

CREATING A CULTURE OF PEACE – WHAT IT TAKES

by

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- In our modern tragic history, the devastated war in Cambodia start, first, from 1970 to 1975 between the two groups: one lead by the Khmer Republican army, supported by the US and South Vietnam, and another one lead by the Khmer Rouge army supported by China and North Vietnam;
- Million of people were displaced, and an estimated 600,000 people died by the casualty of war;
- Despite the fighting and destruction, I felt quite isolated from the reality, living in an easy and comfortable life, working as a State employee at the Ministry of Finances. Most of the Cambodian people believed that the country would have peace with the KR victory;
- But, what happen was that, at the very first day of their entry into the city of Phnom Penh in April 1975, the Khmer Rouge forced every body, by gun point, to leave their home;
- Later on, the KR leaders lead the country by terror, anger, hatred, illusion and delusion. They want to have a society with no class. To fulfill this utopia, the KR destructively purged the people from urban area, the educated, military, women and children, and abolished the religious institutions, markets, schools, hospitals, etc.
- For three years and eight months under the Khmer Rouge regime, out of eight million people, 5 million were displaced and an estimated of 1.7 million died by killing, disease and starvation.
- They separated the family by sex and age groups, and sent every body in the forced labor camp, with little or nothing to eat;

- Like anybody else, I worked in the fields, planting, harvesting rice, and other works as directed. The daily working hour was from 4am to 10pm. Sometime, the KR called for meetings that may last until 1 o'clock in the morning;
- Who ever complaint about the hardship were disappeared with no explanation;
- The KR told people to be loyal and faithful to the Organization. Children were encouraged to spy on the parents and other family members wrong-doings and to report to their team leaders. At the end of each day, they held a self-confessed meeting that people had to confess any unfaithful thoughts, negative feeling, and/or mistakes committed;
- With starvation and exhaustion, I became very sick, and, one day, I felt that I was about to die. I then silently pray for the mercy from my parents, Buddha, Dharma and Singha. But, after a while, I felt that little by little, my mind and body became serene and calm.
- I was astonished and overwhelmed by what happen. I asked myself how and why could that happen? As a civil servant working for the government, I trust our government, politicians and leaders;
- Furthermore, observing the wisdom of communism, I felt that our leaders were stupid. But, the most stupid person is my-self. I was stupid to believe them without getting involved and participated in the socio-political affairs. I was stupid to allow them to lead us to such a disaster.
- When the Vietnamese military entered into Cambodia in 1979, the Khmer Rouge fled to the west parts of Cambodia and joint forces with two other Khmer factions to fight against the Vietnamese forces;
- The war broke out again, and caused so much destructions and devastations to the country and the people, especially at the country sides;
- We returned to the city, but life was not safe for our family. The situation was chaotic.
- People switched sides to join the winner, and/or other groups that they believed in for survival reasons, and/or greed, anger, illusion and delusion. Suspicion, accusation, hatred, revenge, distrust were wide spread, so we decided to escape to Thailand. The escape roads through the forests were infested by land mines and Khmer Rouges soldiers.
- At the refugee camps, I witnessed that most of the people were not educated women and children, and something changed inside me. I felt a sense of duty to help those destitute and vulnerable people. I forced myself to change from a typical and traditional Cambodian woman to be a more active, assertive, and articulated person by

participating in different activities in the refugee camp, and start to stand on behalf of the voiceless and the less fortunate people;

- Consecutively, I was selected to be a Woman leader, a Secretary General, in the refugee camp, and in USA;
- Working with the post-conflict community, I put myself at an even-kill mode, accepting people from different political affiliations, tendency, and belief. I tried to build hope, confidence and trust among them.
- In the US, we establish a class for the children who want to learn their native language, a Khmer classical dance, and other social and religious activities to keep the our culture alive;
- In 1987, I was divorced, with no joy or sorrow. Nothing to be ashamed of. In 1991, I was graduated with a Master Degree from Portland States University. I received the Diploma with equanimity. Nothing to be proud of;
- In 1992, I was recruited by the United Nations to join a UN Mission called the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia. The mission allowed me to contribute to the process of rehabilitation and reconciliation of my native country;
- For a period of 40 years, from 1953 to 2003, Cambodia changed Six political regimes: (1) from French colonialist to (2) Absolute Monarchy, to (3) Khmer Republic, to (4) the Khmer Rouge absolute Communist, to (5) socialist, and then to (6) the current Constitutional Monarchy;
- I felt the divisions within our society caused by a long lasting war, separation, and destruction. People who never left the country resented the one who lived in the refugee camps, and/or escaped for their life to a third world country;
- To contribute my small part to the reconciliation, peace and stability in Cambodia, I started one of the projects, from 1996 and on, a series of Public Forums where citizen can express and convey their needs and concerns to the authorities;
- In 1999, we organized a Public Forum about the Khmer Rouge Trial. But, during the ground preparation, I realized that the trial was not an ended product. What we needed was the National Reconciliation. We invited the KR intellectuals and people who lived in the former KR zones to our Forum;
- It was the first ever series of Public Forum led by an NGO that involved the KR into a peaceful process. The theme of our Forum was: “The KR and the National Reconciliation”;

- In 2006, we held another series of Forum at the former KR zone, and the theme was: “The National Reconciliation and Justice”;
- Pol Pot, the KR leader number One died by natural cause in 1998. In 2002, I went to visit the place where they cremated him, in the forest on the top of the Mountain at the Thai-Cambodian border. With equanimity, with no sadness, no joy, no hard feeling, I burned the incense sticks for the liberation of his soul;
- I believe that Pol Pot’s existence in this world is the law of the nature. War and Peace, Life and death, sorrow and joy, good and evils, disaster and harmony are intertwined. That is the Law of the Nature. That is Life!
- We cannot pick and chose the things that we like, and discard things that you do not like. But, what we can do are to maintain our mental balance, our equilibrium to better face the reality;

Based on Buddhism, Buddha said that “Greed, Anger, Illusion and Delusion” are the main causes of all sufferings, miseries, and evils.

Therefore, Buddha set five precepts for the people to abide by:

- No Killing, which leads to the respects for human rights, and peace,
- No Stealing, which leads to good governance,
- No Lying, which leads to a social justice and equity,
- No Drugs, which leads to a healthy and safe environment, and
- No Adultery, which leads to a harmonious family life.

From the Law of the Nature, Buddha found the Four Noble Truths:

- The first truth states there is suffering – get to know it!
- The second truth states that suffering is caused by mental attachment – abandon it!
- The third truth is that cessation of attachment brings ending of suffering – realize it!
- The fourth truth suggests a way of life by which self-centered attachment (and so suffering) is reduced – practice it!

This is expressed as eight guidelines for daily life of: 1) right views, 2) right aspiration, 3) right speech, 4) right conduct, 5) right efforts, 6) right mindfulness, 7) right concentration, and 8) right livelihood,

May Peace be with you!