

The Voice of Hope

by Alan Clements

Conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi,
Burma's imprisoned Nobel Peace laureate
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PREFACE TO THE NEW EDITION

“We outside Burma cannot look away and ignore the plight of Burma's peoples. Our religious and philosophical teachings tell us that human suffering anywhere must be accepted as our own suffering. And our worldly experience convinces us that only practical political action can help end that suffering.”

—Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Vaclav Havel, leader of the non-violent Velvet Revolution of Czechoslovakia, says of his first becoming a political activist, “I stopped waiting for the world to improve and exercised my right to intervene in that world, or at least to express my opinion about it.” Howard Zinn, the great American author and human rights advocate, reminds us that, “at many of the key moments in history some of the bravest and most effective political acts were the sounds of the human voice itself.”

From Burma we now hear and see a powerful expression of these values: the power of the powerless; the activism of the human voice—the sound of conscience itself. In this predominantly Buddhist nation of 50 million people, many, at this very moment, risk their lives for the right to choose their destiny—freedom from the most brutal military regime in the world.

The Voice of Hope reveals one of the most politically ravaged, yet spiritually vibrant societies on earth. In conversation, Aung San Suu Kyi illuminates one of the most awe-inspiring, nonviolent revolutions in modern times. As Burma's democratically elected leader she remains, to this day, imprisoned by the violent military junta.

I first met this formidable human being in 1995, a few weeks after her release from six years of house arrest. Two additional long periods of incarceration were still to come. She told me, “Nothing has changed since my release ... Let the world know that we are still prisoners in our own country.”



Twelve years have passed since the first publication of this book.

Has anything changed in Burma?

On October 24, 2007 Aung San Suu Kyi entered her twelfth year of detention from her initial arrest on July 20, 1989. Several thousand other prisoners of conscience are presently incarcerated in Burmese prisons. Relentless ethnic cleansing—the murder, torture, and rape of minorities there—now leaves more than 3,000 villages destroyed. Nearly one million refugees have fled the country. One million more are internally displaced, subsisting in primitive, malaria-infested jungle conditions. Hundreds of thousands of Burmese citizens are enslaved as forced laborers: building roads, bridges, dams, and monuments for tourism. Millions are tyrannized by one of the largest standing armies in the world. Dictator Senior General Than Shwe commands 400,000 rank and file soldiers. As many as 70,000 of them are children: some are as young as eleven years old. In its totalitarian terror, Burma is an Orwellian nightmare. There is no regard for human rights. None. Burma remains a land of 50 million hostages—prisoners in their own country.

Has anything changed over twelve years?

There is one notable difference: the voices of hope are multiplying, fast.

Aung San Suu Kyi, in her own words, offers insight into the courage of the Burmese people. Despite her silence and isolation, both her voice and her presence infuse them with strength and a vision of freedom. “Those of us who decided to work for democracy in Burma,” she explains, “made our choice in the conviction that the danger of standing up for basic human rights in a repressive society was preferable to the safety of a quiescent life in servitude. Ours is a nonviolent movement that depends on faith in the human predilection for fair play and compassion. Some would insist that man is primarily an economic animal interested only in his material well-being. This is too narrow a view of a species which has produced numberless brave men and women who are prepared to undergo relentless persecution to uphold deeply held beliefs and principles. It is my pride and inspiration that such men and women exist in my country today.”

The protests in Burma between August 19 and October 2, 2007 confirm a nation’s unrelenting resistance to dictatorship. Their moral bravery stands as a new benchmark of nonviolent spiritual activism in the world. I, like millions of others, watched on television as robed monks risked their lives in hopes the world would help. Tens of thousands of Buddhist monks and nuns marched peacefully in the streets of their nation’s major cities. Infused with the moral authority of an unwavering belief in freedom, they protested an end to decades of tyranny, deprivation, and slavery.



For that moment in time the world stood still, enraptured by the elegance of nation-wide, spiritually-led revolution. An archetypal confrontation of opposing forces rose up—Buddhist monks chanting prayers of loving kindness towards rows of armed soldiers with their rifles poised to kill. The power of this vision continues to ripple around the world, spilling its message into our own lives. On September 21, at the peak of the protests, five hundred monks defied the regime’s threat of a crackdown. They marched past Aung San Suu Kyi’s home in Rangoon, chanting a sacred Buddhist prayer for “sending loving kindness towards all sentient beings.” To the surprise of the world, their democratically elected leader and the only incarcerated Nobel Peace Laureate somehow managed to briefly leave her home. She was seen crying at the gate of her walled compound as she reverentially lowered her head in prayer towards the monks. This was the first sighting of the imprisoned Aung San Suu Kyi since her 2003 re-entry into house arrest.



Over the next few days international headlines told a grim tale:

*Soldiers Fire on Peaceful Protesters, Killing and Arresting Monks.
The Killing Continues as the Regime Attacks Monasteries Nationwide.
Rangoon is Locked Down, Streets Silent, Monasteries Emptied.
Mass Arrests Continue Nightly, Reports of Torture Widespread.*

Awed. Saddened. Repulsed. Outraged. These are just a few of the emotions reflected in the media. World leaders echoed dismay. Millions of us remained fixated on the trickle of pictures, footage, and commentaries of the regime’s brutal assault on the monks and other protesters.

As smoke from the automatic rifles and tear gas lifted, the city streets emptied. Soldiers poised on almost every corner, the monks had disappeared. Shari Villarosa, the chief diplomat at the United States Embassy in Burma, issued a statement asserting, “We have pictures where whole monasteries have been trashed,” and “At least fifteen monasteries in Rangoon alone have been

totally emptied.” In another report, a dissident group stated that thousands of monks had been imprisoned in the north of the country. Monasteries emptied. In some, only broken glass and bloodstains remained.

International outcry results in little change. Numerous monasteries remain barricaded or under armed surveillance. Arrests continue nightly. Reports of torture and imprisonment persist. Many monks hide in the countryside, or remain missing. Country-wide, the state-run papers print propaganda, restrict internet access, jail journalists, harass photographers, censor writers and ban publications, making it impossible to know how many monks and protestors have been killed and are being tortured, and detained. No one believes the regime’s official body count of fifteen dead. The Norway-based Democratic Voice of Burma puts the death toll so far at 138. Many hundreds, perhaps thousands, more are injured, eerily reminiscent of the regime’s bloody response to the peaceful pro-democracy marches in 1988.



Mahatma Gandhi once said, “When I despair, I remember that all through history the ways of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants, and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it—always.”

Is there hope, really?

On the one hand, the travesty in Burma elicits easy comparisons to China’s brutal suppression of democracy at Tiananmen Square. Or further to the horrors of Darfur. Or that of Pinochet’s murderous reign of terror in Chile. On the other hand, Burma’s “revolution of the spirit,” as Aung San Suu Kyi often refers to her country’s struggle for democracy, offers an opportunity like “the miracle in South Africa,” or the lightening-speed fall of Romania’s Nicolae Ceausescu. Or Havel’s Velvet Revolution. Or the mass pro-democracy demonstrations that flooded Belgrade and eventually delivered Slobadon Molosivic to the War Crime’s Tribunal.

Yes, there is hope.

This is how I see it.

At the heart of Burma’s revolution is a life-transforming metaphor, a candle of hope illuminating this totalitarian darkness. Its unrelenting flicker, when expanded to a blaze, offers the power to ignite the thunder-flame of conscience in everyone. It reveals an invitation to rise in spirit and take action — an invitation to support not just Burma and Aung San Suu Kyi, but the message of freedom and the belief in hope. Thus, may we join what is perhaps the most courageous and the most compelling spiritually-inspired, nonviolent revolution the world has ever seen. “Feel always free,” Aung San Suu Kyi encourages everyone who dares to enter the revolution. “Nobody can detain [your] mind, though they can detain [your] body...master your mind [and] nobody can abuse you. We need to remember this... Feel always free.”

How to accept this invitation to be free?

How to join Burma's revolution of the spirit?

Meeting Aung San Suu Kyi was one of the most memorable experiences of my life. I had many questions. One of the first questions I asked was, what core quality could make your country's revolution successful when confronted by such overwhelming military might? Without equivocation she answered, "Courage! You were outside on the street when I spoke to the people. There were Buddhists in the crowd, as well as Hindus, Christians, and Muslims. All of them want the same thing: Freedom. They risk long prison terms, even torture, to participate. That takes courage."

She told me about the nature of courage. "It takes courage to lift one's eyes up from their own needs and to see the truth of the world around them, a truth, such as Burma, where there are no human rights. It takes even more courage not to turn away, to make excuses for noninvolvement, or to be corrupted by fear. It takes courage to feel the truth, to feel one's conscience. Because once you do you must engage your fundamental purpose for being alive. You can't just expect to sit idly by and have freedom handed to you. Liberation will not be achieved this way. Our revolution will be successful only when everyone realizes they can do their part. In this regard, courage is three-fold: The courage to see. The courage to feel. And the courage to act. If all three domains are realized our revolution will succeed."



General Than Shwe (left), Aung San Suu Kyi (right)
(Photo credit: AFP/File)

After years of persecution, Aung San Suu Kyi continually stressed the importance of everyday revolution—the art and activism of expressing liberation through living. "Love is an action, not just a mind state," Aung San Suu Kyi told me. "It is not enough to just sit there and send thoughts of loving-kindness. One must put that love into action."

My experiences in Burma showed me what is possible when conscience is stirred, when good people care deeply enough to act on behalf of the greater good. Years later, watching these most recent monk-led uprisings, I realize that Burma's struggle for democratic freedom is in fact a microcosm of the larger picture—the world's struggle to overcome tyranny, to end violence, and to establish free societies.

I realize that continuing to hope is in fact an act of tremendous resistance. All these years of growing and nurturing a revolution have brought Burma closer and closer to a democratic country—one that is more benevolent and compassionate. This is expressed in the countless daily acts of courage which help to preserve self-respect and human dignity over the many long years under the tyranny of oppression. Aung San Suu Kyi's nonviolent revolution of the

spirit offers us—the global community—an awe-inspiring model of how to peacefully engage complexity and tyranny. It offers the potential to bring about true social and political change. It is my firm belief that through innovative expressions of nonviolent activism—our own unique expressions of everyday revolution—the world will be a much safer and better place to live. And we will see a liberated Burma, a freed Aung San Suu Kyi, and a nation offering the world community a new, more enlightened expression of democracy. This democracy will have a human face; one that embodies dialogue over domination, kindness over cruelty, and compassion over killing.

Ultimately, the revolution in Burma is a directional challenge to us all: the voice of democratic decency everywhere versus the machinery of repression. It is a message for our planet.

How can we make Burma's revolution of the spirit our personal revolution? The answer is in our own, insistent voice of hope. Together with Aung San Suu Kyi, I pray that one day we will live in a world that celebrates a liberated Burma.

Alan Clements
November, 2007

“We have faith in the power to change what needs to be changed but we are under no illusion that the transition from dictatorship to liberal democracy will be easy, or that democratic government will mean the end of all our problems. We know that our greatest challenges lie ahead of us and that our struggle to establish a stable, democratic society will continue beyond our own life span. But we know that we are not alone. The cause of liberty and justice finds sympathetic responses around the world. Thinking and feeling people everywhere, regardless of color or creed, understand the deeply rooted human need for a meaningful existence that goes beyond the mere gratification of material desires. Those fortunate enough to live in societies where they are entitled to full political rights can reach out to help their less fortunate brethren in other areas of our troubled planet.”

—Aung San Suu Kyi



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Tel: 604-251-1781

www.everydayrevolution.org

Email: contact@worldddharma.com