

An Interview with Many Uch

LiZhen Wang for Buddhist Peace Fellowship:

Many Uch was born in 1976, during the Khmer Rouge genocide that happened in the aftermath of the US bombings of Cambodia during the Vietnam War. Many and his family stayed in refugee camps throughout Asia until he was 6, when they were relocated to the United States.

Many grew up in a community navigating intergenerational trauma, institutional violence, and poverty. When he was 18, Many was arrested for driving the runaway car of a robbery, and he spent three years in prison. While locked up, Many studied fervently to teach himself immigration and deportation law, because when he got out, he was facing yet another kind of punishment, that is: despite being a lawful permanent resident, and despite having already served time for his crime, Many was now subject to deportation. He fought his deportation orders, as well as that of many others, and he has since been granted a pardon from the governor of Washington state. But this is no guarantee; Many could still be deported at any time. He is one among many who live with this precarity. Earlier this month, under heavy pressure from the US, Cambodia agreed to accept more deportees, and this week, over 100 Cambodian Americans were rounded up and detained.

As for Many, he doesn't identify as a Buddhist, but he grew up in a Buddhist family and has found that Buddhism is a thread that runs through him and all the stages of his life. Here, he talks with Buddhist Peace Fellowship about growing up Buddhist and his relationship with the dharma now.

As long as I can remember, I don't remember any other religion besides going to the temple at the refugee camps. I was probably too young to be running around outside, so I spent most of my time with my grandma in the temple. I mean that's all she does, is dedicate her time at the temple. I would follow the Buddhist custom and everything, but that's because I have to, right? Because you're grandma's going to make you do it regardless. I was a kid-- I was 5 years old, you know?

Many said his grandmother spent most of her time meditating, and that most of his time with her was spent trying or pretending, to meditate.

That's kind of the thing, that when I go to my grandma's room there was no activity except to sit and meditate. She doesn't preach a lot, and she's really generous. You know, you spoil your grandkid, and I was the most spoiled one because I spent a lot of time with her sitting and pretending to meditate.

You know, it's hard for me to say what the relationship mean. It's really personal where I regret a lot of stuff. My grandmother misses her homeland, so she end up moving back to Cambodia, and she passed away in Cambodia and I never get to go to Cambodia.

Many also learned about the Buddha from his mother:

My mom was a dedicated Buddhist, so she made us watch the movie about the Buddha. What intrigues me is the Buddha sacrifices himself, like gives his kids away to actually be enslaved to... what is the other person? He was a con-man. But the idea behind the Buddha is, if he asks for it, we must give. So he gave or loaned his kids to this con man to have him use his kids for... probably this con man conjured up some story like he needs labor or whatever. So when the Buddha finds out, just the thought of maybe the Buddha should take revenge on the conman, is also a sin. I kinda learned through that what is the life of a Buddha. It's like that. The Buddha gives everything away.

I see it in my mom doing the same thing. It reflects what the Buddha's teaching is. There's times when my experience with my mom and her friends-- and they both practice Buddhism-- I used to take my mom and her friends out to the park and stuff. This is when I was out of the prison, maybe 15 years ago. This is so regular a thing, I kind of tell them not to do it, but they always give panhandler money. They go out of their way searching in their bag, in their car, to see if there's anything to give to the panhandler. And I would tell them, "Why do you need to give it? They might just be conning money from you!" And they would just: "Well, if they're willing to sit there in the sun and the rain to ask for money, they probably need it. And so just give it to them."

My brother used to hold this anger toward my mom because, he rebelled against being poor; he hates being poor. Not understanding my mom has kind of a guilt trip, because our family able to escape and live in the US. Our parents kind of have this guilt trip, like, 'we made it.' I don't think my brother took that interpretation or anything, like "yeah I'm teenager and I deserve nice shoes and nice clothes." But not understanding that my mom sometimes worked in a sweatshop and in most cases we were on welfare and we were poor and we live in the projects growing up.

When I get a little bit older in my teenage years, I felt the same way. I felt my mom was doing all this and forgetting about us. Now we're kind of talking about refugee stuff, but yeah, I think it kind of has to do with the religion as well: you give what you can and sometimes you sacrifice your family, but if somebody asks for something, it seemed like you had the obligation to do it. So my mom was that way.

Many went to prison at 18, when he was arrested for driving the getaway car from the robbery. In prison, he said he didn't want to be like his mom; he wanted to be more guarded. And yet, the threads of his Buddhist childhood tugged on him, but it wasn't easy to reconnect with the dharma from inside his prison cell. I asked Many about looking for Buddhism there:

When we were inside, we thought about redeeming ourselves because we are such bad person to get into prison in the first place. So we always thought about the religion itself to make us better. And we talk about that among our friends, about how do we heal. We want to be a good person. Most of us in prison would seek out religion to meet that anger, because you know the environment of prison is harsh and fast-- being bullied, being a bully, fighting for yourself and so.

As friends that grow up Buddhism, we want to continue practicing that, to learn more, because that was the space... but you know, it's hard.

Many tried to get Cambodian monks from his local temple to come to the prison. He'd seen white monks in the prison, but this didn't work. He was told by his mother and others from the temple that a monk does not enter spaces like prison.

Later, when Many got out, he ended up helping his local temple. He was unemployed for a while because of the stigma and institutional discrimination against people who've been incarcerated. During this time, community members from the temple were engaged in a fight to win their temple back. They'd taken the fight to court. Because Many is bilingual, he volunteered to interpret for his mom and the other community members. He spent many days a week in court helping the older generation with the litigation. He told me about an exchange he had with one of the members:

This one gentleman is part of the litigation. One day he mentions to me, "You live your life like a monk, and the only difference between you and the monks is that you go home and sleep with your wife, and the monks go to the temple."

That means a lot to me when he talks like that, because maybe he hasn't seen many people that are... maybe young men that are my age that are dedicated to helping the temple without wanting anything back, and I spent a lot of time. I mean even when I didn't even have any money. I was unemployed, it was during the recession, and I still spend a lot of time at the temple trying to be helpful with the case.

I mean, I mean how much is that tied into what my mom's teaching is? Because I don't know-- maybe there was something taught and I don't know what it was. I really can't explain it. This is one of the first times I have to explain something where maybe it came from the Buddhist teaching... You know, I really didn't like religion. But maybe in a way, maybe I do like it, maybe I'm just denying it! But I take the good part of religion, and then I really object to maybe the bad part that I think it is. So yeah.

Afterwards, Many told me he'd never really been asked about his Buddhist upbringing before. It was just a natural part of life and community. But the conversation had him reflecting more deeply about himself and his family, where he came from and how he came to be, and that it was meaningful to look back and see this thread that had been running through his life all along.

So that's our interview with Many Uch. Today, Many describes himself as a proud father, husband, and mentor. He's also the co-founder of FIGHT, where he is a fierce organizer and advocate for fellow immigrants and incarcerated communities. To learn more about the work he's doing, check out his organization FIGHT, at fightwa.org. That's fightwa.org. Thanks for listening and going on this journey with us. Wishing you, and wishing all those impacted by the violence of deportation and incarceration, much peace, freedom, and abundant love.