a prime mover in the Cambodian peace process that ultimately led to United Nations-backed parliamentary elections in 1993.

In 1988, Cambodian monks and lay people in Paris elected Maha Ghosananda the supreme Buddhist patriarch of Cambodia.

Maha Ghosananda was initiated into the Cambodian Buddhist Order in 1943, according to published accounts. He spoke 15 languages fluently.

"He is far beyond the nationality, the borders of nations," Natha Pandito said. "He's beyond a particular religion. He is an international figure. We should honor him and support his legacy here."

Lowell Sun