

Theravada Buddhist Ideology in the Economic Behavior of the Khmers Ethnic in Binh Phuoc Province, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT: Theravada Buddhism permeates all facets of Khmer culture and is the cornerstone of their ethnic identity. The purpose of livelihood is to ensure the continued existence of the human species. Within the religious community, Theravada Buddhism's ideology also has an impact on daily life. This article examines the impact of Theravada Buddhist philosophy on livelihood behavior of the Khmer people in Binh Phuoc Province, Vietnam, through the use of data from ethnographic methods of cultivation, such as attendance observations and in-depth interviews. The analysis's findings demonstrate that, in a strongly Buddhist society, the Law of Karma, right action, and right livelihood ideologies have an impact on the way of life of the Khmer people in Binh Phuoc. They must amass a great deal of blessings in order to have good karma, and blessings are obtained by leading moral lives and performing good deeds, such as making offerings. They did that by working honestly and meeting their obligations to provide for their families while avoiding hurting or upsetting other people. In a more subtle way, this helps to better their families' lives and foster community growth.

KEYWORDS: Binh Phuoc province, Khmer ethnic, Theravada Buddhism's ideology, economic behavior

I. INTRODUCTION

With 1,319,652 members, the Khmer population is the fifth largest ethnic minority in Vietnam, making up 1.37% of the nation's total population. Southwest (1,141,241 people) and Southeast (172,477 people) have the highest concentration of them (General Statistics Office of Vietnam, 2019). There are 1,206,059 Khmer people, or 91.39% of the total population, who practice Theravada Buddhism (Nguyen Phu Loi, 2022). Every aspect of the Khmer community's social, cultural, and economic life is governed by this religion, which is regarded as the nation's soul.

There are 19,315 Khmer residents in Binh Phuoc province, one of five provinces and cities in the Southeast region. Additionally, they belong to a religious community that is primarily concentrated in the districts of Loc Ninh, Chon Thanh, Dong Phu, and Dong Xoai city (Binh Phuoc Statistics Department, 2020). The Khmer people arrived in this region at various points in history and have long resided in the border region between Vietnam and Cambodia (Mac Duong, 1985, p. 16; Tran Bach Dang, 1990, p. 270). However, the Khmer people of Binh Phuoc currently make their living from agricultural production with food crops like rice, corn, cassava, legumes, and perennial industrial crops like rubber, pepper, and cashew, as well as hired labor in agriculture, workers, trading, etc. because of a variety of factors including state policies, market economies, ecological environments, and cultural exchange (Dinh Thi Yen, 2023). This community has developed a very rich and varied culture through living in and adapting to its ecological surroundings. They are heavily influenced by Theravada Buddhism while also incorporating cultural elements unique to mountain dwellers, such as the ethnic groups of the Central Highlands. Buddhism permeates every sphere of the community's social, cultural, and economic life. Furthermore, Buddhism also influences on their livelihood choices and behaviors

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scientists have been interested in studying the relationship between Buddhism and economics for a long time. The most compelling study on the advantages of religious spending comes from Melford Spiro (1966), who contends that Theravada Buddhists in Burma are influenced by the concept of karma and, as a result, work hard and spend a lot on religion, believing that doing so will benefit them both now and in the future by elevating their religious status. Author Schumacher (1973) highlights the importance of having the right livelihood, which is a crucial prerequisite for maximizing happiness while consuming the fewest resources possible.

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There is no direct correlation between per capita income and national happiness. It is reasonable to anticipate that national happiness will rise in tandem with per capita income; however, in a developed society, national happiness does not rise in tandem with national income. Accordingly, production, consumption, and other economic activities are merely means to an end, not the ultimate measure of human happiness (Payutto, 1994). Easterlin's paradox states that, once basic needs are satisfied, average national happiness tends to stay constant over time as per capita income rises (Easterlin et al. 2010). Our thoughtful use of resources to enjoy life and serve others is a part of Buddhist wealth (Matthews, 2014). A positive outcome in our lives, like getting a promotion, winning a game, or purchasing a new car or home, may be something we look forward to and enjoy, but we will quickly adjust to it and revert to a fundamental sense of wellbeing (Gilbert 2006). As a result, a lot of scholars emphasize that, in the context of modern economics, Buddhist economics offers people, corporations, and nations an alternative to Western individualism and rational economics. True happiness will come to people through Buddhist economics. The richness of Buddhism lies in our deliberate use of resources to enrich life and serve others (Tran Hong Lien, 2007; Zsolnai, 2011; Giorgino, 2014; Tideman, 2016; Magnuson, 2016; and Brown, 2017,...).

Religion and culture have a major role in the livelihood activities of ethnic groups that identify as religious communities. Studies have demonstrated the detrimental effects of culture and religion on the development of livelihoods. According to Clifford Geertz (1963), Balinese people in Indonesia face too many limitations, many cultural expectations and boundaries to feel content with their basic needs, but these limitations have also led to businesses stagnating and performing poorly. Theravada Buddhism holds that the Khmer community lacks sufficient labor for production in order to support the traditional small community. This has resulted in limitations on market dominance, decreased competition in the current environment, and an inability to lay the groundwork for development, particularly sustainable development (Ngo Van Le, 2012, 306). Their mindset is one of laziness, as they cling to government policies and social subsidies (Nguyen Thi Hue, 2020).

Conversely, numerous researches demonstrate the beneficial influence of Buddhist teachings on the advancement of human subsistence. According to Charles Keyes (1983), the fundamental tenet of order for the people living in Ban Nong Tun village in northeastern Thailand is the “law of kamma” of Theravada Buddhism. The accumulation of virtue from the previous life determines the wealth, poverty, and social standing in this life. Work and merit are positively correlated; the more “hardworking” and less “lazy” a person is in giving up vices like excessive drinking, gambling, and consumption, the less “demerit” he will be able to accrue.

The author also highlights the community's active responsibility in work and its efforts to uphold its place in the moral hierarchy, the wealthier the community, the more wealth there is to give. More offerings to produce blessings make one deserving of respect and admiration from all. More precisely, Taylor, P. (2007) highlights the idea of karma, the habit of gaining virtue, the way pagodas create blessings and social networks, and alternate paths that have made life happier and helped the Khmer people find a means of subsistence. According to Huynh Ngoc Thu (2021), the Khmer people of the Mekong Delta have always been influenced by the human philosophy of “sống gửi, thác về”. As a result, they always follow the Eight True Paths' guidelines for the right livelihood and right life when engaging in economic activity. This entails finding and doing honest work to support their families and themselves while avoiding causing suffering to others. In addition to providing necessities for the impoverished, teaching literacy and cultural values, assisting in the building of schools, and mediating family disputes, pagodas and monks are essential to the well-being of this community. People in Cambodia make career decisions influenced by Buddhist philosophy (Dinh Thi Yen, 2022). Building a good life for people both now and in the future is always emphasized in Buddhist teachings. In order to do the righteous livelihood and not damage others, they must set aside their egos. According to that process, benefit sharing is an act of empathy that creates a compassionate, good society (Ngo Thi Phuong Lan et al., 2023).

Numerous studies have demonstrated the significance of Buddhism in the religious, cultural, and social lives of the Khmer community in Binh Phuoc (Thach Ne, 2021; Huynh Ngoc Thu, Danh Lung, Chau Hoai Thai, 2021; Dinh Thi Yen, 2022). These investigations center on the domains of religion and culture. There are currently no records addressing the livelihood activities of the Binh Phuoc Khmer community, much less studies examining the connection between Buddhism and their livelihood.

Therefore, this article makes the assumption that Theravada Buddhism philosophy, particularly the law of kamma and the theory of right livelihood influences livelihood as well as other aspects of life. Buddhist philosophy encourages Khmer people to lead happy, fulfilling lives, but it also puts barriers in the way of developing their means of subsistence.

III. RESEARCH METHOD

In writing this article, we have drawn upon data from ethnographic fieldwork, such as participant observation and in-depth interviews concerning the livelihood activities of the Khmer people in Binh Phuoc province, as well as Buddhist concepts. April 2021, January to March 2022, and July 2023 are the study periods. Tan Xuan ward in Dong Xoai city, Nha Bich commune in Chon Thanh district, Loc Dien commune, Loc Khanh commune, and Loc Thinh commune in Loc Ninh district are all included in the field area. These are places where a variety of livelihood activities are practiced, including service trade, construction, and agriculture. In order to keep a record and provide research materials, we documented the field trips and observations.

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We performed twelve in-depth interviews in addition to the observation process, with six women and six men of various ages, educational backgrounds, and professions: eight individuals over thirty, four individuals under thirty, five farmers, four workers, one trader, one engineer, and one teacher. The interviews took place in a private setting in March 2022 and April 2023 at the interviewees's residence. Every interview is taped, lasts 45 to 80 minutes, and typically concludes with a visit to the garden or with feeding the chickens, cattle, etc. The interviewee feels very comfortable sharing and exchanging information, maybe because of the prior connection. The interviews' content demonstrates that, despite the participants' disparate ages, professions, and levels of education, Buddhist philosophy has always influenced their way of thinking and livelihood behavior. (Size 10 & Normal)An easy way to comply with the conference paper formatting requirements is to use this document as a template and simply type your text into it.

IV. THE RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. Theravada Buddhism in Binh Phuoc province

In the province of Binh Phuoc, there are currently 14 different religions practiced by 203,680 people. With 49,573 believers, Buddhism is the third most popular religion after Protestantism (60,237 believers) and Catholicism (90,375 followers). Of these, 17,727 adherents of Theravada Buddhism are Khmer, hence their religion is referred to as Theravada Buddhism of Khmer people (Binh Phuoc Statistics Department, 2020, p.143; Thach Ne, 2021, p.54).

Seven pagodas have been completed by Theravada Buddhism of the Khmer ethnic group in Binh Phuoc: Bo De Pagoda (Chon Thanh district); Cha La Pagoda; Serey Odom Pagoda; Soc Lon Pagoda; Chang Hai Pagoda (Loc Ninh district); and Sirivansa Pagoda (Dong Xoai city). These temples are situated in the center of the srok, which makes them an accessible location for the locals to live. The abbot, or senior monk, is in charge of the pagoda. Assistant abbots, novices, monks, etc. are helping the senior monk. A management board is also present in certain temples to assist the senior monk in maintaining and growing the pagoda and providing support to the surrounding community of believers.

The history of war and the Khmer people's process of settlement all had an impact on the construction of the Theravada Buddhist pagoda. They were constructed at various points in time and are currently undergoing expansion and completion. Bo De Pagoda was built in 1903, Soc Lon Pagoda in 1928, Serey Odom Pagoda in 1960, Sirivansa Kemarara Pagoda in 1963, and Cha La Pagoda in 1964, all of these pagodas were destroyed and damaged during the war and rebuilt (Huynh Ngoc Thu, Danh Lung, Chau Hoai Thai, 2021). Specifically, the Kemarara Sirivansa Pagoda was constructed on a temporary basis in 1963, but the Khmer people—who are accustomed to subsisting on agriculture—have moved out of Dong Xoai and into the forests. The monks returned to the Southwest, where the pagoda was broken and abandoned, because they could not survive without the Khmer community. About three kilometers from the location of the previous Kemarara Sirivansa Pagoda, in Tan Xuan Ward, Dong Xoai City, Binh Phuoc Province, the Sirivansa Pagoda was constructed by 2011. To address the community's spiritual needs, two pagodas were most recently constructed in Binh Phuoc province's Loc Ninh district. The construction of the Chang Hai Pagoda (Pandhitaram) in Loc Quang commune began in March 2022, while the Loc Thanh Pagoda in Loc Thanh commune began on March 24, 2023. As a result, in contrast to other pagodas in the Southwest, the Theravada Buddhist pagoda in Binh Phuoc was established later but has always been essential to the social, cultural, and economic life of the local Khmer population.

The religious nature of the Khmer people has a direct effect on their livelihoods. Buddhist teachings place a strong emphasis on a person's moral awareness, a society built around a particular worldview, and the relationship between “karma—reincarnation” in the cosmos. According to the processes of birth, growth, illness, and death, Buddhism's conception of cause and effect holds that everything, including life, is subject to this law. The three fundamental stages of this law are hetu, pratitya, and phala. Giving alms and making numerous offerings—in particular, giving the monks four things is essential to establishing merit. When giving something away, don't count on receiving anything back. We have to try to follow The Eightfold Path, maintain moral purity, abstain from dishonest behavior, and uphold the precepts. Meditation is a necessary practice for cultivating one's own spiritual development. We also need to pray and offer blessings for our departed loved ones, serve others, be humble, act morally, and think and think clearly. Finally, we need to regularly listen to the Dharma (Huynh Ngoc Thu, 2022). The awareness and livelihood behaviors of the Khmer people have been significantly impacted by these Buddhist concepts.

B. Buddhist ideology in the economic behavior of the Khmer people

Buddhists uphold the core values of righteous livelihood, correct behavior, compassion, and morally sound ideas and judgments in the context of the “karma-reincarnation” link. True actions and careers that do not harm other people or sentient beings are the definition of a righteous livelihood (Thich Thong Lac, 2011, p. 249-250). Sincere considerations and actions to safeguard the family and community's interests are inextricably linked to other aspects of life for the Khmer community in Binh Phuoc province. Their employment is compliant with religious and legal ethics, and they do it to support their families and themselves. The Khmer people relied on a combination of wet-field agriculture and slash-and-burn farming for their traditional way of life prior to the 1990s. They have currently shifted from producing rice to perennial industrial crops under the strong influence of national

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policies, the market economy, and cross-cultural exchanges. This has led to a diversification of livelihood options, including agricultural production, employment in factories, construction, and a few small businesses. These are morally and legally righteous occupations.

Buddhist doctrine opposed social injustice but did not oppose the accumulation of material goods. Instead, it constantly warns people about the potential drawbacks of material goods and money, teaches them how to know when enough is enough to avoid falling, and takes into account other people's interests as well as the accumulation of blessings. Thus, the Khmer people don't engage in evil or greedy activities. Although Buddhist doctrine does not forbid killing or consuming meat, the Khmer people do not embrace the practice of animal slaughter, despite the fact that it is becoming an increasingly tough task, since they believe that it is not acceptable to harm others or sentient beings.

I sold duck, chicken, shrimp, and fish in 2019. I'm frequently asked to clean and butcher animals by buyers. I stopped selling those items till recently because I was frightened of getting punished for all the terrible offenses I had committed. These days, all of the prepared food I sell here is what I buy from markets and supermarkets (...). While killing is not illegal for Khmer people—anyone can raise chickens and ducks for food—no one chooses to butcher animals for a living (...)" . (Mr. Ly D, 24 years old)

Adhering to the concept of “right livelihood and right destiny”, Khmer people do not only respect other people's rights but also do not cause concern for their relatives. Thus, in a context where prices are constantly changing, they do not follow the profits of the market economy; instead, they hold onto a large portion of their rice land to guarantee food security, which they also do for family members. To minimize unanticipated risks, they gradually switched from rice to industrial crops. This viewpoint is comparable to James Scott's (1976) moral economy's safety-first tenet.

The Khmer people believe that life in this life is the outcome of the process of accumulating virtue in a previous life, in accordance with the Buddhist law of karma. It is necessary to make offerings, give alms, and pay attention to teachings in order to alter the hierarchy both now and in the future. They constantly strive to amass blessings in order to alter their status and identity both now and in the future.

I had few blessings in my former life, so I am not wealthy now. Prior to that, I might not have been wealthy because I was a sloth, had no business acumen, and lacked the money to support people and pagoda. I'm trying really hard to work now. Following the conclusion of the cashew harvest, my wife and I started working in the factory (...). I work to earn money so that I can donate to the impoverished and make offerings to the pagoda. I now put in a lot of effort at work, have money, and everyone respects me because I help others. I will be wealthy and blessed in my next life (...). (Mr. Lam O, 42 years old)

Ms. N, a 32-year-old woman, expressed similar views regarding the Buddhist concept of karma when she said, “*Our house has a small plot of land, about 1 hectare of rubber for my parents to harvest. My husband and I work as workers, earning over 15 million VND a month. With this money, I can still buy a lot of things for the house and still have money left over for my kids' education. The money is used to make offerings to the pagoda, as we do not go there to build merit for pagodas (...). You will be loved by more people, have a better life, and make more offerings to temples if you put in a lot of work (...). I believe that my next life will be better (...)*”.

The two interviewees' discourse reveals how much Buddhist thought has influenced their way of thinking and acting. The karma from the previous life leaves this life, and our efforts in this life will improve the current life, bless the next life, and ensure that our efforts and hard work are always rewarded. The Buddha identified four basic human needs—food, shelter, clothing, and medicine—as necessary for ensuring human survival in the Lotus Sutra. The Lotus Sutra states that poverty will result in social and personal decline, theft, and the dissolution of social institutions (Tran Hong Lien, 2007, p. 83). Through rituals, sermons, and talks given by the monks at the pagoda, the Khmer people in Binh Phuoc address the ideas of karma and economics found in Buddhist texts. The Khmer people have chosen livelihood strategies with awareness and dynamism to secure their families' survival. Many people choose to diversify their sources of income because a single livelihood strategy is insufficient to provide for their family. Their way of living also demonstrates the moral economy, which is based on meritorious work and giving alms and assistance to those in need, as influenced by Buddhist philosophy.

(...) We just make food for ourselves; if we have enough, we give to others; if we own a lot of wealth, land, and other assets but don't give to others, we are not rich. People's lives will not be happy if they do not know how to use their wealth or what causes them to be unhappy. They will not be happy if they continue to live this way in their future lives (...). (Mr. N, 70 years old)

(...) In addition to going to work to make money, I use the time I have to construct a pagoda for a few days per month. I give the monks my money when I have it so they can give it to the underprivileged. There are a lot of sick and impoverished Khmer people; their misery is immense. To support my family and aid the underprivileged, I must learn how to save money, give up eating and drinking, and accumulate wealth. People who give a lot of alms and offerings will be valued. Mr. Th, 36 years old)

More precisely, Mr. Ly D, a 24-year-old, stated, “*I invited the Buddha statue from Cambodia to give my relatives a statue. I don't make a profit; I sell at the original price. I continue to sell to people who are impoverished until they do. Khmer people who worship Buddha must have a Buddha statue to worship. I desire for there to be a Buddha statue in every home here for worship. In order to help people look better during festivals and to earn money, I also sell perfumes and cosmetics online. In addition, I am*

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an engineer who has designed homes for numerous clients. If the house has a lot of money, I take it to design the drawings; if they do not have enough money, I give it to them”.

Khmer people are not passive; rather, they are highly proactive in developing and pursuing livelihood strategies; religion serves as both a “backward” and “conservative” force as well as a catalyst for the progress and development of the community. People can obtain the value of life and happiness from contributions to the pagoda, love, sharing, tolerance, caring for and assisting others, and other non-monetary means as well. The underprivileged have benefited from the constant upholding of the values of almsgiving, offering, and helping one another; as a result, their livelihood behavior demonstrates a clear moral economy. According to Charles Kyes' research, people in northeastern Thailand believe in a moral economy that is comparable to their own: they bless, abstain from sin, and give up their lustful passions. (Charles Kyes, 1983). The middle way theory should be applied to restrain wants and consumption, not to become too wealthy or too poor to be of benefit. Wealth is a means, not an end. Profits are allocated to charitable causes, economic development, and the impoverished (Tran Hong Lien, 2007). But Khmer communities understand ethical economics differently from Jame Scott (1976), who highlights the right to survival and the reciprocity principle in the rural Southeast Asian social structure.

In a life full of Buddhist hues, the group acknowledges its accomplishments as a result of the blessing *“I have the life I have today, all thanks to the blessing and guidance of the master”*. (Mr D, 24 years old); *“I was blessed to be able to study abroad in the United States. I have now come back to establish a free English instruction center for local kids”* (Ms. N, 25 years old); *“I applied to teach at a secondary school, thanks to blessings”*. (Mr. Ph, 23 years old)

The Khmer community in Binh Phuoc believes that their work and everything they possess are the result of their practice of gathering blessings. They have found work opportunities thanks to their social network from the pagoda and indigenous modernism, but the local government's planning does not take these achievements and livelihood strategies into account, and the authorities do not recognize the full potential of the Khmer people in their daily lives. Through the social networks they had established since their visits to the pagoda, Khmer people, like M's family (34 years old) and Kh's family (30 years old) in Loc Ninh, connected and immigrated to Cambodia in order to trade and rent land for agricultural production or to introduce one another to jobs in industrial parks in the province of Binh Phuoc. They have money to make offerings to monks; they build and repair their houses, purchase vehicles, and add to the household's equipment. However, working for a living forces them to accept visiting the temple fewer days per month—one day—or only on festival occasions rather than four days per month like the elderly. There are benefits to earning a living, but there are also challenges. The majority of them ask the monks for advice and share it with them. Ngo Thi Phuong Lan (2019) has examined how religion and way of life relate to the Khmer people. When Khmer people from Tra Vinh province migrate in search of work, they frequently turn to monks for protection; they don't often visit temples, but they do have money to give. When they face challenges in life, they will take a few days off from work to return to the temple, where they can hear the monks' advice and absorb the teachings (pp. 205–217). These items demonstrate the similarities between the behavior of the Khmer people in Binh Phuoc and the Southwest because of their shared ethnic origin and cultural and religious traits. The Khmer people rely on the pagoda in difficult times, and they will continue to give generously to it with all of their respectful hearts until their business thrives. This was a prevalent aspect of Southern Buddhists' pre- and post-economic lives.

In addition to the positive effects, when members of the community create many virtues through alms and offerings, it also makes them feel happier in their current lives. Still, a lot of Khmer people are happy with their lives as they are because they believe in the law of cause and effect. With the motto "living to give, dying to trust," all they do is work in service of life and make offerings. They wish for their ashes to be interred in the temple when they pass away, and when they are alive, they work only to make offerings and attend festivals. They don't understand what it is to develop, acquire wealth, or make investments in human resource development. As a result, they lack the money for medical care when unforeseen circumstances arise. On the material front, the community's educational attainment lags behind that of the neighboring ethnic groups and society at large. In particular, this obstructs the achievement of Goals No. 1 and No. 4 of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals included in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The Khmer people are still very enthusiastic about contributing their labor and resources to the pagoda and giving alms to others, even though outsiders may believe that the law of karma has limitations when it comes to the development of livelihoods. Their blessings and the respect they get from everyone increase with the number of offerings and alms they give. The monks handle and use their donations in a very open and transparent manner, assisting the impoverished, building schools for children, renovating and modernizing infrastructure, and building and restoring pagodas. Every Khmer in the Srok is happy to have a large, lovely pagoda and decent classrooms where monks can instruct children in literacy and culture. The Khmer people also concluded that their alms could not be extremely profitable—not enough to change a person's life—with the amount of money offered. In addition, investing carries a risk that prevents them from experiencing the happiness of the present or the future. As a result, they decide to put in a lot of effort to provide for their family's survival, amass wealth, make offerings and alms to maximize their benefits in the here and now, and anticipate living in the future. According to Melford Spiro's (1966) perspective, saving will

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boost capital but requires religious spending to increase merit. In the eyes of Burmese Buddhists today, this is the most prudent financial investment in terms of future profits and religious prestige (Melford Spiro 1966, 1167).

IV. CONCLUSION

Theravada Buddhism is practiced by 91.8 percent of the Khmer population, who call their religion Theravada Khmer Buddhism to set it apart from the Theravada Buddhism practiced by the Kinh majority. Living in a Buddhist setting, the Eightfold Path—that is, right livelihood and right destiny—as well as the theory of cause and effect have had a significant impact on Khmer people's way of life and livelihood. The karmic idea highlights how the benefits of a past life leave an imprint on this one. To be blessed, one must work hard and take full responsibility for oneself, supporting oneself and one's family without hurting others, and working toward the community's good values. Thus, Khmer workers engage in legitimate occupations like agricultural production, working in factories, and small businesses. They also don't work on tasks that interfere with the rights of others or slaughter animals. To prevent production risks that could cause relatives to feel anxious and deprived, even the conversion of crops and occupations is done in a cautious way without requiring changes at the same time. To get a better place in the hierarchy both now and in the future, they are incessantly learning, diligent, and dynamic in their search for and creation of livelihood strategies, providing for their families, offering to monks, and giving alms to the underprivileged. In addition, the majority of Khmer people do not save money or make profitable investments due to their behavior. Because of this, their standard of living is lower than that of the ethnic groups in the area, many of whom are poor and powerless to get medical care when they are ill. Nonetheless, the Khmer people hold that peace and the purification of people are more important indicators of civilization and happiness than wealth and material possessions. Since happiness for humans is the ultimate goal of all endeavors and investments, have they selected the correct developmental path?

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