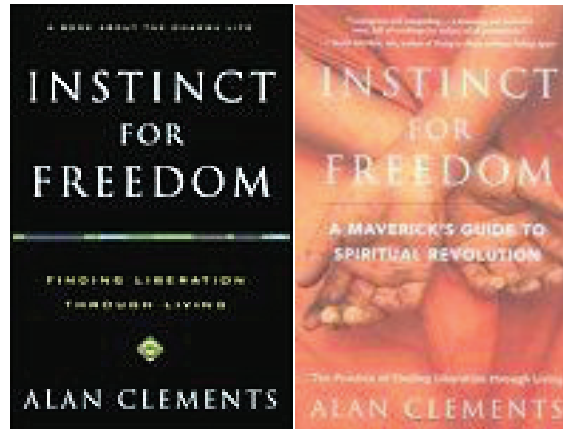


Instinct *for* Freedom

A Book About Everyday Revolution —
Finding Liberation Through Living

by Alan Clements



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**WORLD DHARMA - A FORMER MONK LOOKS BEYOND BUDDHISM -
AN INTERVIEW WITH ALAN CLEMENTS**

by Jeannie Davis

Alan Clements was the first American to have ordained as a Buddhist monk in the country of Burma, where he lived in a monastery in Rangoon during the 1970s and '80s. During those years Alan trained in classical Buddhist psychology (Abhidhamma) and Vipassana Bhavana (insight meditation) with the late Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw and his successor, Venerable Sayadaw U Pandita.

Since 1989, Clements has expanded his teaching beyond classical Buddhism to become an evocative spokesperson for the transformation of consciousness as the basis of freedom, lecturing and teaching retreats worldwide. His contemporary understanding of World Dharma and its expression through social and political activism has brought him international recognition. Mr. Jack Healy, the former director of Amnesty International, has called Alan “one of the most important and compelling voices of our times.”

A number of years ago Clements decided to take an extended sabbatical, opting to live in some highly volatile areas of the world — first, in the jungles of Burma to witness and document a genocide of the ethnic minorities by the military dictatorship, which he wrote about in his first book in 1991, “Burma: The Next Killing Fields?” Then, he went to Croatia and Bosnia for nearly a year where he wrote the screenplay “Burning,” while consulting with members of the UN and NGOs on the role of human consciousness in politics and peace.

In 1995 he returned to Burma where he co-authored “The Voice of Hope,” a book of conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma’s (imprisoned) Nobel Peace laureate and the leader of her country’s nonviolent struggle for freedom. Clements is also the co-author, with Leslie Kean, of “Burma’s Revolution of the Spirit,” with a foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Clements was the script revisionist and advisor for “Beyond Rangoon,” a feature film depicting Burma’s struggle for democracy, directed by John Boorman. Alan has been interviewed on ABC Nightline, CBS Evening News, CBC, VOA, the New York Times, London Times, Time and Newsweek magazines, and scores of other media worldwide.

Jeannine Davies: The Dalai Lama has said “we must all find a new spirituality ...one that is more human... addressing human needs and human issues.” Isn’t this a remarkable statement, coming from the most respected Buddhist teacher in the world?

Alan Clements: It is interesting that such a major religious leader is asking us to find a new, more human spirituality. Perhaps he has seen that people have become indoctrinated in dogma, and have missed the meaning.

JD: You founded the World Dharma website and you are writing a new book, *Instinct for Freedom —A World Dharma Beyond Sectarianism, Dogma and Indoctrination*. Is this an attempt to create this “new spirituality?”

AC: Since I’m no longer a monk, World Dharma was born from my own changes, not from a need to create a “new spirituality.” That would be a job for a Dalai Lama, not an ordinary ex-monk like me. World Dharma is an English-Sanskrit hybrid, which means: ‘the synergy of life meeting life, or the wisdom of shared presence—a way of discovering and embodying freedom through living fully in context, to self, subselves, others, life itself.’ This approach to life, encompassing the psychological, spiritual, existential, social and political, is opposite to the Buddhist monastic model of renouncing possessions and worldly behaviors. We need to demystify Western Buddhism in order for it to become more accessible, more real and human.

JD: What will keep your ideas from becoming just another form of spiritual indoctrination?

AC: I’m interested in a new genre of spirituality, not a doctrine. World Dharma can be likened to the World Music movement, whereby autonomous musical traditions, each with their own integrity, jam together, creating synergy, a fresh new sound that is greater than the individual musicians who created it.

In other words, empowering relationships are the most sacred place for our awakening. Whereby we bring the dharma—the most wise and dignified constituents of consciousness—to the forefront of beingness with others and dynamically interrelate, creating synergy, a more expansive expression of freedom than any one of the individuals.

JD: How, in this process, does one guard against the dangers of rigid fundamentalism or spiritual indoctrination?

AC: By looking at self-deception. People can unwittingly weave themselves into a cocoon of false ideas, all the while assuming they’re free. It’s very Orwellian. Noam Chomsky, one of the world’s leading intellectuals, has written extensively on indoctrination and the role of propaganda. In *Thought Control in Democratic Societies* he explains how “the powers that be” use “misinformation and propaganda to manufacture consent,” whereby one is unknowingly manipulated into believing lies that function to support the needs of the elite.

He also outlines modes of self-defense —tools to safeguard one from becoming a political puppet or a spiritual sheep—namely, sharpening self-inquiry, critical analysis, and independent thinking, the basics of a smart spiritual life.

JD: The Dalai Lama’s new book, *Ethics for a New Millennium*, articulates a set of values that could be

embraced by everyone, irrespective of their religion. Is your approach similar?

AC: The Dalai Lama's book is brilliant. But imagine if he went so far as to transcend Tibetan Buddhism altogether, not just in an ethical sense, but in every sense, becoming a universal warrior who transcends the 'ism' that even formed him. After all, the historical Buddha who attained enlightenment 26 centuries ago wasn't sitting under the tree after his attainment saying, "this part of me will teach an aspect of my enlightenment that only the Tibetan's will follow, while this other, more rich and deep part of me I will name Dzogchen, the 'secret teachings' reserved only for the most advanced of my followers; and this part will be called Vipassana, and I'll keep it for the most pedantic or neurotic; and then I'll piece up the rest of me in such a way that hundreds of sects will develop, all in my name, who will disagree over the 'real teachings' for millennia to come." This is not even taking into account the numerous other spiritual traditions and what they have to say, which is often quite contrary to classical Buddhism. When is someone going to pull the plug on this story? We need to see beyond our indoctrination.

JD: What is at the core of the dharma, as you see it?

AC: Delving with awareness into the matrix of consciousness, understanding the dynamic interplay of being and doing at the confluence of the inner and outer, with eyes wide open, and a heart willing to feel into the truth, not just protecting one's opinion of it. This is the essence. It's where freedom is gained or lost.

JD: Didn't the Buddha say that mind is the forerunner of all thought, speech and action?

AC: I think what you are referring to is found in the first stanza of the Dhammapada, and attributed to the Buddha. Consciousness is it. The world forms on the senses, through the six windows of perception—the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. Here is where we form identities, create myths, and fabricate illusions. It is where separation occurs, values are forged, and principles shaped.

Dostoevsky said "Beauty is mysterious as well as terrible, God and the Devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man." By realizing that consciousness, or the heart, is the source of our world, a radical self-responsibility arises and true empowerment begins. As my teachers in Burma would say, "to know the mind is the most important task of your life. And to know mind is to know the world." Entering this great inner battle is both humbling and exhilarating. It leaves one both scared and in love, at the same time.

JD: Why is living at this edge a more truthful way of seeing the world?

AC: I'll give you an example from my own experience. I lived in the former Yugoslavia for some time during their war and witnessed staggering levels of suffering. But one day I was jolted awake, shaken from my somewhat blind or unquestioned relationships to faith, dogma, doctrine, Buddhism, and other fears and fantasies that had no real basis in my direct personal experience.

I was driving back to Sarajevo one afternoon from Srebrenica, the town where 7,000 Bosnian Muslims were slaughtered. I was with my friend Marcia Jacobs from the International Rescue Committee. After hours of driving through bombed out villages, we stopped by the side of the road to take a break. In a nearby field some men were digging. We walked over and found a mass grave—a pit of putrefying human flesh. It was heart wrenching and frightening. We gasped from the stench.

Protruding from the ground I noticed an exposed hand with a ring on one of the fingers, glistening in the sunlight. There was no way of telling whether it was a man or woman, but the ring symbolized for me a marriage, a bond of love, not just to another, but to God, to a life beyond racism, prejudices, and all forms of separation. To me the ring symbolized a marriage to the world, to dharma, and to the laws that govern this terrifying and beautiful existence which is so sick, so mysterious, so large, so utterly mad and gorgeous. At that

moment, I realized that no matter what I knew or how free I assumed myself to be, my heart had a lot more room to open and for wisdom to grow. I asked myself, was it possible to rectify the split of god and devil in one's own heart? Could I transcend love and hatred, good and evil, this world and nirvana? In that moment the notion of spiritual transcendence seemed preposterous and inhuman. The dharma was a means to embody our humanness, not to nullify it. I wanted god and the devil to kiss, not disappear as if they were a dream. Forgiveness suddenly seemed more important than the transcendence of duality.

JD: Are you suggesting that spiritual freedom is found through these human responses.

AC: I'm suggesting that our spiritual path should serve our humanness, not our projections of perfection.

In 1989 I led a morning insight meditation group at a conference in Los Angeles headlined by the Dalai Lama, who had just received the Nobel peace prize. He told the story of a monk in Tibet who he greatly admired. The Dalai Lama explained that this monk, known as "the Weeper" was given his name because he was so attuned to the suffering of others that he often wept. The Dalai Lama was deeply inspired by the Weeper's highly developed compassion.

Now, weeping all the time isn't your typical, well-adjusted Buddhist stereotype. In fact, in many spiritual circles one might be evaluated as traumatized, in denial of childhood dysfunction, and very likely be given Prozac and put into psychotherapy. Yet this weeping monk was an inspiration to the Dalai Lama himself.

I was moved by this story. Now, after so many years of pursuing a path of transcendence, both of self and suffering, I'm more compelled to actually "be myself" and feel the suffering, as well as enjoy the joy. It's a much more natural way of connecting to the essence of mind, which is innately clear, wise and good. This is the role of meditation, or Bhavana in the Pali language, which means relaxing into the naturally unfolding beauty of consciousness.

JD: What is most urgently needed in the world today?

AC: A "revolution of the spirit" born from a conviction that lasting change occurs when we learn how to overcome our own fear and self-deception. It was Aung San Suu Kyi and the people of Burma who introduced me to this style of revolution. In Burma the non-violent struggle for freedom against the dictatorship is called a "revolution of the spirit." It's a revolution rooted in inquiry and self-honesty. By facing the truth, one is in the best position to act from love and integrity rather than from fear.

The key to that revolution is courage, having the heart to question lies, propaganda and deception, while empowering one's self as sovereign over the spiritual state of one's own mind, and therefore achieving victory over the regime in power.

Courage is the root of all things great, having the heart to enter conflict with soul enough to forgive. The miracle of non-retribution happened in South Africa, where for three years the Truth Council, headed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, encouraged testimony of bombings, maimings, murders and other atrocities committed during decades of apartheid. He told the people that "forgiveness was the only thing possible to end the bloodshed and make a new beginning." That is having the courage to forgive.

JD: Your Buddhist training began in Burma, but now you're blacklisted from Burma by the regime, because of your book of conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi, *The Voice of Hope*. Is that difficult?

AC: At times, yes, it is painful, but many people in Burma risk their lives daily for principles and values that provide a dignified existence. Their plight provides me with perspective on the little struggles I face.

The problems people face in the West are precisely opposite of those experienced by someone like Aung San Suu Kyi. We are also governed by a social structure which perpetuates inequities and political corruption, but in the absence of an identifiable enemy such as a brutal military dictatorship. Instead, we face

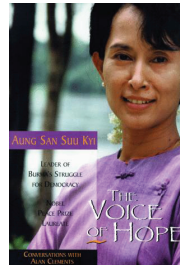
a plague of apathy and anguish and a slow erosion of awareness. This is why meditation, evolving the skill to awaken awareness, is so necessary and precious. I have no doubt that it is the most effective means by which to transform all things for the better. It is because of the great need to counter indifference, hopelessness, and cynicism that I teach and why I feel meditation has individual, social and political relevance.

Jeannine Davies is a Ph.D candidate in Psychology, Modern Physics, and Consciousness, as well as a writer and free-lance journalist specializing in contemporary Eastern spirituality and Western psychology.

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Additional books by Alan Clements



The Voice of Hope - Conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi,
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