

In The Eyes Of Buddha

Searching for the Truth -- 2000

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by Youk Chhang

The ancestor holiday (Ph'Chum Benn) is near, and with it, the former Khmer Rouge leaders, Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith, and their associate, Long Norin, will likely be visiting the Svay Por Pe monastery in Phnom Penh, which they are known to attend. I wonder what they think about while praying the statues of the Buddha in the presence of the monks, both of which they sought to eliminate completely during their regime between 1975 and 1979. If they now pray to Buddha and the monks, does it make them any different from what they were two decades ago? Would Buddha and the monks relieve them of their responsibility for the heinous crimes they and their co-conspirators committed against millions of Cambodian people? Would Buddha forgive their sins?

The Khmer Rouge leadership are still with us today, and their crimes against the people of Cambodia are also still with us. They are not about the past, but today. Long Norin claimed that he joined the revolution because he wanted to make the country independent and developed. Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith shared the same view. I wonder what they meant by saying so, as I compare their claimed objectives with the experience I had under the Khmer Rouge regime. I witnessed a family killed by the Khmer Rouge cadre in a public commune meeting in Battambang province. I saw hundreds of people die of starvation, including my own sister, and I have documented the millions of others who died by execution, torture, forced labor, disease, and starvation under the Khmer Rouge regime. They (Long Norin, Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith) claim that they do not believe that more than one million Cambodians perished under the Khmer Rouge. I wonder, have they ever visited their own secret prison, S-21, now known as the Tuol Sleng museum, where almost 20,000 prisoners were tortured and executed? Van Nath, a survivor of S-21, and a dozen former prison guards who are now living in Kampong Chhnang and Kandal provinces can certainly testify to what happened at S-21.

Long Norin has asserted that he and the Khmer Rouge leaders do not oppose the establishment of a Khmer Rouge tribunal. I wonder if they understand the concept of justice. Justice under the Khmer Rouge regime meant that those who dared to express independent ideas or views were judged to be enemies of "Angkar" and were subject to elimination.

Over and over again, the Khmer Rouge leadership stressed this idea that the good of the nation required the pitiless slaughter of Cambodians by Cambodians. And they certainly implemented their belief with a vengeance. Justice under the Khmer Rouge regime also meant that you had to be pure (Khmer). As in all other things, the Angkar set themselves up as the judges of this quality as well,

concluding that those with education, or light skin, or who dwelt in cities, were all enemies. If you fell into one of these categories, the Khmer Rouge would kill you or starve you to death. I picked for waterness my pregnant sister, who had had no real food to eat for months. This act was considered criminal under the Khmer Rouge regime, so they hit me with an ax, pushed me to the ground, tied me up with rope, and put me in jail for weeks. My mother was afraid to cry in front of them while they were torturing me. Crying was also a crime under Khmer Rouge regime.

They (Long Norin, Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith) have said there will be turmoil if the Khmer Rouge leadership are ever brought to trial. I wonder why they think so? Under the Khmer Rouge regime, people were forced to keep quiet. To speak out was to invite death. At the same time, they forced us to make up lies about ourselves and about others so that they could justify their cruel regime. I wonder how they understand the meaning of change and development in a democratic society.

The Khmer Rouge leaders now talk of national reconciliation, of striving to consolidate peace and progress, and of resolving people's poverty. The gall of such talk from the same people who wreaked havoc on Cambodia defies comprehension. How can you reconcile with the people who killed your own family members without a fair trial? What kind of "peace" can be "consolidated" in a nation where such matters remain unresolved? Did the Khmer Rouge regime ever seek to reconcile with those of us who lived with or "served" the previous regime, and who were simply city dwellers, or students, or merchants? Where was their talk of letting 'bygones be bygones' then? Where was the interest in national reconciliation or the consolidation of peace then? The Khmer Rouge leaders talked about progress, and then proceeded to close the country off from the rest of the world, making everyone work in the fields without food and without medicine to treat the sick. (What was it that they knew better than to permit the outside world to see, and that they deny having had any knowledge of now?)

The Khmer Rouge leaders talked about solving poverty and hunger, and I wonder why we did not have enough clothes, no proper shelters for people to live in, and not enough food to eat under their regime, while in fact they were exporting our national resources- gold and rice- to China and Viet Nam. Perhaps they were too busy killing the almost 5,200 prisoners they murdered during every week of their 3 years 8 months and 20 days in power to worry about the millions left to die without food and medicine.

One of my sisters died and her daughter died because my sister could not breast-feed her. My niece who survived the Khmer Rouge regime wrote to me:

For my uncle Youk: Unfortunately my way of thinking has become, somewhat not clear or maybe too clear. The way I view the world. I believe that every country

has its own tragedy. For example, the United States of America had Slavery, the Jews had the Holocaust and we the Khmer people had this, and I believe that this was a Holocaust just like the Jew's, so maybe somehow history does repeat itself, doesn't matter what part of the world we live in.. Yes, sometimes I wonder what it would be like if there had been no war, and what it would be like if my parents were still alive, including my brother and sister. How my life would be different from what it is now. My daughter Jordyn sometimes asks me how come I don't have a Mom or a Dad like the rest of her friends' parents. Then I proceed to try to explain to her what happened to her grandparents, and this is very hard. It is sad knowing that my daughter and son will never get a chance to know their grandparents and I will never get to see my parents again. You know what the saddest part is? I can vaguely remember them myself. I was about five years old when they died. There's this strange thought as I remember when my parents were buried. I had this thought, or maybe imagining, that they were pretending that they were dead, so they can be buried and then they would dig this underground tunnel that would lead them to another world and they will return to retrieve me and my sister (strange)? PS: I don't believe that justice is enough for what happened to my family. No justice in the world will bring my family back. We should be asking ourselves how we as human beings can prevent this from ever happening again. Love always, your niece, Theavy.

The Khmer Rouge leadership are still denying knowledge of the slaughter under their regime between 1975 and 1979. On what basis should I believe the Khmer Rouge leaders now? Why should I believe Long Norin, Ieng Sary and Ieng Thirith? Do they really look straight in the eyes of Buddha when they pray? Are they really respectful when they greet the monks? Do they really ask for forgiveness?

End.

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