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At tmut: A Cambodian Virtue Perseveres Through Hardship

By Pamela Burdman

Im Chan isn't sure how she endured all the tragedies life has brought her. Her only answer is *at tmut*:

At tmut means persevering through hardship.

At tmut means staying anchored and not being distracted by anger.

At tmut means accepting your fate.

"I can't say enough about the word *at tmut*," says Im Chan. "I learned *at tmut* from my parents and from my society. I learned it by observing everything around me."

Im Chan needed *at tmut* to cope with losing most of her family before she turned thirty. It gave her strength as the family was rounded up from their village by Khmer Rouge soldiers and held in camp after camp. And it kept her going when her parents, her husband, and her youngest son all perished from starvation. Only Im Chan and her other son, eight-year-old Raa, survived.

Eight years later, in 1986, after remarrying, escaping through the jungle, and spending five years in Thai refugee camps and two in Texas, Im Chan arrived in Stockton's Park Village housing complex with her husband, Chun Keut, sixteen-year-old Raa, and four young children.

But the family's dream of getting a fresh start in peaceful new surroundings died one morning in January 1989 during recess at nearby Cleveland Elementary School, where nine-year-old Rann and seven-year-old Ram were students. A crazed gunman dashed into the schoolyard and began randomly spraying bullets, sending children running in all directions.

After an anxiety-filled day spent rushing to the school, then to the hospital, the family learned that Ram had died. She was one of five children—all Southeast Asian refugees—who lost their lives in the shooting. Rann, who was on the playground at the time, carries a haunting image of the day his sister died. "The part I remember most was this girl crawling toward me with blood all over her. It was really bad, seeing somebody dying in front of you," said Rann, now twenty.

The Red Cross gave the family \$3,000 to pay for a casket and burial plot and white clothes to wear to the funeral. But it fell to the Park Village community to raise the thousands of dollars the victims' families needed to pay for a traditional weeklong ceremony and to invite Buddhist monks to chant blessings for Ram and the other victims.

Reporters visited the families by the droves, and social service agencies made the victims' families a top priority. But Im Chan doesn't remember

them helping much. Only Sovanna Koeurt of Park Village, one of very few Cambodian women to become a community leader, seemed to know what Im Chan was going through and how to help her. So she relied on Ms. Sovanna—and on *at tmut*.

"When I came to the United States, I thought it was going to be peaceful," said Im Chan. "I didn't know there was killing too. I didn't expect it. In Cambodia, most everybody I liked got killed. I couldn't believe I had to experience something like that again."

"A lot of people look at me like I have no problems, but inside I'm very hurt. After the death of my daughter, I felt very hurt on the inside. There was another family who lost their daughter. They cried and cried, but for me, I couldn't cry. I felt if I cried, nothing was going to work for me. I felt I had to be *at tmut* and keep control.

"I didn't get mad about the incident," she said, "but I felt regret that my first and only daughter, my lovely daughter, passed away. I just wanted to ask the school to help protect all the children."

Im Chan and Rann trace many of the family's later problems to the shooting. Indeed, though life went on, and Im Chan and Chun Keut had three more children, things never seemed to return to normal.

Chun Keut had cherished Ram as his first daughter, and he was inconsolable about losing her. Despite the family's protests, he began drinking heavily. "There was no way we could tell him not to," recalled Rann. Two years ago, Chun died from alcohol-induced liver disease.

And shortly after the shooting, Raa, then nineteen, devastated by the death of a second sibling, left home only to end up in a jail in Philadelphia for an unknown offense. Today a Polaroid picture of him sits on the living room coffee table of Im Chan's four-bedroom apartment. "Please forgive me," reads the caption. "I can't smile. But still love you."

Now, Im Chan feels the weight of the world, raising six children on \$1,596 a month in welfare and social security. At the same time, she feels at a loss over how to impart good values to her children, since the corporal punishment she grew up with is forbidden in the United States.

"My children's teachers always call me that my son or my daughter has problems in school," she said. "I don't know how to deal with it. In Cambodia, the government gives the rights to the parents more than the children. Whatever the parents say, the children tend to listen. Over here, it's different. The children don't listen to the parents. Whatever you do to the children, they will call the police. That's why the parents can't do anything to raise the children."

So, she relies on *at tmut*.

"That's something I have to live with to set an example for my children. I want to show them Cambodian values. I feel if I didn't have *at tmut*, nothing would work out in the family. Even my neighbors wouldn't want to talk to me."

Rann sometimes worries about his mother. "My mom's gone through a lot of hard times," he said. "I feel really bad to see her by herself thinking about something she won't tell me. But she still has us, and I guess that's what motivated her to live."

Indeed, Im Chan said her happiest moments are when her entire family comes together for a meal. But those are rare, because her children are often out of the house with their friends, and they prefer hamburgers and sandwiches to the Cambodian fare she prepares.

Sometimes, to comfort herself, she watches a video from her 1994 trip to

Cambodia. She had raised money to build a school in her native village, and had returned for the ribbon-cutting ceremony. She appears in the video like a dignitary before thousands of Cambodians who walked from miles around for the event.

Im Chan also feels pleased about her son Rann, the only one of her children who she says doesn't give her trouble. He is a model student. His 3.5 GPA in high school and his volunteer work in the Cambodian community helped him win a scholarship to nearby University of the Pacific. He also tutors children in English at the local community center.

Though the shooting left a deep impression on Rann, it may also have helped him set high goals for himself. He and other students received counseling at school to find ways to cope with their feelings.

"The way I coped with it," he said, "was by thinking that there's no way I could eliminate it, and so what could I do to change my family? If I could get higher education, if I could go to school and earn a degree and get a great job, it could maybe help to cover up the memories a little."

But Im Chan has a different interpretation: "He has a lot of *at tmut*, like me, and that's why he's able to succeed in his life."

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