

IS IT THE RESULT OF OUR KARMA FROM PAST LIVES?

DOCUMENTATION CENTER OF CAMBODIA Phnom Penh, Cambodia

An interview with Mohasomethea Thepdei Tep Vong

Q: I would like to ask you if the massacre carried out in the Pol Pot regime was human fault or whether it had something to do with sin?

A: According to my serious consideration, the answer is still not clear. Why? Because lives are full of sufferings. "Karma" consists of a person's acts and their ethical consequences. I am not sure whether Pol Pot is the one who initiated the karma. If he was not, the suffering and loss of lives are sins from the past. Take, for instance, Buddha killed a demon when he was an ordinary man. However, according to the law, he was a human, but a human acting as a Bodhisattva. A Bodhisattva can kill a demon, and this specific demon ate people, even the prince. The king searched for a person who had magical power to kill it. The Bodhisattva was a suitable person to handle such a task. Before he killed it, the demon begged him, "I am just 80 years old, and in the future you will become a Buddha, because I can see signs on your palms. Therefore, do not kill me. If you do, you will die at the age of 80 like me when you become a Buddha." With the urge to get rid of evils from the world, he decided to kill the demon. After the demon had died, Bodhisattva continued to conduct good deeds in many lives until he experienced enlightenment, and became a Buddha. When he reached the age of 80, the demon was reborn as a pig. The pig owner knew who the pig was, so he killed it to make food, as an offering, for the Buddha. After he ate it, the Buddha got sick. However, he had been well aware that vindictiveness means "One meal means enlightenment and another one Nirvana." Clearly, Socheata's food caused the Buddha to experience enlightenment, while Chon's caused him to die. Therefore, Chon did not commit the crime of murdering the Buddha. In another story talking about a Buddha's follower, Moklean. Due to his obsessive love toward his wife, he abandoned his mother in the forest. Later, she died and was eaten by wild animals. When he became arhat, 500 bandits killed him. Thus, vindictiveness occurred upon each other. Back to Pol Pot issue, I therefore cannot analyze clearly. I do not know whether Pol Pot began doing it first or it was sin of the victims. Two of you and I were starved in the regime.

Q: Do you mean that all the million victims had karma from their past lives?

A: As I have told you, I am not sure about this. If it was not Pol Pot's evil deeds, it was our sin of bad deeds we had done from our previous lives. You and I had sin, but ours were minor. That's why we survived. I guess, you were born a few years before the regime. You were just kids.

Q: Do you think that the Khmer Rouge should be brought to trial for their crimes or we should just regard the tragedy as our own sin?

A: We cannot depend on vindictiveness. Everything must be tried. But the prosecution must be fair and in conformity with religion. For instance, there are two kinds of lives, active and inactive. Active lives are you and me, who have actions. Inactive lives are things, like buildings. Is inactive existence vindictive if they do not harm anyone? In contrast, a human being performs actions; therefore he or she has Karma. Consequently, we consider active lives in a different manner. When a sin is committed, both active and inactive existences are damaged. As you can see both lives and properties were destroyed in Pol Pot regime. With this respect, we must carry the prosecution with justice, avoiding intimidation between people involved that may lead to continuous vindictiveness. For example, killing the Khmer Rouge leaders is in the same way as the killing of the demon. The demon continued to harm Bodhisattva in his next lives. So does Pol Pot leaders to us.

Vindictiveness is endless. That's why, Buddha preached, "Vindictiveness is ended by non-vindictiveness." Therefore, they should be punished according to their crimes. Do not try to include unconnected individuals, which the court may eventually punish everyone. I believe that only about 20-30 persons were directly murdered by Pol Pot, and this guy ordered no one to kill people. His big mistake was that he passed no specific law for others to follow, since he eliminated religions. With the absence of religions, neither sin nor goodness occurred. I was not a monk in that period of 3 years 8 months and 20 days. So, it was the period of religious lawlessness. When a person hated someone, he or she just went straight to kill that person to diminish his or her hatred. The same thing happened in my cooperative. In 1977, a few Khmer Rouge soldiers had arguments with brothers of a mad man, incapable of even tending cattle. Being unable to harm the brothers, the soldiers tied the mad man up, put him onto a bicycle, and took him away. He was shot to death at a place just about 30 meters from my house, which situated at the edge of the village. I saw it clearly. You can see, even such a mentally ill person was ruthlessly killed. There was no legal action taken to stop them doing it. Nor was there a law, which allowed the soldiers to kill him. From this example, we can see that in the regime, human beings and human beings, people and people bore grudges against each other. It began with minor hatred, and in the end, they killed each other. Take today's society as an example, we have all sorts of law, significantly human right law, but killing still exist in the forms of robberies and other cases. It doesn't mean I pardon them. They must be prosecuted, but the proceedings have to be conducted properly to maintain justice. Accordingly, religious laws have to be taken into consideration: do not kill people, because it's a sin; do not intimidate others or force innocent people take accountability for the crime of genocide. More seriously in the tribunal, even some Khmer Rouge soldiers, who have realized their mistakes and defected, might be brought to trial. With this sense, justice does not

prevail. We should combine today's law with religions, Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, in order to judge this case with justice.

Q: For you or Buddhism, what does justice mean?

A: "Justice" means judging one's crime with truthfulness, which brings no catastrophic impact to the legal system.

Q: If the tribunal prosecutes those who committed heinous crimes in the Khmer Rouge regime justly, will this become vindictiveness of the people concerned?

A: According religious law, if justice prevails, there won't be any vindictiveness. According to Buddhism, one can reach Nirvana in his or her current life or next lives. Buddha obtained enlightenment at the age of 45 and reached Nirvana in his current life. Hence, one may wash their sin in their current life or next lives. If their sin is not completely washed away in this life, in this case through prosecution, they have to be responsible for it in the next lives. They can't avoid it. All living beings are prone to sufferings. If you owe someone four, you must pay them back four, and it's over. If you pay five, then the circle of debt will continue.

Q: According to Buddhist teachings, vindictiveness is ended by forgetting it. Therefore, is bringing the Khmer Rouge leaders to trial vindictiveness?

A: No, unless the tribunal is conducted unjustly; ten can't pay for four.

Q: Should the Khmer Rouge who inflicted sufferings to Khmer people, who you have said to have sin, be prosecuted?

A: I am not so clear about this. It depends on the law court. It is fair that they should be forced to take accountability for their crimes in their current lives. But how can we do it if Pol Pot, Hou Yuon, Hu Nim, and Son Sen have all died. Also, we have to distinguish between those who defected and those who are obstinate.

Q: If we do not prosecute the Khmer Rouge leaders for their crimes now, do you believe that they will receive Karma for their sin?

A: Oh, they'll never escape from it. You can take the cases of Buddha and Moklean as examples. Pol Pot, Hou Yuon, Hu Nim, and Lon Nol and his men have died because of their evil deeds, and I can't imagine how miserable their souls are.

Q: How can people believe that they will be punished for their sin as they see the Khmer Rouge leaders are living in luxury with the uncertainty of being prosecuted?

A: We can't time it correctly. Don't you see how Buddha paid off his sin to the demon he had killed many lives ago?

Q: People, though, eager to see in this life the people who hurt them are punished?

A: As Buddhists, we wish to have happiness; we want to go to heaven not hell. We don't know how long will it take us to save up enough merit to be able to live in heaven. All human beings have desires. I want to finish things

up as quickly as possible. However, if we can't get one thing, we had to accept another one. If we don't have rice to eat, we have no choice but to eat other available foods, like porridge for a while. If we want to build a bridge across Tonle Sap Lake or one of its rivers, but we can't do it, we have to travel by boats.

Q: Should the Cambodian people pardon the Khmer Rouge leaders or prosecute them?

A: I have mentioned already. It depends on us all, whether we want them to take accountability for their crimes now or their next lives. I'll never forget the sufferings I had in the regime. I was detained for 80 days and tortured ruthlessly. Nonetheless, I could bear all that agony, since it was the result of my past life's bad deeds. I still struggled in the form of religion. Religion is the lives of the people and me. That was the reason why people killed each other without consideration. I have spent tremendous efforts to reintroduce Buddhism to our country, so that each person can have merit and sin. I fast every evening for the sake of the happiness of our young children.

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Phnom Penh, Cambodia

INTERVIEWED BY KALYAN SANN AND SOKHYM EM

Q: I would like to ask your venerable priest about the Khmer Rouge tribunal, which is hotly debated at present. What is your attitude towards this process?

A: According to the teachings of Buddha, Buddha had sympathy, pity, no jealousy, and a centrally focused mind. No matter what people were, Buddha's attitude toward each of them was unchanged. Even his enemies who endeavored to assassinate him were allowed to meet him. Let's consider the age-old Khmer watchwords. Our ancestors stated, "One can neither cut water nor disown a close relative, or that person will get hurt." Another saying holds that "Taking relationship into consideration means moving away from the law." Our [Khmer] society utilizes both slogans. We care about law and kinship. We care about both. We should assess these two factors. With regard to the Khmer Rouge issue, we cannot simply say, "prosecute them" or "leave them alone". We have to consider the benefits to be gained from each choice. How much will we gain when we prosecute the Khmer Rouge and what will happen if we leave them alone? We should compare the benefits of these two choices. We will be the ones to be directly affected by this decision. Thus, we Khmers should decide this matter for ourselves.

Q: Should there be reconciliation between former Khmer Rouge and other Cambodians?

A: In addition to the slogans I cited for you earlier, we need to consider the benefits. Cambodia needs benefits. What benefits we should receive when we prosecute the Khmer Rouge and what will happen when we leave them alone?

Q: From the standpoint of the Dharma, is the tribunal appropriate?

A: Buddhism is concerned with what one does and the subsequent results – *Karma* and *sanchita* [act and its result]. One receives what he or she has done . Buddha preached all beings receive what they do . What we do determines all that happens to us. No one does this for us. We are autonomous. We do and then we receive. Buddha taught his followers like that. He said if you do not want suffering, you have to avoid bad deeds. Discontinue what you do bad, if you want happiness. Good deeds help you to acquire happiness; in contrast bad deeds lead to suffering. No one induces this suffering; you create it yourself. The same with happiness. Buddha only gave us this advice. He gave us neither sin nor merit. We make these ourselves. He just told us “to do this is good, to do that is bad”.

Q: Do you think that former Khmer Rouge leaders have suffered from what they did?

A: Please consider; they are receiving it now. Receiving what? The world hates them, outlaws them. These are their sins that they should receive. The urge to prosecute them by the UN is also their sin. If they were good people, who would try to prosecute them? They have been suffering these results. Look at their lives. Eventually they were burnt with vehicle tires. Some were killed, which sometimes we are even unaware of. Due to the Dharma, they have been receiving their punishment. They can't escape.

Q: You have mentioned there is Karma and Sanchita. Did the Khmer Rouge victims from 1975 to 1979 do something wrong?

A: All Buddhists believe in Karma and Phal [Sanchita]. Everything is done for a reason. There are causes which lead to results. Why was the Khmer Rouge formed? Take this question into consideration.

Q: Did the Khmer Rouge leaders intentionally commit their crimes?

A: I do not know whether they intentionally did it. I only discuss it in the ways of Buddhism. Intention is the integral part of the sin.

Q: Did the Khmer Rouge induced by previous deeds perpetrate the voluntary manslaughter?

A: Everything is dependent upon what we do. What we do decides everything. Each one of us has sins. Buddha said we are born with sins.

Q: Were the Khmer Rouge leaders destined to commit crimes and were the victims destined to become victims?

A: This is what Buddhists calls collective action, for instance, fishing in large groups or conducting a ceremony together. We do things together. Buddhism does not use the word "accidental." There is no chance happening. In Buddhism nothing happens by chance. Our previous acts lead to what we are in the present. If we do not believe in act and its result, we will not live in peace our entire lives. This applies to all situations, whether we live in our family or society. We can't live if we don't believe in it. Since we can't solve [problems] by ourselves. Water floods and retreats; the tide rises and falls. Day and night, hot and cold occur in interval. Seasons keep on changing. So with human life. This condition triggers the process of becoming once again, producing a renewed cycle of birth, old age, and death. Is there anyone who wishes to die? No, of course not. Why do people die? Even western doctors can't save people from dying. The reason is that it's time for us to die. A doctor from heaven can't cure you. You are predetermined to live at a particular age. This is what Buddha taught his followers. Buddha granted many pardons. He even forgave those who tried to harm him.

Q: Do you believe in "vindictiveness is ended by not being vindictive"?

A: I do. For it is what Buddha said. If we can suppress anger, we can forgive people, because there are times when we do wrong and we are foolish. Buddha always pardoned others.

Q: If we continue to pardon people, will they be conscious of their mistakes? Or should we punish them for what they do wrong?

A: This is a good question. Buddha pardoned people and taught them, not just pardoned and forgot. The word "pardon" means bringing people back to do good deeds, just like with Ang Kuli Mear. After stopping him from committing evil acts, Buddha ordained and educated him. But it does not mean we want Khmer Rouge leaders to become monks. We educate them through appropriate social ways, so that we can live together. It is not pardon and neglect. Bring them into the society and advise them to walk in our ways, to live with us.

Q: Earlier, your venerable priest mentioned that Khmer Rouge leaders are suffering for what they did through hatred of the people. However, I think the gap between the people and those Khmer Rouge leaders is big. The victims still live in misery resulting from the Pol Pot regime, while top Khmer Rouge leaders are living in full freedom and are wealthy.

A: I talked about psychology. If we kill those Khmer Rouge and the people's condition improves and they can live a better life, it is good. Then the tribunal is a benefit to the people.

Q: What do you think about the importance of national reconciliation?

A: I do not have any idea. Now we don't know where to keep the Khmer Rouge. What we should do should be a decision made by all of us. I can't answer it alone. It is not a private issue; it is a national and international issue.

Q: Do you think that the Khmer Rouge history should be passed down to future generations or forgotten?

A: It is what happened. Everyone can talk about it depending on his or her desire. We can't prohibit them. This is an historical event.

Q: Should the Khmer Rouge history be documented?

A: It is history. Buddha's teachings and activities were recorded, so that we might learn from them and advise ordinary people. All books are the result of documenting past experience.

Q: Do you think that the study of the Khmer Rouge history may re-traumatize people?

A: It may or may not hurt people. Buddha advised, "The past should be forgotten, focus on the present and don't anticipate the future." Why? Because the past is like a dead body. If we don't bury it but keep it at home, it stinks and no one will live near us. Therefore we should bury the past. If the future doesn't arrive, don't hope for it. It makes us unhappy, when it turns out to be different than anticipated. Buddha taught us to concentrate on the present and complete the tasks at hand now, don't wait until tomorrow. Otherwise we may die at some point and not have another chance to do it.

Q: Nonetheless, I think that if we forget a past event, sooner or later it will happen again.

A: Buddha did not think that way. Things that are finished are forever finished. Nothing happens twice. A dead person can't come back. I don't believe that a cremated body can come back and haunt us. It doesn't happen. Things keep on changing in time. The future is different from the past. I don't believe at all that a dead body can live with us again.

Q: What about the phrase "Rokasadan (repeated events)."

A: Whether it happens again or not depends on us. Vindictiveness is ended by not being vindictive. If we are vindictive, things will continue; and if we are not, things will be ended.

Q: I still have to wonder. If in society we do not punish a thief for his offense, other people will become interested in working as thieves. Thus, the crime continues. Even though the original criminal will not do it again, others will repeat what he did.

A: I understand, but after punishment will he/she stop repeating his/her crimes?

Q: We do this as a role model for other people.

A: This role model has been repeated for thousands of years, but have people stopped committing crimes? Have thieves been eliminated? We have been using capital punishment and life imprisonment to deter crimes, but still they continue to occur.

Q: I believe that by using such punishments, to some extent, the crime rate is controlled.

A: Buddha made it clear. That's why we should not forget the two slogans "one can't cut the water nor disown a close relative, or that person will get hurt"; and "taking relationship into consideration means moving away from the law." Cambodian people practice these two slogans. Now compare them. We can't omit either one.

Q: Should the Khmer Rouge history be taught to Cambodian children?

A: This is not a controversial issue to me. We can't hide what happened. Even though we don't tell them, their parents will. Thus, although we don't write about it, their families will narrate the history for them.

Q: What is the role of Buddhism in national reconciliation? How much can it help to reconcile Cambodia?

A: Teaching people to abandon bad deeds and pick up good deeds is what Buddhism is doing. We do it on behalf of monks. Bad deeds lead to suffering, while good deeds bring happiness.

Q: I would like you to explain the term "justice" in a religious way.

A: Buddhism also teaches about "Akeakte (biased)" and "Keakte (unbiased)." There are four kinds of Akeate: Chhanteakeakte (biased because of love), Tosakeakte (biased because of anger or hatred), Pheakyo Keakte (biased because of fear), and Mohakeakte (biased because of confusion). Buddha said if one is biased, he or she wouldn't behave in the right way. These are issues that concern justice. Justice is hard to obtain because of love, hatred, fear and confusion. To have justice is to be free from these factors.