

October 2010

Dear friends and partners,

This week is Pchum Ban Festival in Cambodia. Pchum Ban is equivalent to the Christian holiday of Christmas in significance for the people here. It is the time that Cambodians have to honor and remember their parents and grandparents who have passed away. There are very specific ceremonies that need to be completed in the 15 days prior to the actual Pchum Ban day itself. The belief is that people must honor their parents/grandparents by going to seven different pagodas and bringing gifts of food to the monks. On Pchum Ban day itself, everyone must bring a variety of cooked foods plus a variety of dry foods to the pagoda before 11 o'clock in the morning. At that time, all offerings must be completed and the monks sit down to eat.

The belief is that deceased parents sit down with the monks and eat the food as well. Why seven pagodas – basically, the parents are wandering souls and are looking to see if their children are honoring them – if they cannot find the offerings of their children, the souls of the parents become angry – and the children will suffer from nightmares and problems at home. A secondary problem is of course, the amount and variety of food a person brings. A small offering of just rice would not satisfy the hunger of the parents nor sustain them throughout the year so pressure on families is immense.

For families in Tabitha programs, Pchum Ban becomes progressively easier as their incomes increase. When SokLee joined Tabitha 4 years ago, she lived in a small thatched home with her husband and seven children. During those years, we often talked with this family about getting a field well and using their land to better use. SokLee had lost all her family during the Khmer Rouge years – she met her husband who was also considered an orphan, the sole surviving member of his family. Over the 18 years of their marriage, bearing children was one of the few things they did well, sadly several of their babies died before they were a year old. When I would ask them, why they didn't dare change their lives, SokLee would talk of being bad – she would re-iterate again and again, we are suffering because we are bad – I lost my family, my parents, my land, my right to go to school, my right to earn a living, my right to be a Buddhist because of the Khmer Rouge. My children die or are always sick. I have bad dreams – my parents come to me and ask me why I am so bad. I cannot think anymore. I cannot do anymore.

Their home was small and decrepit – her husband was often away trying to earn money from jobs on the border – their children would go to bed hungry. Malnutrition is a disease that weakens the body and tires the soul. Encouraging this family, like so many others takes hours of talking. Peuw, who is our project manager got increasingly frustrated with this family so last Pchum Ban, he took SokLee and her husband and 9 other family heads on a day trip to Tanong, - he did it by force – threatening dismissal from our programs unless they came and saw. In Tanong we have several hundred hectares of land under continuous use with vegetables and rice. Both groups met and talked and talked some more. They talked about being bad; they talked about being of no worth, of not being able to think anymore. They talked of the nightmares. Then our Tanong families talked about changes – about dreaming and thinking again – about working their land – about working together to make sure everyone did well. They talked about learning the markets and growing off season vegetables which results in more money for their crops. They talked about growing rice three times a year and never going hungry. The men talked of no longer needing to leave home to earn money for their families; they talked about the health of their children and the schools they are attending. They talked of the homes they have rebuilt and how good it all is. Then they talked about Pchum Ban, how the nightmares had gone and how their parents were at peace.

SokLee and her husband listened – and he did the unthinkable – he wanted a field well. It's been 10 months since that field well was installed. The change is remarkable – this family grows mushrooms, and cucumbers' and they make rice wine – their income has increased to \$20 per day – each day. Unbelievable! But the biggest change is in them – SokLee and her husband laugh a lot – they are eager to have me come – they are eager to feed me good food, to show off their achievements, to brag about their children. They are eager to show me their neighbors and all that is going so well.



For so many of our families, Pchum Ban is no longer the feared holiday of the year. The nightmares are leaving, their parents are at peace. How good that is.

I thank my God, that I am so blessed and unafraid of life – I thank my God that all of you are a part of the healing of so many. May all our Pchum Bans be seasons of joy and thankfulness because of the peace we bring to others.

Janne