

## Interview with Ng Shui Meng

\* This interview with Shui Meng was conducted by Kearnin Sims in April, 2014. Excerpts of it appear in an article [\*"The Disappeared"\*](#) in the [\*Southeast Asia Globe\*](#).

**Shui Meng, I would like to begin with Sombath's childhood. He grew up in rural Laos during the late 1950's and early 1960s. This was a period of conflict in the Indochina region and in addition to the threats of war Sombath also had to spend much of his time caring for his younger siblings while his father was away on business. How did growing up in this environment shape him later in life?**

Sombath's childhood living in the village was not that different from many rural kids in Laos, although as the oldest child he did bear the responsibilities of the family more than his siblings. I think this sense of responsibility, of having to take care of the family, has had a major impact on his life, particularly because his father was away working for large parts of his childhood. He became very close to his mother and worked with her all the time. Through doing this he came to appreciate how hard the burden of carrying the family is for women in Laos. With his father away, he could really see how hard his mother worked to care for the family and he shared in her chores with her, including carrying around his second sibling who was born with some abnormalities and could not walk. I think this also had an influence on his sense of responsibility.

**This appreciation of gender inequality is something that was reflected in Sombath's later work on community development in Laos**

Yes, and just to add to that you can also see his value for women in the way that he treats other female members of his family and how he was with me. Because in my case I have seen the way that Lao men behave with female members of their family and they are often very chauvinistic. But in Sombath's case, he has always been very understanding and I really appreciate this about him. This was also part of what made our relationship so strong... because I am from Singapore, not Laos, and I can see the cultural practices of male dominance within the family unit and if Sombath had behaved in that manner I do not think our relationship would have been so strong.

**Returning to Sombath's childhood, he also had some amazing opportunities as a child and a young adult, particularly through education. Did he speak much about how this influenced his life?**

Yes, he spoke about this a lot. He would share his life story with his siblings and also with their children, his nieces and nephews, who would come to stay with us in our home while they studied in

Vientiane. In Laos it is common in the countryside for children to not have access to school and it is common that children will go to stay with friends or relatives to further their education. In Sombath's own case his father, although he was not always at home, had insisted that Sombath get an education. His father had no opportunity to go to school and was not well-educated and so he really wanted Sombath to get an education. This meant that Sombath had to leave home at a very young age to stay with the family of a friend. Having received this opportunity himself to further his study, he always felt that it was his responsibility to provide the same opportunities to other families and we have always opened our home for children to live with us. This is something that he felt very strongly about and even today I still have two nieces staying with me. They are the children of Sombath's youngest sisters.

**Was having these children come to stay in your home something that you both found enjoyable?**

Is it enjoyable? Yes, because in Laos when you have children come to stay with you they are expected to help take care of the house and contribute to chores, gardening, cooking and so on, so it was always very much living together like a family. We would always treat those who came to stay with us like they were our own children.

**Can you tell me a little bit about how you and Sombath first met?**

We met when we were both students at the University of Hawaii. There were lots of student activities going on at that time and because I also came from Asia I was very much interested in what was going on in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. So I went to lots of events about the Indochina Wars and in those days when we were students there was still a lot of student anti-war movement and I met Sombath at some of those events. But Sombath is a very quiet and reserved person. He doesn't talk a lot and it took me a while to discover this quiet and serious man who was always sitting at the back of the room.

**And once you had discovered him, what were some of his most prominent personality traits that attracted you to him?**

Well the reason he is a quiet person is because he always wants to hear what other people have to say. He doesn't like to give voice to his own ideas until he has really spent time thinking seriously about them. And when he does have something to say he says it very concisely and to the point. That is part of what first attracted to me. There were many students at the university always shouting out their ideas but Sombath was someone who didn't say much, but what he did say was always so insightful. The other characteristic that I began to notice more once we had got to know each other better was how he interacts with other Lao friends and in Lao society. He is a very

peaceful man who always listens to people and who tries to look at things in a more holistic way... he always looks at things from multiple perspectives. So he is intellectually very good, he is very perceptive, but also very humble. And he is also extremely kind and sensitive to other people's feelings. He is one of the kindest individuals that I have met – and I say that not because he is my spouse but because I have seen how he interacts with other people. And he is also very generous... taking in many children into our house, not just family but other kids who needed help. And a lot of people appreciate him for these traits.

**A lot of these personality traits that you have described share similarities with Buddhist values. Is Sombath a deeply religious man?**

He became more interested in Buddhism in the later part of his life. In early years he was influenced more by our Quaker friends and the principles of social justice and non-violence. He really valued non-violence. And later in life, he came to incorporate a lot of the Quaker philosophy into the Buddhist teachings he had studied. He was never very religious. In fact, he very rarely visited temples and he doesn't give offerings of food or the many other religious practices that so many people in Laos do. But later in life he was very much influenced by engaged Buddhism and the teachings of Ajaan Sulak Sivaraksa from Thailand, who is one of the leading Buddhist thinkers in Southeast Asia, and also by people like Thich Nhat Hanh and the Dalai Lama. So he looked at Buddhism as a philosophy and a way of life, not so much as a religion. He became very interested in the Buddhist teachings of Dhamma, or the natural way, and he read a lot. He kept talking about how the Buddhist teaching tells people to find truth for themselves and to not just accept what others tell you. He valued the Buddhist principles of respect for nature and for life, and of mindfulness. Later in life he went to many meditation retreats and, over the past 15 years, he has practiced meditation at home. He tried to teach others to develop their sense of mindfulness and to live in the present... and also to use your past experiences to guide yourself into the future.

**Aside from the influences of Buddhism and the Quakers have there been any other major influences on Sombath's life?**

He became very attracted to the concept of Gross National Happiness – the Bhutanese model of development- and he attended many of the Gross National Happiness workshops and went to Bhutan twice. He attended similar events in Thailand and was asked by those working on this issue to be part of their network of people sharing ideas.

But when he went to Bhutan he felt that their way of talking about Gross National Happiness was too theoretical. So he wanted to see how he could push forward this idea within Laos and he

became very interested in the idea of happiness and what makes people happy. As he was working in education he began talking to children of different age groups about what makes them happy and he presented his findings on this at one of the UNESCO workshops, where he found that his research shared similarities with other researchers working on happiness. So it was very interesting to see that there are underlying similarities between different cultures around what makes children happy. And he built on this work for his later work and for his involvement with the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF) and his video 'what makes people happy'?. and that video attracted a lot of attention.

**And is this what Sombath's future goals were before his disappearance? To pursue this idea further?**

If he was still with us today, then yes this is what he would continue to pursue. But because he is retired he was thinking of doing more writing and consolidating his various ideas and experiences and his philosophy a little bit more by writing some articles or even a book about his views on development and the various influences that have led him to the development path that he would like to share within Laos and also within the wider Asian region. He felt that the current Western model of development is causing a lot of problems and he always felt that Laos is at a point where you can avoid following that model and pursue a more sustainable alternative model. He believed that we don't need to pursue a mad rush towards economic growth at very high costs to the environment and in its impact on the poor. We talked a lot about these issues because my own background is also in development and we shared a lot of ideas about development. He wanted me to also work with him and we would both write something around an alternative view for development.

**Sombath has already achieved many things. Are there any moments that he was particularly proud of?**

Well he didn't think that he was doing anything so spectacular. If you asked Sombath he would say 'I've done nothing'. And he always said that "all I am doing is following what I believe is right". But I think for him the proudest moment of his life would probably have been the moment when he received the Ramon Magsaysay award. It surprised him. He had no idea that he was even nominated for the award. When he received the phone call to inform him that he had won, he was visiting me in Timor-Leste.

The Ramon Magsaysay organisers had been looking for him and they couldn't track him down so they tracked me down instead and called my office to see if he was with me. They asked me if I knew

where Sombath was and I said yes, he is sitting here with me would you like to speak with him? And when he took the call he was completely surprised. But he was also very proud.

But if you look at the speech he gave when he received the award, it was a speech to recognise the contributions of the people who worked with him. He never claimed it as his own achievement, He never claimed anything as his own achievement because he said that no one single person can achieve anything without the support and the hard work of other people around them.

**He is clearly a man who is very passionate about his work, did he also have time for hobbies outside of work that he liked to do?**

He is actually a very sporting person. In his earlier days he loved to play tennis. And as he got older and he couldn't play as often he switched to playing ping pong. In fact he was quite an avid player of ping pong, but not as a competitive sport – he played it just for exercise. He had a Ping pong teacher who would come to play with him and if he was in Vientiane he would religiously keep aside his time, one or two hours in the evening, for Ping Pong. And he became very good at it, his reflexes became very good. But he never played it as a competitive sport. He hates competitive sports. He would say that sports are to improve your body and he sees Ping Pong as also improving his mind. He talks about playing ping pong as his meditation – his Ping pong meditation. But he does not play competitive sports.

**What about gardening? A lot of work was related to agronomy. Did he also have an interest in gardening beyond food outputs?**

Yes, he actually officially retired in June 2012 but we would always grow some things in our own garden. He would be up early in the morning tending to our vegetables and he was very proud of our garden. I think that he got that from his mother. His mother is a fantastic gardener. Even in her old age she has a yard full of fruit trees and vegetables and he still goes to her for gardening advice. He spent a lot of time gardening in the last 6-7 months leading up to his abduction.

**Is that something that you would do together? Or did you have other shared hobbies?**

Not gardening no. I am not a very sporting person. I do Chi Gong and Tai Chi but that is too slow for him, he really likes the faster sports. But every Friday evening we would go out together and sit by the Mekong to watch the sunset and talk together about our experiences from the week. We would like to watch movies together and when we would go on vacations we would take a lot of walks together. That's a quiet time for us because we both work and sometimes we work in different places, even different countries, and when we are together we really enjoy our time talking about

things that we are interested in and also sometimes about things that we don't agree on. We would have debates about our ideas and I would try and ground his ideas a bit... but he would also help me not to be so practical. He would ask me 'if we don't try then we can't achieve anything'. So our life paths have moved closer together as time has gone on.

**In spending the time that you have spent together you must have taught each other a lot. Is there any one thing that Sombath has taught you that stands out more than anything else?**

Well the first thing that he taught me was to really appreciate the simple things in life. Even though I live in Laos I am from Singapore, I am an urban girl who grew up in an urban environment and Sombath taught me how to understand the value of the simple life... I really like to spend time when we visit his mother to just sit with her... his mother is very wise and she has a really good understanding of how to live with nature. And I learned how to appreciate nature more and the slower pace of life more. Initially when I first came to Laos I was really quite impatient about how slowly things moved but Sombath would encourage me to try and relax. But I also think that he became more appreciate of how to do things in a more organised manner and that if you want to run an organization or a program you have to set up certain frameworks, you have to be clear about procedures to follow, and he would ask a lot for my advice on this because I worked for the UN. And I think he appreciated that I helped him to set up certain management systems, frameworks etc that he could used to organise his programs and for reporting on how donor money was being used. His office is the only local organization [in Laos] that has an external audit. Because his area of study was more agronomy, more science based, and my area of study was more sociology so I think we could share ideas and learn from each other well.

**And my final question is just to ask is there anything else that you would like to say about Sombath?**

I think that this interview is really about asking who is Sombath the man. He is a simple man. With a big heart. Over the past 16 months since his disappearance he has sometimes been depicted as something that he is not. For example, that he is an activist. Yes, he is very concerned about social issues but if he is an activist about anything his activism is about how do we improve education for the Lao people. He is really passionate about improving education, but not like formal education in the school – he is concerned with education of the whole mind, the whole person, and this is what he was always trying to encourage. And I feel that this part of him does not come through enough in many of the articles that have been written about him. He has never been one to try and tell other people what they need to do – he would like people to come up with their own answers and he

talked about critical thinking. This is more important for him than just rushing in to create change or take action. People would often ask him 'how do we do this or that', but he would say its not about doing, its about experiencing and learning by immersing yourself in the communities that you say you want to support. Understand their way of thinking. But unfortunately that aspect of him doesn't come through very much. He is a man of a big heart, he is not a campaigner, his intention was not to create a movement, he believed change had to come from the inside.