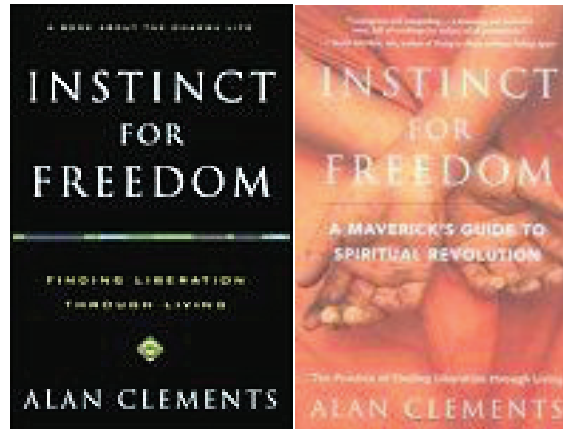


Instinct *for* Freedom

A Book About Everyday Revolution —
Finding Liberation Through Living

by Alan Clements



[excerpt pps 156 - 160]

OUR PRESENCE IS ALL WE HAVE

So, with my begging bowl, a sitting cloth, a shaving razor, and a passport, I flew across the Bay of Bengal on a one-way ticket to Calcutta. I had no idea what I would do. I had no money. As a monk I was not allowed to even touch it. Oddly, I felt safe, protected, and strangely secure. I took refuge in the reality that our presence is all that we have.

And so began the next leg of my Dharma odyssey. A few hours later I stepped off the plane in Calcutta. Eighteen hours before I was what felt like a hair's breadth from enlightenment and now I was walking into a city of twenty million people, dodging rickshaws. Traffic spewed exhaust through intersections stuffed wall-to-wall with people, while cows, goats, and dogs nipped at my robes and heels.

After a free bus ride I got out and walked across the Howrah Bridge — the gateway to the city. Entering Calcutta at any hour is like entering a surreal humanscape of samsaric carnage: legs and arms unimaginably twisted and bent, or missing; beggars squatting, lying, and dying in the gutters; others sleeping against walls, oblivious to the death and squalor all around them; entire communities of families living on cardboard boxes covered with plastic or scrap wood. Under the ramps, along the river banks, in every conceivable square foot of earth and pavement were people, barely clinging to life. Calcutta is raw and exposed, undoubtedly one of the great unmasked windows into the dark heart of reality. With running water often limited to two thirty-minute periods a day, and with electricity blackouts up to eight hours at a time, sometimes five days a week, it's hard to imagine that it all kept going, but it did.

I kept walking, passing exotic markets and shops with magnificent embroidered fabrics and gorgeous women in their colorful saris. Beyond the filth I noticed flowers everywhere. Almost every shop had a vase full and almost every woman had some in her hair.

There were old mansions built by the British. Some had chauffeur-driven cars parked in front them,

while groups of beggars groped and knocked on their blackened windows hoping for a face of compassion.

Magnificent temples were as plentiful as churches in Kansas City. Each had its pantheon of statues of every variation and size, dedicated to every Hindu God and deity there ever was.

As I continued walking I encountered a number of lepers whose hands had been reduced to bloody festering nubs. Their presence touched me. I asked myself if could manifest the same quality of kindness that my own caretakers showed me when I was ill? I couldn't help thinking what it would have been like for me not to have been cared for.

As I walked on with one leper's hand in my face I reflected on a time when Sayadaw U Pandita explained to me that "if you want to develop compassion you have to make the suffering of another your own. Allow your heart to quiver. Allow it to be touched. To open!"

"Before you turn away," he said, "put yourself in their body, their mind, and pause. Feel their condition as your own. If fear arises, challenge it. If disgust arises, challenge it too. Challenge any thought that tells you it's wrong or that it is too much. Remain determined in your effort. You must see the situation as opportunity — for your own liberation and their happiness, too. Then ask yourself, what can be done to ease this person's pain, their struggle? What act can you do to help?"

"Compassion," he went on to say, "cannot be considered complete by merely feeling the suffering of another as one's own. Compassion must be accompanied by action. Compassion is a behavior, not just a thought."

Fighting my own fear and revulsion, I turned to look directly at the face of the leper beside me. For a moment before he moved away, we shared a breath of existence together.

Now that I was abruptly back in the world my teacher's explanation of compassion became a guiding principle. This brought greater clarity to the Buddha's encouragement to make each person you meet the most sacred place for spiritual awakening, for without people liberation would not be possible.

A few hours later, after it had become dark, I came across a child, perhaps only eight years old. She was carrying what looked like a dead infant in her arms — eyes begging, hungry — her outstretched hand was in desperate search of a few pennies. I'd seen some pretty terrible sights before, but nothing quite like this. She just stood there. Our eyes locked. I had no money. After a few moments I reached into my shoulder bag, pulled out a piece of palm sugar, which I carried with me to quiet the hunger, and placed it in her hand. Instantly her fingers grasped tightly around it. Expressionless, she ran off as the infant's arms dangled in the air like a doll.

I walked on, stunned, wondering, who was this God, this great intelligence emanating totality, that allowed the poverty, disease, and suffering I saw everywhere around me? Why is the world like this? What determines our fate?

Samsara spews forth existence in a continuous display of mind-boggling variation. Perhaps the why is unknowable. Is it random? Is it some lawful chaotic karmic symmetry? Or is life really a dream, like so many holy people would like us to believe, and our only salvation is to wake up, and wake again and again until we've unveiled the last illusion of separate identity? Is it true that life is a holographic emptiness? In that case is horror just God's cosmic play to wake his or her children up?

I don't think I had ever really questioned my motives for embracing a spiritual life, beyond overcoming my own suffering, until I walked as a monk into Calcutta. It was here that I felt the impact of asking, "What does really matter, and why?"

THE WEIRDNESS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

I stayed a few months in Calcutta, living on the street in the Kali Ghat area of the city, near the Black Hole, where the poorest of the poor lived. I chose the area because it was near Mother Teresa's Center for the Destitute and Dying. At first I thought I might help out but opted for the weirdness of everyday life on the street instead. After some adjustments I blended right in. I slept outside, often sitting up against a wall all night. I had learned the technique in Burma from an old monk who hadn't slept lying down for fifty years. It was surprising

how restful it was.

As a monk, the locals generously brought me food and rice. In the evenings I would often chant with the local Hindu holy men sitting around a campfire. Occasionally I'd visit Mother Teresa's center, but for the most part I preferred to stay on my own. Most nights were spent at the local burning ghat, where I would peer into the flames for hours, watching as a body was cremated in any one of the dozens of fires that raged around the clock. The experience was sobering. It disavowed me of a certain attraction and attachment to form, appearances, and flesh. One moment these people were alive and in the next they were dead. Just like that, in an instant, life was severed and came to an end. This proximity to death was freeing.

Overall, my time in Calcutta was interesting. In some ways I felt more liberated on the street than I did in meditation in the monastery. There was something so weirdly pure and organic about it. No clocks. No schedule. No contrivances at all. With so much death and poverty all around, life was raw and unmasked. This touched me deeply.

One morning I was stopped by an American couple. Once they realized I was a Westerner, their faces piqued with curiosity and they greeted me with an enthusiastic namaste, a Hindu greeting that means I honor the God in you as the same God in me. The man startled me with a piercing and shiftless gaze. I was amazed at how irritated I became. How easy it was to love a beggar, I thought, especially in comparison to a self-assured, wealthy, overly spiritualized American stranger.

After telling him that "as a Buddhist I don't do eye," he backed off, apologized, and introduced himself and his girlfriend. Both of them had Hindu god names, similar to Ram Dass, the former Harvard professor who wrote the book *Be Here Now*. In fact, they may have been from that same spiritual scene. A portrait of a large bald Indian man wrapped in a blanket dangled from the mala beads they wore as necklaces.

The man proceeded to explain how they were lost and needed directions on how to get to Mother Teresa's Center for the Destitute and Dying. As I was giving them instructions we naturally began to chat about ourselves. We were, after all, fellow Americans, living in a foreign land.

He gleefully shared how they owned a home in Mill Valley — an affluent town just across the Golden Gate Bridge north of San Francisco. Although they didn't say it they looked to be in their early forties. She said they were both psychotherapists with Ph.D.'s in clinical psychology, each with a large private practice. They did yoga, ate vegan, and kept journals. They were both articulate and good-looking. And they both looked like they had been in India for some time. He had a scraggly beard, wore Indian-style white clothing, a vest, and Birkenstocks with socks. She wore a Tibetan dress with dozens of silver bangles on both arms and a small diamond stud through her nose.

I must have looked even weirder to them than they did to me. I was bald, in orange robes, and barefoot. And I'm sure they were judging me as much as I was judging them. The only difference may have been that I felt justified in my judgment of them whereas they had nothing on me. At least I was authentic, I told myself. They were just looking the part. Although I didn't realize it at the time, I think we judge in others that which we either deny or dislike in ourselves. After a while he explained how they had been in India for about a year "looking for the real thing."

"We just got fed up with the West-coast spiritual scene," he said. "Been there done that." She nodded sympathetically in agreement.

"What's wrong with it?" I asked curiously. "It's been about two years since I've been there."

"You're not missing anything," he replied, carving a look of disgust.

"Yeah . . . we've tried it all," she said.

"We did 'breath work.' Why pay a lot of money to hyperventilate and cry your way through a cathartic circus act?" he asked rhetorically.

"Too much Mommy-Daddy stuff," she said with a smirk.

"We also did primal scream. They should update their work a bit," he said sarcastically.

"Did vipassana too. Hard work! Strange too! Here we were expected to sit still in meditation all day and the guy leading the retreat is never in the meditation hall himself. Seemed more like a gig to him than anything

sacred.”

“Now our psychoanalysis was good. Some real deep stuff came out.” She nodded in agreement.

“More recently,” he said, “we’ve had some private sessions with a great guide, using MDMA — Ecstasy. Amazing stuff.

“You ever use it?” he asked. “We’ve got some if you want it.”

“What’s it do?” I asked.

“It brings you into the now . . . and opens your heart too,” she said with a warm smile as if transfixed by the memory.

“Not just that,” he added, “it brings you in close to the truth of who you are beneath your denial and defenses. It’s been the most important therapeutic opening tool I’ve ever come across.”

“Then again,” he said, pausing in a moment of reflection, “the healing process has just begun.” They both looked at each other and nodded in agreement.

Healing process, I thought to myself. What are they talking about? Are they ill? I had never heard the word “healing” used in a spiritual context. It confused me.

“I don’t mean to intrude, but are you both sick?” I asked cautiously, but seriously.

Startled by the question, she spoke up. “No, of course not. Why do you ask? Do we look sick?”

“You just said you were both in a healing process. I thought maybe you were ill.” I was thoroughly confused.

They looked at each other and laughed. “No, we’re not sick,” she said. “What he meant was that we’ve both uncovered a lot of past hurts. Old Wounds, you know. Traumas from childhood. We’re in the process of healing them — working them through.

“See, I had an extremely unavailable father, and he had a very controlling mother. It’s been a long battle trying to overcome their influence.”

“Frankly, he still gets attracted to other women,” she said as if fighting a rancid memory. “Let me tell you . . . we’ve had our rounds on this issue. He can’t seem to integrate his anima.”

Rather than reacting he twisted a smile and said, “Oh . . . that doesn’t happen anymore. But still, it’s part of who I am. I’ve told you all along. What do you expect me to do, just turn that part of me off and pretend that you are the only girl who turns me on?”

“What did you say?” she tossed back. “Are you trying to impress the monk?”

“Can’t bear the truth?” he asked. “I thought you were committed to the process?”

At that moment a leper walked up to us. Asking for money, he held up his arm to show us the pulpy stump of hand where his fingers used to be. She was so infuriated that she was oblivious to the leper. “You asshole. You always make it sound like I’m attacking you. You speak about your need for assertiveness and autonomy, and the truth is you hide behind your rhetoric. You’re a spiritual fraud.”

How interesting I thought to myself. I like that term. It had never dawned on me that I may be one too. Suddenly my interest was stirred.

“Fraud, my ass,” he said.

As they shouted back and forth the beggar continued to ask for a few coins, saying, “You have everything, I have nothing, a few pisa [pennies] please.”

“You always do this to me,” she yelled. “And now in public, too!”

“And me? I’m never enough for you . . . just being me,” he retaliated.

Meanwhile, I stood there judging them for being oblivious to the beggar and thinking how they both need to get into long-term meditation, if someone would have them.

Suddenly the man turned from his girlfriend and shouted at the beggar, “Go away!”

Looking back at her, he says, “Look what you’ve done.”

“I haven’t done anything. I’m just being myself. Screw you.”

As the beggar walked away she turned to me and in an apologetic tone said, “We’re really sorry about this.”

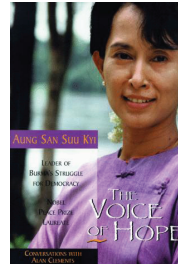
“Yeah, truly” he said. “Anyway, you were saying . . . which is the way to Mother Teresa’s?”

As they walked off I thanked them both in mind for giving me the gift of being more aware of the “consciousness raising” movement sweeping American culture, a movement that would soon begin to invade Asia. My encounter with the Americans had been upsetting on a number of levels and it emboldened me to isolate myself even further.

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