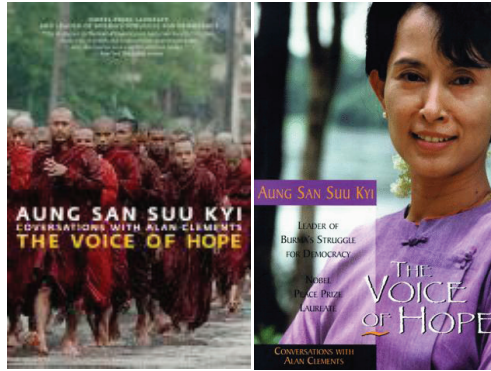


The Voice of Hope

Conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi



By Alan Clements

An Interview with Alan Clements
For the Release of The Voice of Hope

Banyen Book's Branches of Light
by Kolin Lymworth & Michael Bertrand

April 1998
Vancouver, BC, Canada

Kolin Lymworth: The Voice of Hope, your new book with Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, leader of Burma's nonviolent struggle for freedom, sets down a remarkable series of conversations with one of the world's most respected leaders. In reading the book I was impressed by how fully she brings 'engaged Buddhism' to the forefront of her movement — a struggle that has become known as 'Burma's Revolution of the Spirit'. Having been a Buddhist monk in Rangoon for five years, and conversed with her (a devout Buddhist) over many months, could you say more about what she means by that expression, and how it has relevance to our own lives in the West?

Alan Clements: Aung San Suu Kyi, like Gandhi, King, the Dalai Lama, the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hahn and scores of other less famous spiritual-political leaders, is committed to using the power of truth and the power of heart as her weapons of choice, so to speak, in response to aggression, violence and war. Aung San Suu Kyi's 'revolution of the spirit' is just that - a revolution born from the spirit, unifying timeless spiritual truths with modern political realities. As she has said, "a people who would build a nation in which strong, democratic institutions are firmly established as a guarantee against state-induced power must first learn to liberate their own minds from apathy and fear." In that sense, the overcoming of apathy and fear is totally relevant to our lives.

Everyone knows how debilitating those insidious energies are, and equally, how difficult it is to liberate the mind from fear. Aung San Suu Kyi explains: "Fearlessness may be a gift but perhaps more precious is the courage acquired through endeavor, courage...from cultivating the habit of refusing to let fear dictate one's actions."

It is these twin qualities of courage and endeavor I so admire about her. There is something so beautiful about those dimensions to a person. They are the pillars of self-respect, dignity itself.

Michael Bertrand: In *The Voice of Hope* you and Aung San Suu Kyi speak a lot about Buddhism and Christianity, in fact you talk of a spirituality that transcends doctrine and goes to the heart of the matter — a freedom beyond dogma that places compassion first, an engagement with life and the world, not separated from them.

AC: Love and compassion as the motivation for spirit-in-action, is in my way of thinking, the basis for an authentic spiritual life. But in Burma, a nation presently ruled by a military dictatorship, with lethal force as their modus operandi, who promotes as policy a repressive climate of fear as a totalitarian measure of control, love and compassion vitally expressed through actions are not only necessary to further a vision of freedom, but such behaviors take on new dimension and depth.

Some people feel empowered by standing up for the values that we so commonly take for granted in the West. We all remember back in 1989 the lone man standing on the Avenue of Eternal Peace stopping the advancing column of tanks on route to Tiananmen Square. Obviously, that took courage. Such courage occurred in Burma when hundreds of students knelt down peacefully in front of armed soldiers and chanted, ‘we love you, you are our brothers, all we want is freedom and democracy.’

The results have become known as ‘the massacre of 8-8-88.’ Over three-thousand unarmed protestors were killed.

Atrocities of all kinds go on in Burma everyday.

KL: I’m amazed by reading your conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi that she continually seeks the best in others, including the regime itself, never casting them from her heart while genuinely seeking reconciliation. She’s not saying that these generals, despite their tortuous behavior are hopeless and therefore should be obliterated.

AC: She’s manifesting the very qualities that will allow for the trust that is needed to bring those generals to the table and start a genuine dialogue.

I think of the struggles we all face in our lives here in the West, and how easy it is at times to quarrel, blame and walk away. Clearly, there’s a major spiritual lesson for us all to learn here. I think of Jesus assisting the adulteress as she is about to be stoned by the angry mob of men and he says, “Let him who has not sinned cast the first stone.” Aung San Suu Kyi’s humility and tireless diligence in trying to bring about reconciliation is quite similar.

I think when one is willing to acknowledge his or her own shortcomings, one is much more able to accept the weaknesses of others. But if one is in the habit of denying their bad habits one tends to be rigid, hypocritical, unpleasant to be around.

I don’t know who said it but I read it recently and liked it; ‘I’d rather be imperfectly human than perfectly inhuman.’ Beneath the psychological masks people wear, those projected self-images, I think there is a sincere and tender heart in everyone. And it is our task in life, should we choose, to seek the beauty in everyone, and in so doing forgive those who have hurt us, and seek forgiveness with those we have hurt or offended. How else can there be love and peace in the world unless we learn to forgive.

And like everything else, forgiveness is a choice. It’s a form of compassion in action. Also, it is a choice to challenge apathy, anger and fear in the face of oppression, as it is a choice to speak out and act with as much love and compassion as possible.

Of course, the dark side of activism is self-righteousness, blame, and rage. That’s the razor’s edge of dharma in action which, in Aung San Suu Kyi’s case, makes her a worthy leader. Clearly she has a wellspring of love and compassion to draw upon in the face of insurmountable odds.

MB: Burma is 10,000 miles from our home. What would you say is the common link that bonds their struggle for freedom with the basic struggles most people deal with in the West?

AC: Everyone in the world wants to be happy, secure and satisfied. No one wants to be frightened. No one likes to live in need. So in that sense the common bond that links all humans is that intrinsic spiritual instinct to live 'free of fear and free of want'. And the mark of a truly civilized human being, is in one's own pursuit of freedom and also in what they do to safeguard and elevate the freedom of others. Essentially, this means fostering compassion in one's life.

I do think it's time that we came out of antiquated notions of self-realization as being license to keep one's eyes inverted only, to neglect the needy, the have nots, those folks who need a helping hand. I really liked what Vaclav Havel said about Aung San Suu Kyi calling her 'one the world's outstanding examples of the power of the powerless'. I think he's saying that no matter what, that true empowerment is rooted in love.

I live a few blocks from East Hastings and I frequently encounter alcoholics, drug addicts of all kinds lying stoned on the streets or walking around dazed in some form of drug psychosis. Its really awful. Sometimes they ask me for money or if I want sex or to buy drugs or on rare occasions they want to talk, and when I stop, they stop, and we hang a bit. And when I relax enough and stop conveying that I'm inconvenienced or in a hurry, I often see that it's love that they are asking for, not money alone. They are alone and in pain. And it seems to me that it takes courage to come out of one's isolation and to ask for love, albeit indirectly.

In fact, I think most people, rich and poor, are essentially asking for the same thing in life — love. And love is the willingness to open our hearts — opening it to that person right in front of us as best as we can.

Why put a limit on our greatest wealth as humans? Why be stingy with it? As Jesus said, 'Open your heart, not your mind.' And it is the mind that so often betrays the heart.

So true empowerment is the act of love or love in action. And love is the spring from which compassion flows. Love is the soul of dignity.

MB: I understand that you have written a personal appeal letter to Buddhists and caring tourists worldwide calling on them to boycott traveling to Burma, while encouraging them to become proactive in supporting the cause.

AC: Yes I have. We have some devoted volunteers sending the letter out via the internet daily. Like Tibet, Burma is a sister Buddhist country and one of the last remaining wisdom cultures on earth. It has a 2,500 year old unbroken lineage of the Buddha's teachings. As the dharma continues to come to the West from the East, and with so many of us who have benefitted directly by those teachings, I think it is our duty to support our spiritual elders, like any decent son or daughter would do for their parents, especially at a time when help is needed.

Having lived in the former-Yugoslavia for some time during the war I can appreciate more fully the need for help when it is actually needed, not only after the fact. Also, one can't help but think that it may very well be you or me needing help the next time.

Of every dollar one spends in Burma the vast majority goes into the pockets of the oppressors, thus supporting repression and genocide. It reminds me of what Gandhi said, "non-cooperation with evil is as important as cooperation with good." So our Burma Support or Burma Appeal letter is a way to make the need known and hopefully evoke compassionate action in support of the people of Burma.

Just the other day a Tibetan lady telephoned me. She explained that she fled her country in 1955 and lived in the squalor of Indian refugee camps for many years. She concluded by saying, 'it was in the camps that I learned what it meant to be the fantasy of someone's compassion rather than the reality of it'.

KL: On November 7th Banyan Books is sponsoring the Vancouver launch of your book *The Voice of Hope* in which you will give a public talk titled *The Awakening of Conscience*. Then on Saturday November 8 you will lead a half-day seminar called *The Courage to Care*. For the many readers unable to be there, would you please say a few words about the heart of what you'll present?

AC: The Awakening of Conscience is the stirring of one's heart to challenge myopic and egocentric thinking and open to the world around us, with the urge to help out. We will also look at the forces that keep us held back.

Drawing on Dostoevsky's words, "Beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and the devil are fighting there and, the battlefield is the heart of man", we will explore the human heart as the source of both activism and apathy.

The success of both events will be determined more by what happens when people leave, than when there. Because in the end it's love in action that counts, not just words.

But in all honesty, I just like to be near people who love to love. So I hope that whoever comes, they will come to share their beauty.

To excerpt "Instinct for Freedom" or "The Voice of Hope"
or interview the author, or for foreign rights, contact:

Alan Clements
www.everydayrevolution.org
www.WorldDharmaOnlineInstitute.com
www.AlanClements.com
www.WorldDharma.com

Email: contact@worlddharma.com