

# Cambodian Buddhism

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# Cambodian Ideas of Cultural Identity

## Cambodian Buddhism

See: [www.seasite.niu.edu/khmer/Ledgerwood/Contents.htm](http://www.seasite.niu.edu/khmer/Ledgerwood/Contents.htm)

### I. How to teach about Buddhism in Southeast Asia.



A panoramic view of Angkor Wat. (Kim Seang Poam)

# 1.Introduction

Obviously this is a very broad topic, shape your approach based on:

- the course being taught
- the background of the students
- how much time you have
- how much depth you want to go into.



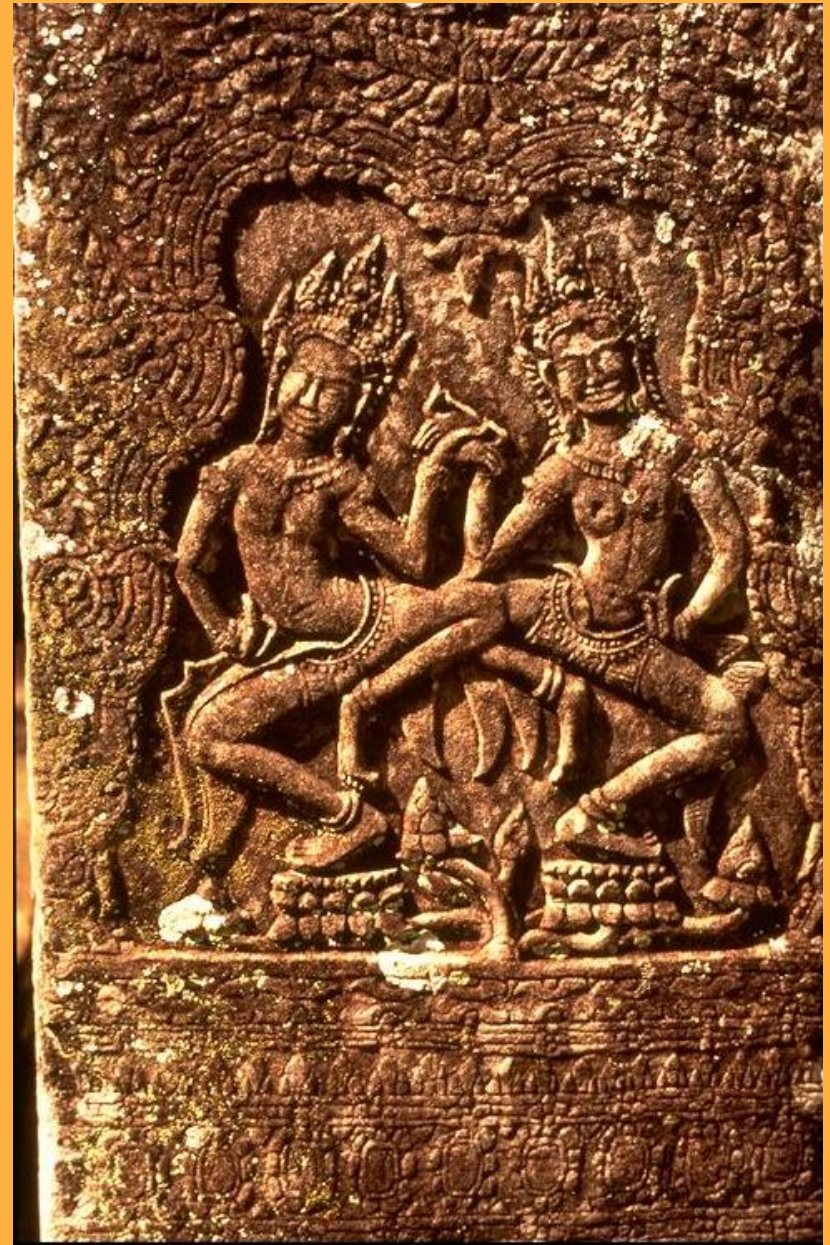
Angkor Wat. (Rachel Rinaldo)



## Start out with visual material.

Swearer comments on the importance of images to understanding cultural differences.

His book, *The Buddhist World of Southeast Asia* has an audiovisual bibliography of films on Buddhism.



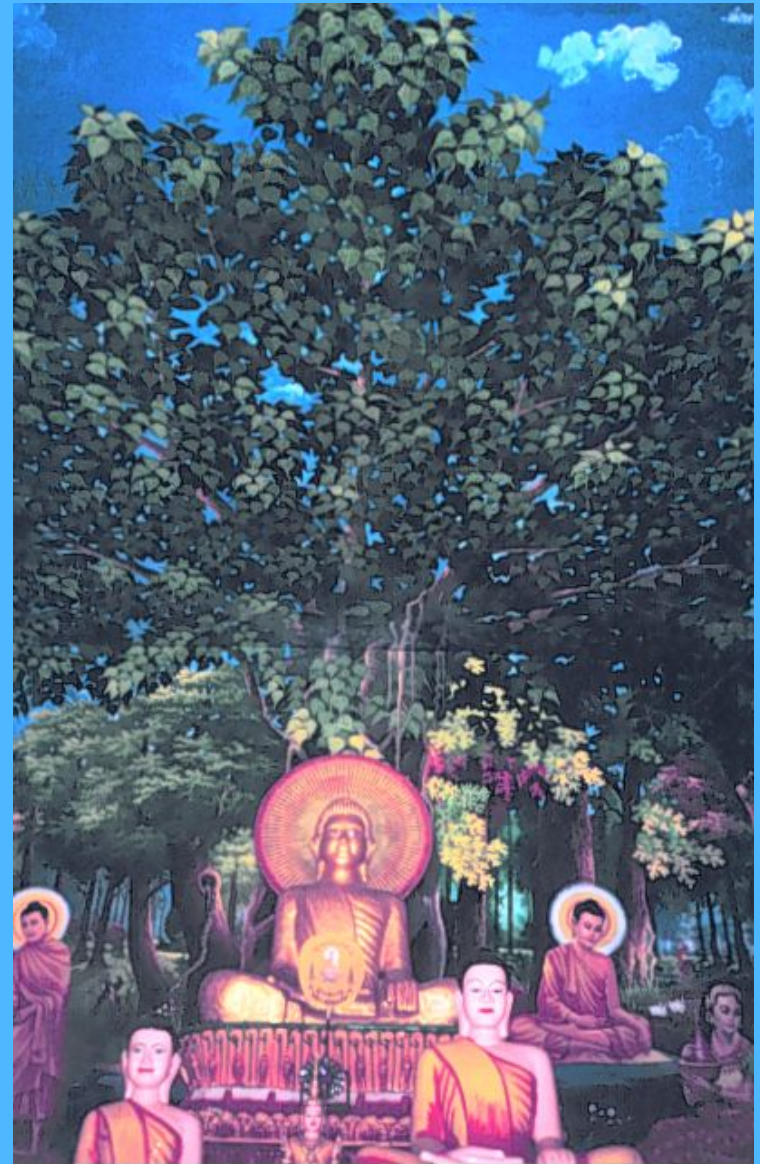
Angkor wall carving. (Rachel Rinaldo)

## A. The Buddha's Life as a Model

Born a prince, privileged life, at age of 30 sees suffering: illness, old age, and death; and an ascetic. Leaves the life of a householder, tries severe asceticism, tries middle path, meditates and gains enlightenment

Teaches this path to others. Dies a human death; is not a god. He is not reborn.

Nirvana is escape from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth.



Buddhist images in a rebuilt rural temple, 1995.



## **B. Key concepts to understand**

**1. reincarnation, samsara, karma, merit/demerit** - all actions have consequences. The karmic consequences of your actions will play out in this life or the next.



Monk and Cambodian-American tourist, 1991.  
(Bruce Sharp)

## 2. The 4 noble truths:

Life is suffering, the cause of suffering is desire, it is possible to extinguish desire, the way to extinguish desire is the 8 fold path.  
We are never happy with what we have - we always want more.

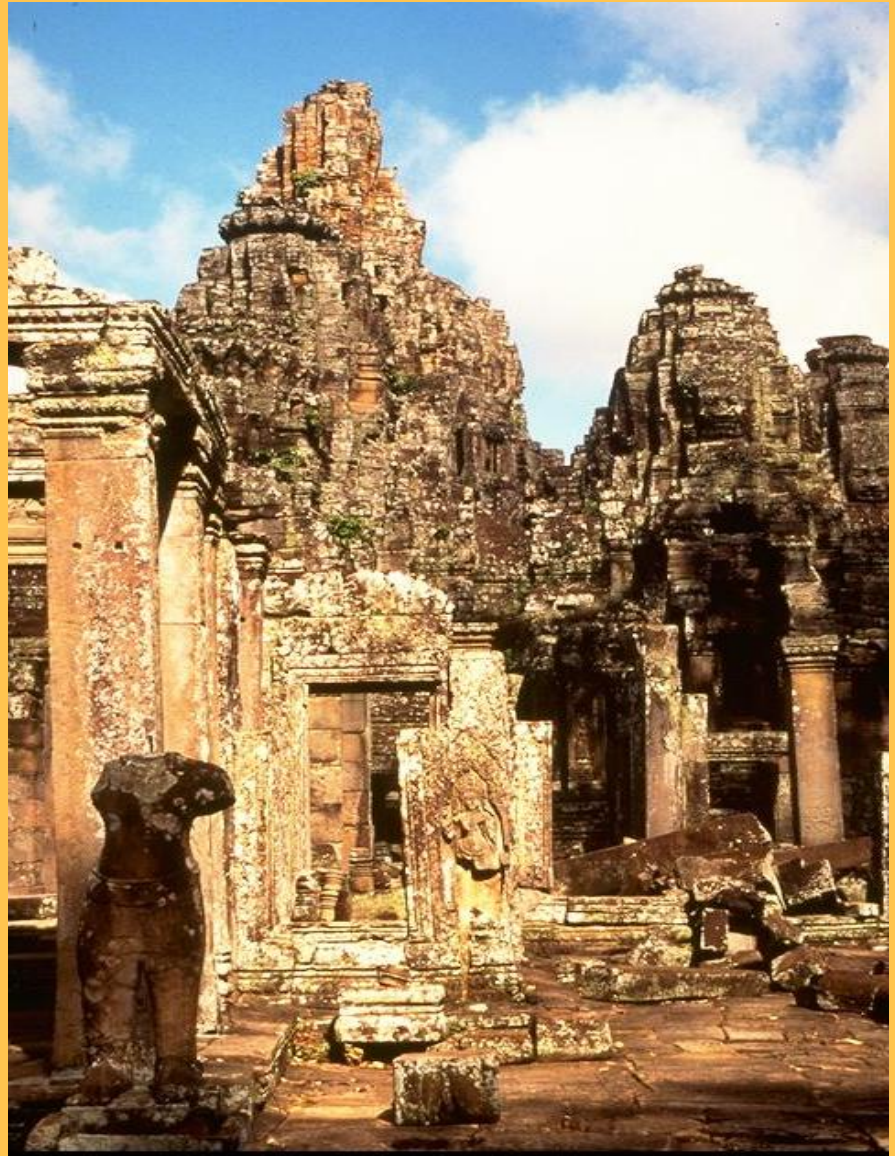


One of the many enigmatic smiles of the Bayon.  
(Kim Seang Poam)



### 3. The 8 fold path:

- right knowledge
- right aspiration
- right speech
- right behavior
- right livelihood
- right effort
- right mindfulness
- right absorption



Bayon. (Rachel Rinaldo)



#### 4. Together 2 and 3 are the core of the dharma, the Buddha's teachings.

All people can in theory gain enlightenment, but realistically it might take many lifetimes. Generally only monks are on this path. Most householders focus on living their lives as best they can - trying to accumulate merit and avoid demerit.



Phnom Penh street scene, November 2000. (Bruce Sharp)

## C. Daily Life: Living as a Buddhist in Southeast Asia

**1. Follow the precepts:** don't kill, don't steal, don't lie, don't engage in sexual misconduct, don't use intoxicants [additional five: don't eat after noon, don't sit on a high chair or sleep in a soft bed, don't go to entertainment, don't adorn oneself, don't touch money - novices keep 10, nuns keep 8 or 10, lay people keep 8 or 10 on holy days].

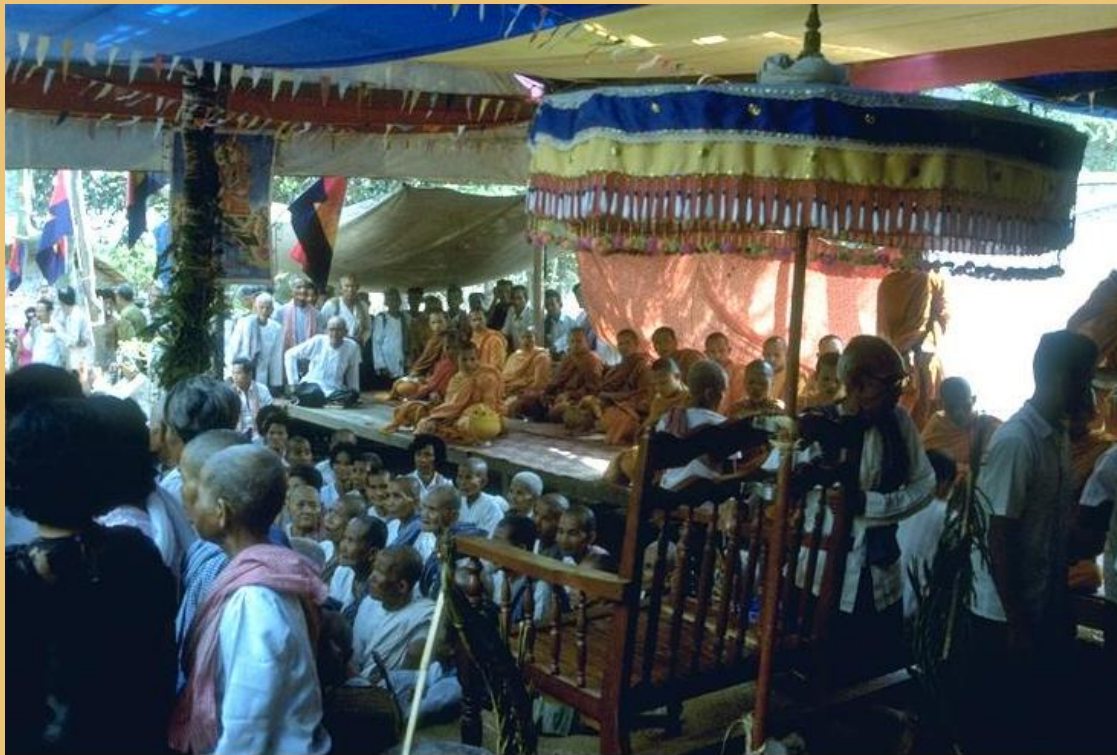


Phnom Penh street scene, 1991. (Bruce Sharp)



## 2. Take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha.

Which means turn yourself over to the Buddha's model, his teachings, and the sangha as an ideal. Try to take the path of renunciation to degree that it is possible to do so. This is a stance of dependency.



Memorial ceremony at Prey Umbel, 1991.

(Bruce Sharp)



**3. Make merit.** Primarily this is done by making offerings to the monks in a system of reciprocity. Monks have the time, the freedom to study and meditate because householders feed them. Householders make merit by offerings to the monks, thereby improving their chances for a better rebirth.



#### **4. Some lay people practice meditation.**

This is much more complicated to teach about in the classroom. I sometimes have the class sit silently for one minute, and try to clear their minds.



### 3. Other Topics

#### A. Syncretism - Buddhism and the Spirit World

What are *Phi*? *Nats*? *Neak Ta*? Some spirits incorporate pre-Buddhist Hindu beliefs, Hindu deities or local deities that were absorbed into Buddhism. Examples include: *Nagas*, *Neang Kong Heng*, plus territorial spirits, ancestor spirits. These are not seen as separate, but as a part of Buddhist beliefs/cosmology.

#### B. Role of the Temple in the community.

The temple serves as a place of education, a moral center, a place for festivals (annual and life cycle rituals), a community gathering place, place for elders to meet, a place for travelers to rest. The layout of the temple includes the *Vihear* (worship hall, usually with paintings of the life of the Buddha), *kot* (residences of the monks), *sala* (meeting halls and dining halls), *stupa* reliquaries for the ashes of the dead.



### **C. Women in Buddhism**

What is the difference between Bikkhunni (Female monks) and today's nuns? Discuss the movement to restart the order of Bikkhunni. Discuss other roles of women in Buddhism, as mothers, as donors; women and "relative" attachment.

### **D. Other kinds of Buddhism**

What are the differences between Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism?

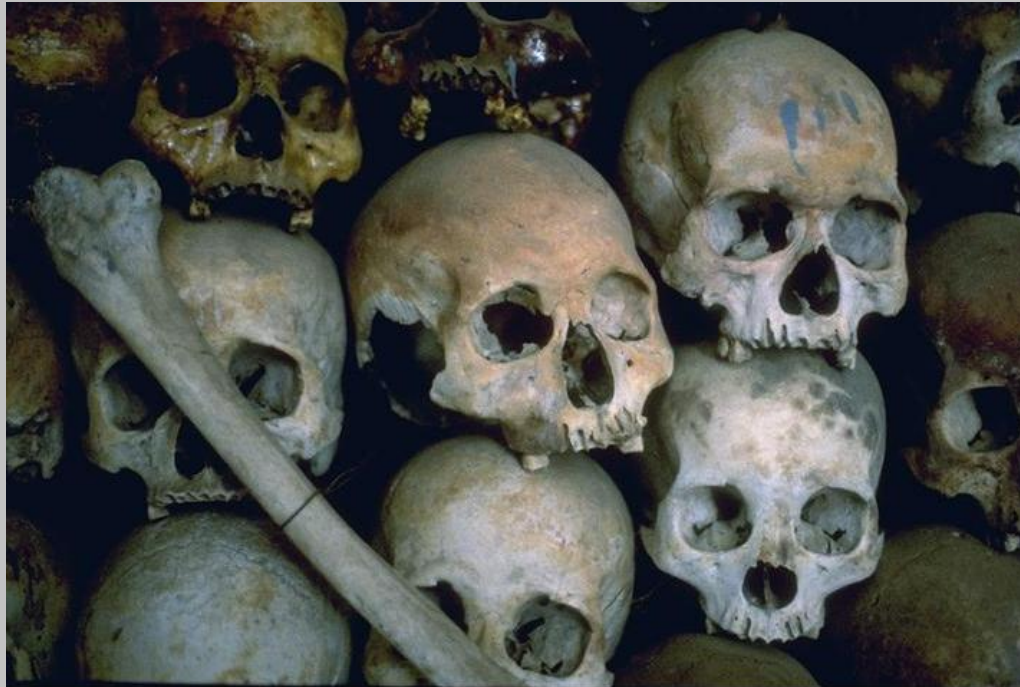
## II. Buddhism in Cambodia

**1. Buddhism in pre-war Cambodia** - was much as I described above for SEA generally. Accepted as a crucial aspect of Khmer identity. To be Cambodian is to be Buddhist.



## 2. The Khmer Rouge years.

We discussed Democratic Kampuchea in another session. Massive destruction of temples, images, and texts. Monks were forced to disrobe. Monks at the top of the sangha were executed. People were not allowed to worship, to conduct rituals or do daily practice. The Khmer Rouge attempted to completely eradicate religion, not only Buddhism, but also Christianity and Islam.



Skulls of victims, Tuol Sleng.

(Bruce Sharp)



### 3. Socialist period from 1979 to 1993.

Buddhism is allowed, but tightly controlled. Men can only ordain as monks if they are over the age of 50, money for temple reconstruction is extremely limited, donations are diverted to schools, road building, etc.



Amputee, Neak Luoung, 1991.  
(Bruce Sharp)

**4. After the Paris Peace Agreement in 1991 and the UN Peacekeeping Mission in 1993, Buddhism was rebuilt throughout the 1990s.**

**A. The number of men ordaining as monks: 60,000 pre-war, 2,311 in 1982, 20,000 in 1991, 55,755 in 2003.**



Monks at Prey Kongreach, November 2000.

(Bruce Sharp)

**B. The number of temples** is now likewise at pre-war levels, with nearly 4000 nationwide. Quite amazing given the poverty in rural areas, some of the money came from overseas Khmer in the US, France and elsewhere.





## **C. The Buddhist Institute,**

the center for the study of religion has been reestablished, the library reconstituted, and a publications program restarted.



**5. Research conducted in 2003** in six rural temples near Phnom Penh focused on daily practice. The major finding is that daily practice today is very similar to pre-war patterns:

**A. Rural people** try to follow the precepts and make merit through donations to monks on alms rounds, donations to temples, and donations at festivals





**B. The temple is still at the center of village life, monks still play key role within the community**





**C. As in pre-war years,**  
it is elders who  
participate more: go to  
the temple on holy  
days to take the  
precepts, give on alms  
rounds, sponsor  
ceremonies and so on.



## 6. Problems today:

**A. A lack of older educated monks.** Those ordained before the war or in the 1980s are elderly and dying. Abbots today are often young with limited experience. Many men who ordain as monks today do so as a means of social mobility, as a way to gain an education.





**B. There is still a lack of texts.** While some basic books have been reprinted, especially for monk education, the vast majority of books in Khmer were lost in the destruction of the Khmer Rouge years.



Family of five on motorcycle, Phnom Penh, November 2000. (Bruce Sharp)

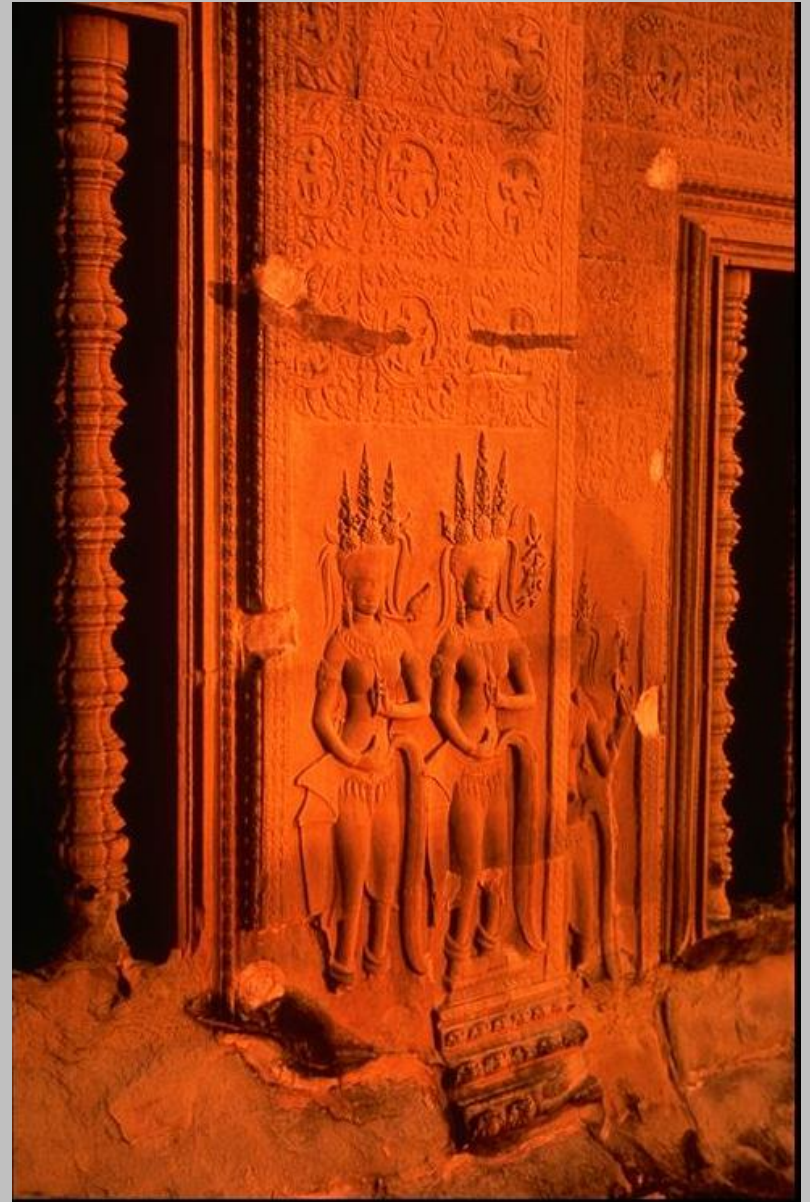


**C. Many lay people** allege that the monks are not as strict in their practice as pre-war monks. At the same time, they also discuss a moral crisis among the Khmer lay population. They cite new outside influences from abroad, including television, drugs and gangs as bad influences on young people.



## **D. Is a crisis looming as this generation of elders dies?**

The main group of people practicing Buddhism today are the elders (as was true in the past). But will those who are now middle-aged take on their role as Buddhist leaders as they age? They were children under the Khmer Rouge and had limited contact with Buddhism in the 1980s. They did not listen to sermons at their parents knee, nor ordain in their teens as their parents did. Will Buddhism skip a generation?



Angkor Wat at sunrise. (Rachel Rinaldo)

# Source Material for Teaching about Buddhism in Southeast Asia

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