

## **Khmer Rouge Ideology, Buddhism and Totalitarianism**

Every human being wishes to be happy and to live in harmony – a wish rarely granted by history. People everywhere have to endure separation, devastation and disaster. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was particularly brutal in that regard. As World War II ended, the discovery of Hitler's extermination camps was met with universal horror; and the tally for the Shoah, a Hebrew word meaning annihilation, was six millions Jews – including children and women. People across the world vowed for such a genocide never to occur again but 30 years later, it did, in Cambodia: The Pol Pot regime is thought to have executed a full third of the Cambodian people from 1975 to 1979. And 15 years later, yet another genocide took place in Rwanda where the Hutus as a whole went on a systematic campaign to kill their Tutsi neighbors and are believed to have massacred anywhere between 500 000 to 800 000 people from April to July 1994. And these are just the atrocities that we have bothered to document.

This is not an attempt to put what happened in the Democratic Kampuchea in context. On the contrary, my brief recap of the bloodiest century on record serves to remind us that the cruelty of human beings knows no bounds. Any country at any time can succumb to human folly. It's not "someone else's" problem. It is ours: yours and mine. We should be the ones, one person at a time, to make sure that the 1948 United Nations slogan: "Never Again" is not just words.

I decided to participate in this workshop on the Democratic Kampuchea regime because my belief is that we should never forget. I consider myself a witness for those tragic years, when a Khmer life was considered "a drop of water on the lotus leaf". During that painful time, like most Khmer, I lost many of my beloved relatives: my father and my husband were shot by the Khmer Rouge somewhere on the road between Battambang Province and the Moug Rusey District. They beheaded my brother and shot my younger brother and his French wife. Almost all the men in my family were killed because Democratic Kampuchea classified them as "gentry".

The organizers of this symposium asked me to prepare a lecture about the relation between Khmer Rouge ideology, Buddhism and totalitarianism. I am very honored by their trust.

I was 29 when the Khmer Rouge took over in Cambodia. I worked at the National Institute for Khmerification as a Technical Director. The institute was part of the Ministry of National Education, and its focus was to "khmerify" all things French, i.e., to translate textbooks from French into Cambodian. In 1975, we translated textbooks for graduate programs. Before this job, I taught Philosophy from 1968 to 1970. In 1968 I received my Bachelor's degree in Philosophy, and in 1970 my Bachelor's in Economy.

Like many Khmer families, mine was Buddhist. My father made sure I was given a proper religious education. As far as I was concerned, Buddhism was more than just a tradition. After 1968, it was a personal choice I made. Thanks to my work at the National Institute for Khmerification, I had the opportunity to deepen my knowledge of the

Blessed teachings of the Buddha. Most of my colleagues had been educated at the Institute for Buddhism and we worked hand in hand with the Venerable Samdech Chuon Nat to find appropriate Cambodian words for the textbooks we translated.

I believed then and continue to believe that Buddha shows every person the way to freedom. His teachings will allow you to cross the ocean of suffering and reach the other shore, the shore of Wisdom. But this in turn raises a difficult question:

### **Why were Buddha's teachings powerless against the Khmer Rouge atrocities?**

I don't pretend to have a definitive answer. What I will share with you is one of many possible answers, one based on my own experience. The Buddhist tradition does encourage us to find answers in our personal experience.

Let me begin with what may seem to be a discouraging comment: no religion can prevent violence rooted in the human heart. Religions try very hard to channel violence, but in the end, it's up to each person to make a moral choice – not to their religious leader.

In our culture, the word for “religion” is “sasna”; the extended meaning of the word is “moral instruction showing how to live in Peace and Serenity”. The aim of the Blessed teachings is to free us from Samsara (the cycle of reincarnation). According to Buddha, humans are greater than any divinity, because only humans can reach Nirvana. Water and earth spirits are less powerful than people.

In that sense, those who think that Buddhism failed in Cambodia are mistaken. Buddhism, like all true spiritual instruction, promotes freedom. In that respect, Buddhism and Christianity are very close. They both emphasize personal dignity.

Buddhism, however, was hijacked by the Khmer Rouge dictatorship. The Khmer Rouge made perverse use of the Cambodian people's belief in karma for instance. From 1975 to 1977, on countless occasions I heard Khmer rouge chiefs and a few Sahakor or co-op presidents say that the victims “deserved” their fate - an easy and terrifying way to justify violence and crimes. If the victims are responsible, then there is no crime, and torture can be justified. People were manipulated into believing this. Anyone who could alert others to the dangers of this manipulation was ruthlessly eliminated. This explains why all great Buddhist spiritual masters were executed.

### **What does the belief in karma really mean?**

Most practicing Buddhists believe there is a cause for everything that ever happens to every living thing, and that this karma can be influenced and changed. If you engage only in this belief, then you are definitely ignoring the most potent part of Buddhism: the Brahma Vihara, or Four Noble Truths, which Buddhism is based on.

The Truths are: Metta (Good Will), Karuna (Compassion), Mudita (Joy), Upekkha (Equanimity). They are embodied in the face towers of the Bayon. They are the true core of the Buddha's teachings, and his disciples should not forget them.

Now, it's easier to understand that no dictatorship can tolerate the noble truths. If you say that victims deserve their fate, then caring and compassion get in the way.

To achieve their genocidal goals, the Angkar used three weapons: evacuation, fear and starvation.

- The purpose of the massive relocations was to disperse any possible resistance. We all lost our bearings. City people felt uprooted when they arrived in the countryside. Country people felt submerged by the newcomers from the cities. No one knew who was friend and who was foe, and this created tension.
- The tension allowed the Angkar to create paralyzing fear. Our fear made us lose track of our conscience. We fell into a state of fearful ignorance, which the Buddha called "Ak Vichea" (unconscious).
- Famine ratcheted up the fear even further. We were afraid, because we could no longer rely on reason. Reason and conscience had fled, as the body was deprived of everything. Any Khmer-born person knows from its Buddhist culture that extreme deprivation does not foster meditation and clear thinking.

Using those three weapons, the Khmer Rouge did their best to remove compassion and conscience from their Buddhist, Muslim and Christian victims. Many of our compatriots switched their politics at that time - but not all Khmer did. Some remembered, despite the fear, despite the grotesque justification of violence by karma, that compassion was a keystone value of Khmer society. They practiced it secretly, often with small gestures that went unnoticed by executives in the Angkar. These gestures were beacons of hope for many people like me, caught in the vortex of genocidal violence. They were reminders that there was still humanity to be found.

Democratic Kampuchea is not something we Khmer can be proud of. Democratic Kampuchea trampled humanity and turned some of its children into wild animals. The four years of Khmer Rouge rule have created deep, historical wounds that will be difficult to heal. Wounds that now belong to all of humankind, all the more so as any analysis of that time shows how prevalent foreign influences were in the ideology and choices of the Angkar.

We, Khmer-born, should not bear alone the shame of Democratic Kampuchea. That doesn't mean we should deny our responsibility in the tragedy by blaming US foreign policy, for instance. We have to find, according to the Buddhist tradition of our country, the "Middle Way" between immature denial and paralyzing shame. Our good fortune is to have the international community on our side as we ponder this dark period in the history of Cambodia and humankind. The international community must not forget that this tragedy happened in a given culture, and should not ignore that Buddhism is the cultural jewel of our country. I feel that no analytical work or healing can be undertaken

without spiritual strength. What I mean by spiritual strength is not just religion, but any tool that allows a person to retain their dignity and freedom. In Cambodia, we need our Buddhist spiritual masters, our writers, our poets to work together and help our people make a stand. We don't need spirits and idols, which are the product of ignorance, as the Blessed teachings tell us.

**We can look for causes... we can analyze... But what can we do with that?**

Any analysis aims to create a future for our aging generation, and even more importantly for our children. We owe it to our youth to pluck up our courage, look into the time of Khmer Rouge rule and dispassionately discover what made these events possible.

This analysis should be conducted in a calm atmosphere. According to the law of karma, any effect has a cause. So let us examine the causes of Democratic Kampuchea's genocidal policies. As we conduct our research, we should keep in mind and heart the Brahma Vihara, the Four Noble Truths.

The kindness and compassion of our Buddhist tradition should not diminish in any way the responsibility of those who perpetrated murder, torture and unspeakable violence. The conviction of Khmer Rouge leaders at all levels must be pursued and made known to the Khmer people. I do not say this in a desire for revenge, a burning need to convict those responsible for the deaths of my relatives and two million of my countrymen. I lived their evil in my flesh. And I do not wish upon them what they did to us – but I would give its rightful name to each crime. I would say that evil is evil. This is the only way that the next generation will be freed from ignorance and stop the cycle of violence, according to the teachings of Buddha.

It should be clearly stated that the death of two million Khmers from 1975 to 1979 is not the result of karmic law, but of the madness of men.

The mass killings also resulted from various factors: political, economic, social, human... Our duty is to analyze these factors, and make sure they don't combine again to produce a tragedy like the one orchestrated by Pol Pot. We should study them in an attempt to eradicate them from Khmer society. Social peace and national harmony depend on the ability of each Khmer to promote a just society. And a just society requires the condemnation of all crimes against humanity, not in a spirit of revenge, but with an eye towards the future. We analyze the past so we can derive a better future from our present.

Let us be brave and responsible Khmer, whether we are Buddhist or otherwise. Let us rebuild Cambodia based on facts, not illusions and fears.

The only aim of our work should be to uproot evil. We will confront and eradicate evil by writing our true history – by creating a strong collective memory, which will serve as a springboard for our young generation, so they can create a better future.