

# Spiritual Anarchy

An Interview with Alan Clements

## Free Radio Santa Cruz with John Malkin

Santa Cruz, California

January 14, 2004 \*

John Malkin: *“If you assume that there is no hope, you guarantee that there will be no hope. If you assume that there is an instinct for freedom, that there is an opportunity to change things, then there is a chance that you may contribute to making a better world. That is your choice.”*

*Why did you choose to open a book that explores the confluence of consciousness and activism with this quote?*

Alan Clements: Because I loved it: it illuminated the matrix of my being—the core intelligence of where I find my deepest sense of meaning. Freedom; consciously choosing to live it and give it.

After completing the book I hadn't yet decided on a title. I then came across this quote, which is actually from Professor Noam Chomsky—the radical human rights activist and linguistics scholar from MIT—and it just clicked. “If there's a purpose to existence,” I thought, “a guiding wisdom at the core of the organism, it is this urge for freedom—an instinct to liberate the heart from all obstacles, real or imaged.”

As humans, we're clearly driven by a variety of primal urges: the urge for security, the urge for survival, the urge for sustenance, and sleep. And as social animals we need each other to survive. So it seems to be that we also have this instinct to be close to one another—co-mingle, if you will—to feel, emote, to procreate.

On a deeper, perhaps more fundamental level, we also seem to have this primordial urge—our instinct for freedom. And if we believe that instinct to be true, and imbue it with discernment and compassion, we educate the instinct's expression in the world; we mature and evolve our understanding of freedom.

As our ability to choose refines, we can choose freedom—contributing to making a better world.

Look at it this way: as an artist chooses colors, we can consciously choose states of consciousness. And just as an artist mixes their chosen colors, so too can we mix states of mind—mixing colors of consciousness, so to speak, and therefore, more consciously actualize our visions and dreams, creating a more nuanced world of relationships and interactions.

*But first one must know the colors of consciousness on the palate of their own interior being, so to speak?*

Alan Clements: In the knowing there's freedom. As such, one can freely choose to challenge the presence of any afflictive state of consciousness that may arise; mind states, such as fear, arrogance, and deception.

Equally, one can choose to inhabit love or human goodness. Or peace and tranquility, for that matter. One can choose compassion and one can choose to restrain anger.

We can freely choose anything. We can choose dignity. We can restrain fear. Emotions are states of mind—colors of consciousness—and as energies they are imprinted with potentialities. They have power; the power to define who and what we are in any given moment of existence.

The emotional architecture inherent within any moment of consciousness determines one's actions. This is why choosing the blueprint of freedom—a freedom designed by compassion and conscientious co-existence—is perhaps the finest art of all.

Freedom to me, is the lifeblood of civilized existence. To take away one's freedom, one often suffers the greatest loss. So the honoring of our instinct for freedom is just the art of living freely. An art that also honors the freedom of others. Which brings up a crucial point.

Freedom is a tortured term today. George Bush has made it the mantra of his government. He used it thirty-four times in his twenty-eight minute State of Union address awhile back. And as we have seen, the President has an extremely warped and perverse understanding of its meaning.

Freedom fuels the President's Jihad—his evangelical Christian, corporate crusade to rid the world of his idea of evil-doers. You might say, he's spiritually dyslectic. He calls fascism freedom and cruelty compassion. He's made Christ his poster boy for capitalism, and turned killing into a corporate cash cow. All, of course, in the name of Iraqi freedom. And as I understand the meaning of freedom, it does not mean licence to kill, even if that killing is couched in concepts like collateral damage.

Something is missing in the President's understanding, and among the missing elements, I'd say it's conscience. Which is the very soul of consciousness. Conscience to me is the spiritual intelligence inherent in the human psyche that informs one's instinct for freedom to actually make wise choices that elevate life, elevate dignity, and elevate human rights.

Conscience also is the spiritual intelligence to refrain from behaviors and choices that denigrate life, dignity, and human rights. Conscience is the queen of consciousness. It's the benevolent feminine in each of us. Call it the Great Mother within. It nurtures. Protects. Consoles. Embraces. Conscience gives life, doesn't harm it.

*I'd glad you brought up Bush. If I may, I'd like to come back to him and his so-called war on terror a bit later in the interview. For now, I'd like to further explore the meaning of freedom.*

*Sometimes it seems that in politics the method by which freedom is sought is quite different than in spirituality. Often in spirituality, freedom means a "letting go" of worldly concerns, while in politics, freedom can mean engaging the material, adding more laws, rules or ideas, and dissuading others from infringing on your freedom.*

*Two questions: would you say more about how you understand the meaning of freedom. And secondly, where do politics and spirituality meet?*

Alan Clements: Let me answer you first saying: if there's a silver lining in the Bush government, and this is a stretch, but with his insistence on "spreading freedom," we have a remarkable opportunity to instigate a national and international dialogue about its meaning. What does freedom really mean, in all dimensions, in all its senses: physical, spiritual, molecular, economic, environmental, social, sexual, sub-molecular, religious, trans-religious, cosmological, and of course, political as well.

What does freedom mean, in truth; beyond the war-mongering rhetoric of white-right-wing evangelical Republicans; beyond the psycho-pathetic Jihadist propaganda; beyond the manipulative misinformation of Madison Avenue marketers intent on manufacturing a synthetic society of moving mouthing mannequins programmed to shop until they drop; a freedom that is free of dogma, censorship, and compromise. What does freedom really mean? What are its features? Its disguises? How can we really know it and distinguish it from fear, complicity, and crime?

On a basic political level, freedom points to our inalienable rights as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This three page document, drafted in the United Nations in 1948 by John Peters Humphrey of Canada and seven other members of an international panel, including contributors from Lebanon, France, the United States, and China, enshrined thirty articles of humankind's essential freedoms expressly inherent to "all people in the human family...without distinction."

This document, translated into more languages than any other document in the world, was intended to be discussed and posted in daily and civic life the world over in order to prevent the scourge of war from ever happening again.

These rights include freedom from slavery and torture, freedom from arbitrary arrest and detention, freedom of expression, conscience, religion, opinion, and movement. It delineates the right to have a nationality, a standard of living, an education, to participate in government, to choose marriage, to work, and to rest and leisure.

While the Declaration does not now bear the full weight of rule of law, it calls with authority for responsibility by power and protection from its abuses. It supports a world conscience combined with action in which “human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want ... proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.”

Sadly, this document is perhaps the most abused document on earth today. And even more tragic, is that we as a nation—The United States of America—are currently forcibly occupying both Iraq and Afghanistan, and in so doing, obliterating life and land, all of course, in the name of “spreading freedom.” And this is totally contrary to the Declaration of Human Rights. It’s totally contrary to civilized behavior. It’s uncivilized, full stop.

Take our situation, right now, on Radio Free Santa Cruz. We’re exercising our basic human right to freedom of speech: we’re communicating freely over the airwaves of America and saying pretty much anything we want. Imagine if Mr. Big Brother Bush had the power to control our voices, censor our words, or moreover, pull the plug on the station itself. And suddenly we’re silenced. Imagine losing that freedom? Losing that human right?

In Burma for example—a country of 52 million people held hostage by their own military—do not enjoy the human right to speak freely. Listening to programs on the radio other than the regime’s Orwellian sponsored station, or even mildly satirizing the dictatorship—let alone speaking one’s conscience—are strictly forbidden under threat of imprisonment and loss of home and property. People routinely go to jail in Burma for listening to the BBC and VOA.

Freedom of movement: imagine living in a country where gatherings of five or more are a crime against the state, as is true under the dictatorship in Burma. Who knows, it may well be the rule of law in America if Bush and his cohorts continue their criminal behavior. Who was prescient enough to see the seeds of Nazism in 1933 and predict what was in store for Germany in 1943?

Freedom is three-fold. On the one hand, freedom is the heartfelt willingness to challenge the forces of self-degradation and self-compromise. This means, confronting one’s pride, one’s denial, one’s righteousness, one’s delusion, and the multiplicities of any other denigrating forces of consciousness.

This instinct for freedom, also urges us to occupy human goodness and other liberating states of consciousness. This instinct also urges us to awaken conscience—the soul of consciousness—as, I said before, which is the spiritual intelligence inherent in the psyche that allows one to discern right from wrong, or in other words, the ability to make choices to elevate life while refraining from choices that denigrate life. This, of course, is a highly complex area of discussion, and hotly debated too.

Lastly, our instinct for freedom also informs the quest for mystical adventure—the wild existential exploration of this magnificently maddening mystery that we are all embedded. And with it, try, in our own little ways, to understand the intelligence animating this weird hyper-dimensional world of ours and come to some greater clarity of its functioning.

What I am pointing to here is the freedom of imagination or the liberation of our intuition. After all, we are alive—human. This is not a dress rehearsal. We are in real time madness. But oddly, a lot of people just don’t get that life is a miracle. Although their eyes are open, they act as if they are in some form of coma; the coma of conformity; the coma of certainty; the coma of consumerism; the coma of comfort; the coma of craving; the coma of narcissism; the coma of dogma; the coma of an operating system of consciousness that out-sources killing while you vacation in Crawford.

So freedom also requires courage: the courage to question one’s conscience and the courage to come out of the coma of complacency and comfort and to re-enchant the impulse to explore our mystical inter-beingness.

Who are we? From where did we come? Where are we going? Is there other life in the Universe? Or is this all a dream, a hyper-hallucination as many of the Eastern schools of thought would like us to think.

*And where do politics and spirituality meet?*

Alan Clements: I think politics and spirituality are arbitrary distinctions. The roots of spirituality and human life and the roots of good politics are the same, both are about human dignity and freedom. And dignity and freedom empower, not compartmentalize, our spiritual, sexual, economic, ecological, and certainly our political lives.

Personally, I don't like to separate anymore. I am human. I am not a Buddhist. I am no longer even a spiritual person. I am just a human being. A human being seeking to understand the nature of consciousness and how we can protect this environment and this world.

I often ask myself, what will our children's, children's children remember about our lives. How will be judged? What are we doing today, that will provide future generations with the best guarantee of a life of dignity, with human rights, with freedom—with an empowerment of their instinct for freedom—and if they choose, making their world a better place.

### **Gods and Governments**

*You imply a merging of social change and spiritual growth. In your book, *The Voice of Hope—Conversations with Burma's Nobel Peace laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi*, you speak with her about this at length. At one point you say to her, "In truth, spirituality and politics are rooted in the same issue – freedom."*

*She later responds, "I think that some people find it impractical and embarrassing to think of the spiritual life as one with their political lives. I do not see them as separate." She also says "in democracies, there is always a drive to separate the spiritual from the secular."*

*I sense around me, that often people involved in social change find spirituality somewhat impractical. As if compassion, love, and deep listening are not going to really get the job done. These qualities are viewed as soft and lacking strength. What is do you think about this? And what do you think about the "drive in democracies to separate the spiritual from the secular?"*

Alan Clements: Clearly, there's a drive in the ideals of democracy to separate the institutions of religion from the institutions of government. I draw a distinction, however, between religion and spirituality. Nor are our political lives limited to government.

Look at the Bush government. He and his sympathizers incessantly fuse governmental policy with the language of religion. In a sense he's created a "government of God," a presidency "ordained by God." He and his Cabinet blatantly disregard expertise and law in policy making and political appointments. Instead, they demand faith and loyalty. Where is the separation of religion and government?

And look at how the President confuses cruelty and violence with the quintessential principles of the Christian tradition, which is kindness and forgiveness. Who among us can judge, one might ask? Was it Jesus who said, "let he who does not sin throw the first stone."

There's some irony here, however. Spiritually-infused politics are a good thing, I think. Look at how Gandhi, Aung San Suu Kyi, the Dalai Lama, and the late Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., all great political leaders, all universally respected people, and I add, respected for their abilities to merge their respective religions with politics. But when President Bush mixes his religion with politics he is pretty much condemned for it by liberals and Democrats and even some Republicans.

I was joking the other day with a friend of how the Dalai Lama and George Bush have a number of similarities. The Dalai Lama wrote forwards to two of my books and have studied his work, so I have some sense of the man.

Both President General George W. Bush and His Holiness The Dalai Lama of Tibet are the political leaders of their respective countries. Both men sincerely integrate their religion with their politics. Both men speak of being ordained by a high power; the Dalai Lama was hand picked as an infant by religious men to be the incarnation of the previous Dalai Lama, a lineage of 13 other Dalai Lamas who are considered to be the embodiment of universal intelligence. And we all know that Bush thinks he's God's chosen Son, ordained by God to do God's work.

Both men adamantly believe in heaven and hell, albeit Buddhist hell is more terrible than Christian hell. Although Christian hell is permanent, which really sucks. Whereas in Buddhist hell you can kind of work your way out of, although it takes gizzillions of years. But the descriptions of hell in the classical Buddhist texts are beyond; descriptions of torture that make the Texas Chainsaw Massacre look like a Disney movie. Whereas, the worse thing about Christian hell is that it's owned by Wal Mart and you are forced to live side by side with Christians forever trying to convert you to Christianity.

Both men also believe in sin and punishment, although instead of sin the Dalai Lama as a Buddhist speaks of karma and the results of karma. But it's pretty much the same. Both men are against abortion. Both see drugs and alcohol as bad for oneself and society. Both men see themselves as compassionate.

And here is where the differences begin. The Dalai Lama embodies the qualities of compassion and peace and as such, was awarded the Nobel Peace prize. Whereas, Bush would love to receive the prize, yet is almost universally abhorred by intelligent people around the world. What is the difference? W. lies and D. doesn't. W. kills and D. doesn't. In other words, one man lives in deception to himself and others and the other man is honest with himself and others. One man kills and inflicts cruelty on others and the other man abstains from harming life, even insects, and shows kindness, even to his enemies. One man wages war to promote his political agenda, and the other man leads an international peace movement based in nonviolence.

Yet, in all fairness to the complexities of the modern world and high-political office, who is to say that the Dalai Lama or Aung San Suu Kyi for that matter, wouldn't use weapons of mass destruction to stop the genocide of their people if they had them? It's perhaps impossible to predict what a leader would do when compelled to confront so-called Bin Ladens and terrorism in the world, especially, if you are the sole super power.

I raise this point for one reason: the human mind is a hyper-complex phenomena. It is largely a mysterious entity that we are compelled to live with, by circumstances beyond our control. In that sense, forgiveness and redemption are two more qualities within conscience that serve to refine one's instinct for freedom. In other words, it is important not to demonize President Bush, but to understand these ranges of responses within ourselves so that we may nurture actions and mind states that effectively create peace. This brings us right back to our instinct for freedom and the wisdom of discerning states of consciousness.

As we all know, history bears witness to great atrocities committed in the name of God, Allah, Christ, Oil, Freedom, Truth, Democracy, Love, Liberation, and So-On. We should not forget that excessive glorification of nation and national characteristics have in this century brought untold suffering, death, and destruction upon the world. We have seen the concretization of illusions when individuals fuse their identities with nation and religion, and we still see these illusions invoked by political leaders to provide pseudo-ethical, moral ammunition to fuel nationalism, blind loyalty, and ultimately, war.

Look at the famous vow of Hitler's Nazi S.S.: "My honor is called faith-loyalty." We all know the path of death and destruction down which this diabolical dictum led. In this sense, separating religion from politics is imperative. But infusing deep spiritual values with politics is not only necessary, it's crucial if we expect to survive as a planet.

It all comes back to freedom and its meaning. Let's look at it this way. If the essence of spirituality is freedom, and the essence of democracy is also freedom, as in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, then essentially no two of us will express freedom in the same way. And by honoring this quintessential diversity inherent in the meaning of freedom, and so express our freedom, creatively manifesting our human rights, speaking freely, thinking freely, acting freely, and so, we keep freedom alive, expand its beauty and

meaning, elevate its status as the defining quality of civilized existence.

Freedom is rooted in our respect for our own uniqueness, our own individuality. As it has been said, diversity is the life-blood of democracy. And this inherent human diversity becomes intimately complex when we acknowledge the depth of our human interrelatedness. Which begs the question, can we really learn to honor our differences rather than competing for control over each other? Can we really refrain from killing each other, killing in the name of God, Allah, oil? Is it possible to be human, to live freely, and be utterly nonviolent?

*Can we?*

That's the quintessential existential question. It's the central question I raise in my show, "Spiritually Incorrect: In Defense of Being, Human." Is violence biologically imprinted in brains? Is it encoded in our DNA? Are we two-legged jackals disguised as humans? Beasts of prey programmed to fight, feed, and fornicate? These are tough questions. I go as far as to speculate that God is the original suicide bomber. Who else was behind the Big Bang? Whether violence is mind made or innately embedded in the submolecular circuitry of totality is mute. Violence exists, full stop. And I'm assuming life started before me. So at the least, I think it's reasonable to say that Homo Sapiens are an exterminator species. But is the fetish for violence the defining quality of who and what we are?

Life is interrelated miracle, that we know. Nothing stands alone. We are breathing, as we speak. An eight mile aura of oxygen and hydrogen, surrounds our earthly home. If the quality of that life-sustaining invisibility is poisoned — if you start to gag and then I do too, instantly, we realize the obvious: our lives are interconnected—our body does not end or begin on the surface of our skin. The epidermis is porous membrane that allows all this other stuff—water, air, and light—which appears to be outside ourselves—but is equally as crucial to our survival as is our blood. So the entire notion of inner and outer is an arbitrary distinction. It does not ultimately exist.

Ironically, there are very few people who value the quality of the environment and its resources as crucial to the quality of their inner health. Understanding and respecting our inherent (truly sacred) interconnectedness is the basis of how I would define spiritual intelligence.

To me, a working definition for meditation is the experiential investigation of the physics of interconnectivity. Meditation is not about attaining transcendent states of consciousness alone, but opening ourselves to a living, breathing engagement with our shared psycho-physical circuitry and then consciously connecting our circuitry with the hyper-circuitry of Life. Perhaps there's no end to integrating the wisdom of interrelatedness as direct experience of union, or wholeness with Everything.

I bring this point up only to address your question: can we live without participating in any form of violence. That we feel our individuality as mutually interdependent, the more likely we are to foster a relationship of reverence both with otherness and oneself.

The more we embrace the actual sensation of the sacred, the actual feeling of sacredness in the psyche, it is my feeling that we will progressively deactivate the coding embedded within psyche to kill, harm, and or violate any form of "otherness," for whatever reason, whatsoever. The more I feel you as me, the less likely I am to harm you to free me.

*This is the existential dilemma: how do we in fact live in a world where there are people and beasts that approximate innate evil. And with that recognition, how do we remain committed to actively engaging our inner Gandhi, our inner Aung San Suu Kyi, our uncompromising commitment to non-violent activism? And is it ever appropriate to kill?*

Alan Clements: Apparently, this was the chief reason why the Buddha sought enlightenment, which he referred to as the "end of rebirth." He committed what I would call existential suicide—de-enthraling

consciousness of its central hallucination—I, Self, Me, does not in reality, exist. He took himself, so to speak, out of the cycle of murdering to live. He did not think it was possible to live without participating in violence, in some form or another.

Personally speaking, and I know this is seriously spiritually incorrect, but I think such thinking is cowardly, existentially speaking. We are just beginning to explore consciousness and cosmos. Let's give mystical adventure a chance. Let's see if we can really co-create peace and transform this wilderness of a cosmos into something that doesn't bite.

Clearly humans are compelled by biological and cognitive functionings to seek sustenance and security, primarily for oneself and one's off spring. The organism is programmed by birth to inhabit space and in so doing ingest matter and breathe gases from the outside to sustain itself inside.

Every living creature on the planet endures the same biological imperative—the instinctual struggle to survive. So yes, we are in an super-existential conundrum: the human has orifices requiring management; how, therefore, does harmlessness and peace co-exist in a world where killing life—killing otherness—is required to maintain both inner peace—healthy bodily functions—and outer peace—societal harmony.

Is war really obsolete, as the Dalai Lama has stated. Or is it a necessary evil at this time in evolution? Is it humanly possible or even desirable to coexist without killing, even any tiny-little-strand of complicity with killing?

When we speak about the popular spiritual concept oneness, and the other very popular spiritual concept, the sanctity of life, what do they mean in terms of freedom, dignity, harmlessness, and peaceful co-existence? What does it mean to stop participating in the killing machine, not just refusing to fuel our government's genocide in Iraq, or the President's war on minorities, or his war on the poor, but a complete "stop work order" in the name of "no more killing, no more violence, not in my name?"

Life needs life to live. And Life also kills life in order to live, that we know. Who among us can live without complicity with murder in support of our way of life? The murder of human beings. The murder of animals. The murder of birds. The murder of fish. The murder of insects. The murder of forests. The murder of microbes. The murder of sub molecular organisms yet to be seen by man's nano-technological genius. The murder of God every living, breathing moment of life. Humans are murder machines.

Life eats itself in order to co-exist with itself, in order to inter-relate with itself, and in doing so, kills itself. The Buddha is said to have called this cyclical murder machine "samsara" – the eternal swirl of perpetual murder.

He who gives up murder gives up God. He who commits to non-violence commits to the evolution of God.

From murder machine to lover—will a nonviolent eternity ever exist. It probably already exists. That's why altering consciousness may be the best and only means of survival. Can we stop killing long enough to part the cosmic sea of suffering? Can we cease the deafening roar of war planes long enough to release ourselves from the sorrowful grieving of the needless loss of life and begin to tune into other frequencies of being? Instead of responding to life through fear and anger, can we tune into a multi-frequency awareness that simultaneously self-regulates and collaborates in mutual, conscious genesis?

To give up participation in any and all forms of harm—small, macro, submolecular—may require the death of being as we know it. Thus in a cosmos requiring murder to survive, suicide would simultaneously be the ultimate act of compassion and the ultimate act of treason to God or existence as we know it. Just maybe, there is a natural re-attunement to a different frequency that is not a part of the Universe as we know it through quantum mechanics. Perhaps there is a worm hole into a world beyond worlds, a type of life not known by our senses, a 5th or 6th or 7th dimension that transcends and supercedes every notion of God, and "I/We" can exist without feeding needs for preservation.

The sacred as no longer "outside" or "inside" of us or as something we "seek." This is a metaphor for the Deathless, a primordial peace that is simultaneously infinite and finite. Here definitions vanish or cease

to have meaning. In other words, murder is no longer within the cosmic architecture. If my little brain can imagine it, it must be right around the corner.

*Is that why you perform your show, Spiritually Incorrect, to encourage suicide and therefore, take oneself out of the food chain?*

Alan Clements: If existential suicide means decoding the psyche of violence then I'm all for it. Whereas, global suicide—through global warming or a nuclear accident and or nuclear war—is happening fast enough, so all this talk about nonviolence may be mute.

One of the reasons I created my show, “Spiritually Incorrect,” was from sensing the gravity of the global crisis and seeing how hard it was for good, smart people to really hear and take in the state of affairs we are in.

People, by and large, do not want to hear how bad things are. And I'm not talking about ordinary folks. I mean, there are a lot of so-called spiritual types, conscientious people, who want to keep their head in the sand. Thus, my turn from lecturing to the stage, and with it came the discovery of humor, irreverence, and satire to explore some of the tough questions, and in so doing, have some fun exploring our basic human stupidity.

Take quantum physics for example, which asserts that our perceptions are not certain but inherently influenced by the subjective receiver. It's so easy to look up at the sky and project a bull around the constellation Taurus. But in fact, up in those stars, there is no bull. Clearly, it's a projection of the mind. A fabricated stencil cast upon points of light.

This same form of projection occurs upon internal processes, upon one's inner universe. I may have said it before, but humans are projection-crazed myth-making mammals, story-tellers, fiction factories, lovers of fables and fairy tales.

Consciousness has an uncanny ability to project images upon itself, then label the constellation by a name and that name is often the opposite of reality. Bush, for instance, projects Christ upon his consciousness, then adds crusade to the constellation, then calls killing an act of compassion because it protects corporate capitalism and cash to his cronies. George Orwell once said, “When Fascism comes to the West they will call it freedom.” Welcome to Bush's America. Welcome to the corporate coma.

And yet, these primordial forces within consciousness, ignorance itself, are so beyond our own control. Some spiritual insights give the sense that control has been achieved but shift the context and freedom is often back to square one. We are back in the house-box we thought we escaped.

Clearly, we are embedded in a universe not of our own making and forced to participate based upon genetic codes. It is terrifying to open our eyes to co-existence with suicide bombers, Bin Ladens, George Bushes, and rapists. Yet we co-exist not only with suffering but also with meteorites, the remnants of dinosaur biology, and a mysterious cosmos that is enormously overwhelming. It's no wonder that faith and religion are growth industries. Why feel, when you can hide in hallucination. Is religion a new form of LSD?

I was reading an interview the other day with the previous lead singer for Rage Against The Machine, Zach de la Rocha. He mentioned this quote by Harriet Tubman—the most famous of the underground conductors—those who ushered African slaves in the Southern United States to break away from their white slaveholders and eventually escape to freedom in Canada.

Harriet Tubman herself was born a slave in Maryland, escaping to freedom and eventually returning to the South many times to help liberate hundreds of others from the horrific confinement of slavery. Before she died she made this remarkable statement. Apparently she had one regret: she wished that she could have freed a thousand more of her brothers and sisters from slavery, but they could not be convinced that they actually were slaves.

My God, they couldn't be convinced of their confinement, despite the fact they were tied in chains. The spell of indoctrination is powerful indeed. Look at trance-consciousness in our own culture. Does

freedom of movement travel in 4-door SUV's? Will life insurance free us from death? Does freedom come in paperback? Does it wave an American flag made in China? Does it smell like soap? Does Homeland Security soothe our fears? Are corporate-sponsored televised elections free? Do 1.8 million people in prison in the United States, half of whom are African-Americans, make me freer? And in between the commercial breaks for freedom, which invariably involve money, if Bush seamlessly dons a flight jacket for service he didn't fulfill and announces "Mission Accomplished" over the carefully-lighted seascape of San Diego, California, are the Iraqi people free? Are we?

### **The Cool Inside The Flame**

*You mention Rage Against The Machine. Their first album cover is a photograph of Thich Quang Duc—the Buddhist monk in Vietnam who set himself on fire in protest against the U.S. war in Vietnam.*

*I read in your book that you saw this image on television when you were sixteen and it had a huge impact on you. How did his immolation influence your journey to Burma in 1979 to become a Buddhist monk and study, as you put it, "the nature of consciousness?"*

*Also, what did you learn and experience in those five years as a monk, and why did you eventually leave the monastery?*

Alan Clements: Some say that his immolation marked the beginning of the end of the American invasion of Vietnam. And he was just the first of many other immolations; there were dozens of Buddhist monks and nuns in Vietnam who immolated themselves in protest to the invasion—and to ignite conscience in others around the world of the grievous suffering inflicted on the Vietnamese people by the American government at the time.

I wonder what action, what image today, is required to do the same to end the American occupation of Iraq? What will it take to bring our young men and women home and stop the madness?

Anyway, at that time my older brother was about to be drafted, so we thought. And when I saw the image of the monk burning himself it seared in my mind. For one, he didn't move. He just sat there, motionless, upright, profoundly dignified.

I had just come home from hospital, recovering from a traumatic car accident in which I fell asleep at the wheel and drove head-on into a telephone pole. My head went through the windshield and after two operations and lots of stitches, I was home for the first time when I saw the immolation. In fact, my eyes were still so swollen I had to hold one eye open with my fingers in order to see the immolation on TV.

Minutes later, I was in the bathroom looking in the mirror for the first time at my head, unbandaged after several months. As I gazed at my disfigured forehead, I saw an image of that monk in the mirror, and felt inspired. I thought to myself, "I have got to face my own pain."

The metaphor of this monk encased in a burning body facing his own torment, gripped me. Imagining the courage, the moral courage, to set one's self on fire created a helter-skelter in my own unquestioned programming. What did that monk find inside of himself that allowed him to sit motionless? What was that sacred place inside of himself that allowed him to remain cool when burning? This was my first real spiritual awakening, the first steps along my own path to discovering the nature of my own mind, coupled with a desire to seek a freedom beyond my own sense of personal suffering.

I would say, his immolation became the catalyst for me to eventually ordain as a Buddhist monk in Burma.

*You were the first American to ordain as a Buddhist monk in Burma. What were you thinking that drove you to such a radical action?*

Alan Clements: It was not so complicated. I petitioned the Burmese government to be granted a special visa

so that I would be able to live in a Buddhist monastery. Apparently, from the time of the military coup d'état in Burma in 1962, the regime had not granted visas to anyone except foreign diplomats and UN works for more than seven days. And for some unknown reason, oddly, they granted me a six-month extension.

So with it stamped in my passport, I found myself in the city of Rangoon as an ordained Buddhist monk, at a meditation center with teachers, ten thousand miles from my homeland, sitting in silence twenty hours a day, trying to find that special nirvanic oasis inside, beyond the burning of my own negativity and fear, beyond the burning of this world in a sea of suffering.

The circumstances of suffering then are not dissimilar to the world today. This is what drove me into the monastery: how to understand self-inflicted, self-generated suffering, simple and straight.

What is this suffering that we humans are innately born to experience? What is the source of our own greed, anger and delusion? Meditation, and awareness meditation specifically, addressed that issue head on for me.

Eventually after some years of arbitrarily being tossed in and out of the country by the Burmese authorities and roughly five years of living there as a monk, primarily engaged in silent, intensive meditation, I was eventually thrown out of the country for good and told not to come back. There was no reason given.

I have, however, clandestinely reentered Burma three or four times since then, until I was eventually deported in 1996 and “permanently blacklisted,” and soon thereafter, branded a “Public Enemy,” according to an editorial I have read about me in the regimes’ State controlled newspaper.

### **“Bullets In Alms Bowls”**

*How and why did you first reenter Burma, secretly, after you had been thrown out as a monk?*

Alan Clements: Back in 1988, in nonviolent protest comparable to the democracy demonstrations in China’s Tiananmen Square, in which we saw televised images of the man who stood down a column of tanks, in Burma a million people took to the streets in cities throughout the country, and peacefully demonstrated against the government, amassing to confront the 30-year-old dictatorship.

After a week of peaceful marches, armed soldiers were ordered onto the streets. In a remarkable gesture of peace, prodemocracy activists knelt down on the pavement and kissed the feet of the soldiers. But the soldiers had strict orders to shoot and they did.

Diplomats present at the time, reported somewhere between three and nine thousand people were shot or bayoneted to death during August of 1988. After the massacres, a period of bloody repression followed.

Some time later, I was in Australia teaching a meditation retreat when I read a Time magazine cover story titled, *Bullets in Alms Bowls*, which described how the regime had attacked hundreds of monasteries, arresting many monks and killing many others. Apparently, the regime thought that monks were about to enter en masse the peoples’ struggle for democracy.

It broke my heart to think that my teachers and friends may have been killed, so in the spirit of any loyal son or daughter, I returned. But when I got to Bangkok I learned that Burma was sealed, closed—no one was allowed in or out. So I entered the country underground.

What I witnessed staggered my sensibilities. I encountered human rights violations at such a grotesque level that I soon realized that I had entered a full-scale ethnic cleansing. I detail these events in my first book, *Burma: The Next Killing Fields?*

From those experiences, my understanding of human consciousness, including my own meditatively-born insights, in fact, my entire understanding of Buddhism—everything—cracked wide open. “How easy it is,” as Jesus said, “to love those who love you. Even the tax collectors can do as such.”

How easy it is to be free and compassionate and still in a ten-day meditation retreat. Almost anyone can do that after a little bit of practice. But to be free and compassionate and loving in much more complex

circumstances, such as tragedy, let alone to lose home or family or your very life in genocide—it just took me to my knees. It was the first real crack in my indoctrination into orthodoxy and insight into the overestimation of my own spiritual depth.

I then went to the former-Yugoslavia where I lived during the final year or so of their war. As a journalist and human rights observer I looked at life, as much as possible, free of pretension; simply feeling our frailty as human beings and seeing what was right in front of you.

In war, you have the deepest conversations with your soul, or whomever you empower as God. It was my experience that no amount of meditation training, no spiritual teaching, nothing prepares you for what you see. No central dogma gets you through it. You are on your own and it's often very confronting.

I remember one day standing by a mass grave outside of Sarajevo near the town of Srebrenica. Srebrenica was the town where Serbian soldiers overran the soccer stadium where 9,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were removed from the women and over the next 48 hours were systematically shot to death..

I was with my friend, Marcia Jacobs, who was working with the International Rescue Committee, the relief organization founded by Albert Einstein, and in the middle of this mass grave—a pit of putrefying human flesh—was a hand sticking up. There was no way to tell whether it was a man or woman. But I thought I saw a ring on the hand, a wedding band. And as my mind swirled in all directions, I caught myself and imaged that the ring symbolized the human desire to unify and marry our differences, our duality. At that moment, I dropped to my knees and thought, “How does man's inhumanity perpetuate itself like this?”

Beyond religion, there is a deep tendency within the human organism to identify with ideology. Within the human psyche, what causes the identification with lethal fantasies?

Religion is so much about the unattainable—God, heaven, hell, absolute Truth. Who are all these omnipotence people, and what even is omniscience? People so often neglect to really investigate the matrix of these concepts about perfection and absolutism. And absolutism is really synonymous with religion. Absolutism becomes a place to fuse all of your impotence, fear, anxiety, and collective rage. How do you enrage a bunch of men and women? Give them ideology. Wars are fought over ideology. And we humans must learn how to overcome our addictions to these orthodoxies; overcome our addiction to illusions; our addiction to religions—beliefs of all kinds.

The human loves stories. The human loves fairy tales and fables and fictions of all kinds. As I previously said, we are myth-making mammals, enamored by our own projections cast upon the cave walls of our own consciousness. We must see these self-generated phantasms as such, and come out of the hallucination, come out from the opium-like dream of illusions and stop assuming they are absolute truths. We must dis-enthral ourselves from the mythology of I Know-ness and re-enchance the beauty of mystery and uncertainty.

### **In the Shadows of Jungle Temples: A Confrontation with Non-Violence**

*During your experiences in the jungles of Burma, you met many Burmese activists and students who had fled the cities into the jungle to avoid imprisonment by the Burmese military.*

*I would like to hear specifically about your discussions with people there who had become militant and taken up weapons. A friend of yours even pressed an M-16 into your hands and told you that “it is time for you to join us and not judge us from your comfortable position anymore.” Tell me about that.*

Alan Clements: Let me start by saying, there are so many courageous people in the world today that go unrecognized. They are the real teachers: the anonymous masses out there, in the jungle in Burma, in deserts, mountains and cities the world over, who often risk their lives, daily, perhaps at this very moment, for the right to live with dignity and freedom and human rights.

I have met many prisoners of conscience—people who have spent time in prison because of their views. They empowered freedom of thought over fear of incarceration. They choose to stand up and express what they believe despite fears of consequences. Where does the courage to risk defying unjust authority come from? How do we take a stand, in a spirit of peace, on behalf of principles, values, and human rights and so be free, rather than talking about freedom, alone?

You mention a story about a friend of mine in Burma. It speaks to the existential dilemma of armed resistance versus non-violent resistance. By 1989 roughly 10,000 students had fled the cities of Burma that began after the massacres in August '88. I had taken up with a few hundred of them along the Thai-Burma border, living in horrid conditions within malaria-infested jungles. Some of my companions resisted the dictatorship as pacifists, and some had taken up weapons.

One companion was someone whom I'd known in the monastery in Rangoon. He had disrobed as a monk when I next met him.

One afternoon, we were walking through the jungle in a single-file of five or six people. In the haunting silence of a thick jungle we were surrounded by small groups of soldiers loyal to Burma's dictatorship. An attack was likely at any moment. As such, the atmosphere is intense. And with it, the mind becomes hyper-intuitive—perhaps even telepathic. Communication is nonverbal. And it seems that you can hear people's thoughts.

As it turns out, my mind wasn't so quiet. My friend, who was leading the patrol, could sense my judgement of him. Aung San Suu Kyi was unequivocally clear about her commitment to nonviolence, and I believed in Gandhi and civil disobedience, but not weapons and killing. I was a Buddhist monk, a pacifist. I had trained to try to love your enemy, not seek their death. And here was my friend—a former monk—who sat next to me in silent meditation for years—with an M-16 assault rifle in his hands.

My friend then turned to me and shoved his rifle in my chest, yelling, "I dare you to judge me like this! What if it was your mother, sister, brother, son or daughter, who had been killed or raped by the regime? What would you do? Would you just stand back and be an enlightened, pacifist, dead-right Buddhist meditation teacher? Or would you take up a gun, defend yourself and your family and your values? You have an American passport in your back pocket. You always have that leverage to leave this jungle. We don't."

It was a provocative moment. I was forced to confront the issues of violence or nonviolence. Clearly, these are not black and white issues. Every one of us seems to have both light and darkness in us. "Beauty is mysterious as well as terrible", wrote Fyodor Dostoevsky. "God and the devil are fighting and the battlefield is the human heart."

Everything that I have ever held as sacred has collapsed under greater scrutiny. The position of nonviolence is just not simple. Does nonviolence mean never using self-defense? Is defense of your mother, your sister, your grandfather, your son, self defense? It becomes a very complicated area. This battlefield of the human heart, these gray areas, have infused my quest to understand consciousness in these last sixteen years since this encounter in the jungle.

I am proud to say that I am among not just the disbelievers but the unknowing. And in that unknowing, one becomes more patient, more willing to listen, and less willing to strike out. What a hard-earned lesson for me. It took witnessing two two violent conflicts, two wars—genocides, really—to snap crack the coma of certainty. To look at the world with an open mind takes a lot of courage today. It hurts to see someone in Ramalah throwing stones at a tank; to see someone starving and imagine her to be my child. It is one thing to practice loving kindness, yet another to embody that person as yourself or your own family. It is hard enough to love one person in life who loves you back. Imagine loving one hundred people? What if ninety-nine of them dislike you? This is why I am so high on cultivating our instinct for freedom—the ability of the human heart to free itself from obstacles and illusions. The art of basic human self-responsibility.

## Democracy Must Demonstrate Its Principles

*Discussing nonviolence in your published conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi, she explains, “Primarily why I object to violent means is because I think that it would perpetuate a tradition of changing the political situation through force of arms.” She concludes, “If you want democracy, you must demonstrate its principles.” She very much embraces non-violence as the path to democracy. What are your impressions of her and her commitment to the values of nonviolence, compassion and integrity?*

Alan Clements: I am very honored to have met Aung San Suu Kyi. She is both a friend and a mentor, as well as a great leader. In 1990, in internationally recognized popular democratic elections, a 90% majority of popular voters, elected Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy to Prime Minister of Burma, along with a 485 member people’s assembly. The military junta never honored their so-called “free and fair” elections. Instead, they imprisoned all remaining elected officials and many of their supporters.

At this time, Aung San Suu Kyi and numerous others in her political party were already imprisoned under house arrest or in jail, where she and many others remain today.

When she is freed, when she does achieve democracy with the people of Burma, when she is able to travel the world, we will then see much more of her than is already recognized as a Nobel Peace laureate. I would like to express that she is a truly profound human being, and I look forward to hearing her speak for herself.

Aung San Suu Kyi once said to me, “I am insignificant in relationship to the thousands of people in my country, who no one knows, that risk their lives every day to further this nonviolent revolution.”

One of Aung San Suu Kyi’s numerous attributes, and one that struck me very deeply, is her humility. Here I was in Burma to interview this remarkable leader of fifty million people held like prisoners in their own country, and she would often ask me personal questions about my own life. She loves people. She loves taking interest in others. She genuinely cares for others and leads with the Buddhist quality of metta, also described as loving-kindness. She defines metta as simply showing a deep gentle interest in another person’s heart, mind, and life.

She is always the first to defer, “Oh, my goodness, it is my colleagues who have been imprisoned, who have been tortured and suffered so much more than me. I was, after all, only under house arrest.”

There is something so natural about her friendliness, her warmth. These qualities of humility and this generosity of spirit make her remarkable even beyond her courage to lead a nation in a vision of nonviolence. In so doing, she actively aligns with the qualities of love and compassion, as it were, as her weapons of choice against oppression.

Of course, empowering love and compassion to confront Al Qaeda would not win you the US Presidency. Not only are these qualities often considered old-fashioned, but radically passe, in politics that is, real world politics. I mean, can we imagine Cheney, Bush, and Rice holding a press conference at which they announce ‘a radical new American approach towards their ‘war on terror.’ We are renouncing violence as a means to resolve conflict and empowering dialogue. Why is talking to settle differences a radical thought? I know the answer, because you have to talk the language that terrorist and tyrants know, and the only language they know is “kill or be killed.”

Aung San Suu Kyi is a firm believer in the power of dialogue. I find her way of being thoroughly modern, a radical visionary. Beyond her individual character, she’s leading a “spiritual revolution, a revolution of conscience,” a struggle for freedom and justice rooted in the timeless qualities of love, compassion, and self-responsibility.

In South Africa, Archbishop Desmond Tutu invokes the traditional African concept of ubuntu as a force of transformational social conscience. He describes ubuntu as “a person becomes human through other people.” In other words, we become human through our relationships. With ubuntu present in one’s heart, that which is denigrating to you, is felt as denigrating to me. Equally, that which is elevating to you,

is also elevating to me. This universal, shared bond with all humanity is similar to the Buddhist concept of interrelatedness.

Aung San Suu Kyi embodies ubuntu—a sacred spiritual intelligence, if you will. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called the stirring of social conscience in service to the power of love, “divine dissatisfaction.” Informed by his relationship to the sacred, he encouraged people to become deeply dissatisfied with unequal laws, social injustices, and abuses of power. He encouraged people to empower this dissatisfaction with their unique and collective beauty and dignity and said that love and power are not philosophical opposites. “Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.” He invoked a “divine dissatisfaction,” acting on conscience in the service of love and compassion, informed by a personal relationship to God, or the sacred.

Aung San Suu Kyi evokes the power of a divine dissatisfaction infused with her connection to Buddhism and the qualities of liberation. She doesn’t separate the power of love from, what I would call, ‘sacred rage’— a more radical expression of King’s divine dissatisfaction.

She is not beyond anger and openly admits that she gets upset at times, angered really, at the injustices of these dictators and the outrages of their atrocities. She does not fear her feelings. She is not afraid of being irritable or angry or of crying. She is not afraid of her femininity or her frailty. She embraces a larger spectrum of emotions. She sees power in vulnerability. She, in my mind, is a living expression of the spiritual-political-warrioress.

It will be a splendid moment once Burma’s democracy is achieved. At that time we can joyously look forward to hearing Aung San Suu Kyi address the United Nations and travel the world to let us know, herself, what stirs her heart and hopefully, offer an inspiring vision for achieving global peace.

### **Grace Courage**

*You mention the very central concept in Buddhist psychology of interrelatedness, or what Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh describes as “inter-being.” You also mention Martin Luther King Jr., and I recall that he spoke about “an inextricable web of mutuality.” These non-violent activists also seem to share the Buddhist view that negative experiences can be transformed into positive qualities, and in fact, may even require that to happen. Aung San Suu Kyi told you “We need strong opposition to keep us on our toes.” Tell me about Aung San Suu Kyi and the “Revolution of the Spirit” and how we may develop beneficial qualities through strong opposition.*

Alan Clements: A great question. And a complex one too. It covers the psychological, political, spiritual and existential realms, as well. Rather than killing those who oppose our views or seek their physical and or moral destruction, can we as humans truly work with our differences—our complexities—for the betterment of the whole? And in so doing, grow together? Can we stop participating in dominator-predator metaphors and embrace one’s that illuminate intelligent co-existence?

This brings us back to the concept of ubuntu or what I would all conscientious interactive transformation. Essentially, ubuntu points to the non-demonization of otherness. The non-demonization of greed, hatred and injustice.

Non-vilification, inherently elevates the status of engaging diversity and differentiation, with hope. A hope that is coupled with endeavor and compassion—a courageous commitment to nonviolence, listening, and tolerance.

On the other hand, when one empowers justifiable homicide as a means to address differences, as the Bush government does, the so-called opposition—those who differ with our views—fill in the blank with whatever—instantly solidifies the opposition into unchanging entities— or freeze-dried evil doers. This division, in itself, perpetuates a cycle of hatred and murder—an endless war on consciousness. And that’s all we’re taking about here—consciousness, aspects of the mind that we do not understand.

What I am about to say is so basic it may be mistaken for simplistic, naive, or even dumb, but if we are to survive as a species, us humans need to learn to talk to one another, that's all. Learn to talk about our differences and stop killing each other. Basic common sense, that's all.

We have great examples of nonviolent dialogue. To paraphrase Dr. King, 'we are not here to defeat the white man but to stir his conscience, and in so doing, hopefully win his friendship in return.'

Igniting conscience in ourselves and actively seeking conscience in our enemies, our adversaries—in those who radically differ from our point of view—is the only hope for our survival as a human family.

But with that said, we may develop strong qualities in ourselves from our encounters with fools—such as the despotic generals in Burma who go about terrorizing the population the way Saddam did. But it begs the question, perhaps there is a better, quicker, more efficient way to invoke co-operation in the mind.

I mean, is it possible, or even smart for the future of civilization, not to see a Hitler as he really is—a genocidal psychopath. Why not seek the truth of a person's psyche long before he or she assumes power? Are they fatally flawed with a fractured psyche? Who among us are born with, or, at this moment, are developing into monsters?

I wish I had the answers. And doubtless, there will be some drug developed, some magic bullet that decodes the psyche of its proclivity to hallucinate racism, nationalism, and hatred.

Until such time, I ask myself the basic question: can I stop the violence in myself. Thus the question, "Do we have the self-confidence in the healing power of our own courage and compassion? Do we believe in the power of our own love enough to confront violence, ignorance, and stupidity with the conviction of Martin Luther King?" I think so. Although, we all have different thresholds of what we'll accept and what constitutes crossing the line.

In Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi and her colleagues lead a non-violent revolution by empowering a spiritual-political alchemy, if you will. These activists seek spiritual and political transformation through the courageous confrontation of oppression with hearts of patience, love, and compassion. I asked Aung San Suu Kyi, "How do you do this? It is one thing to speak about nonviolence and courage from a safe distance outside of a dictatorship, but you are at the front lines of revolution. Here in Burma, you are imprisoned for voicing views opposed to the regime."

She answered without equivocation. "The root of spiritual revolution is courage. The moral courage to care about things larger than one's own self interest. That means developing the courage to confront fear in your own heart."

She continued to tell me that perhaps even more important than the idea of fearlessness is what she calls "grace courage" — grace that is renewed repeatedly under harsh, unremitting pressure.

It is this grace under pressure that I think is at the soul of facing the darkness of our own ignorance. We can face our own anger, our own knee-jerk reactions to strike out against the unfamiliar. We can learn how to hold more gently our own ignorance, to hold with more grace the pressure of our own self-centeredness, greed and stupidity. The courage to confront tyranny with love may be the central quality that is most needed in the world today.

I met a fellow recently after one of my performances in Sydney, Australia. He was Burmese. As all of my shows are advertised as benefits to raise awareness of Aung San Suu Kyi's incarceration and the plight of her peoples' struggle for freedom, the man thanked me for helping his people achieve democracy.

After answering his questions about being a monk in his country, I asked him his background. With great modesty, he went onto to explain how he had spent four years in prison under the Burmese regime. Since his release, he escaped the country and fled to Thailand. From there, he was granted political asylum in Australia.

He went onto explain that for the first six months of his incarceration, he was put in what was known as the "black cell."

I stopped completely and asked, "What does that mean?"

He said, "Just what it says. A pitch-black prison cell. A cell without windows, without ventilation.

Completely black. One cannot see their fingers in front of their eyes.

For a moment, we stood there with eyes locked. I had heard some pretty bad stories of incarceration in Burma and else where, but I gripped myself in preparation for the horror to come.

“ They stripped me of my clothes. Naked. There is no water. No bucket. No bed. No blanket. No place to urinate or defecate, except on the cold, filthy concrete floor.”

He said that for the first six months in this black cell, if you can imagine, he knelt in front of the keyhole in the iron door because that was the only fresh air that he could smell to survive the stench of his own excrement and urine and the stifling claustrophobia of this black cell.

He looked at me with such a heart of gold. He had so much love in his heart as he said, “In those moments, kneeling in front of that keyhole, breathing some fresh air —although they put me in that black cell and I was in prison—in those moments, my heart was not closed.”

He was a young scientist who was studying physics. To survive the ordeal, he explained how he kept his sanity by continually expanding his consciousness into larger and larger metaphors. He reflected on the theory of relativity and how freedom itself is also a relative idea.

He reflected on the indoctrination of his captors, the dictators, who were move by their own fear and ignorance. And as he kept his nose to the key hole, breathing the tiny bit of fresh air day after day, while reflecting on “relativity of the mind, values, time, space and cosmos, he said that he began to feel compassion for his captors and himself, as well.

After some months he got to a point he said, that his dharma life in the black cell was perhaps the most breathtaking spiritual opening he had ever encountered.

And to think that it all came from being on his knees for six months in a dark cell, humbled me to my core. Now that’s grace-courage; courage renewed repeatedly under harsh unremitting pressure.

I often compare these stories of courage to my life here in the West. How easy it is to complain about too many emails, too many phone calls, not enough income, all Republicans are bad, Bush is an evil idiot, the human is an inherently flawed organism, religion is itself creating hell on earth, the planet is doomed, God is the original suicide bomber and the Big Bang is proof. My list of reasons why we are not going to make it are nearly inexhaustible. And just when we finally make it and retire on the beach in Hawaii, a damn asteroid is seen to be on a head on collision with the White House. Call it divine intervention—targeted assassination by God. I mean, it’s all a freak show, really.

### **The Uniqueness of Fingerprints**

*This story of the man in the black cell reminds me to have perspective on what many millions of people on this planet suffer at this very moment. It makes me pause and reflect.*

*I have read somewhere how you don’t view yourself as a Buddhist anymore. In fact, you caution people that monasticism or intensive meditation practice is not in and of itself an endpoint.*

*Still, I would like to hear a little more about your experiences with meditation and how they have benefitted you. Ultimately, it seems that the practice has brought you to working for the benefit of others.*

Alan Clements: (Laughter) It’s not that I’m not a Buddhist anymore. Rather I’m a recovering Buddhist. And if I don’t regularly attend my AA meetings on addiction to meditation, I could easily relapse and go on a binge—do something crazy like attend a three month meditation retreat. Once an addict, always one. Just can’t seem to break the habit of mindfulness—me focusing on me, looking back at me looking at me, ad nauseam. I graduated, thank you.

*Look, I know it did something!*

Alan Clements: (Laughter) The really funny thing about meditation is that it works but not in the way that

many people teach it and or assume it works. For example, meditation is often taught as a means to reduce stress. Well, that's true, if you don't do too much of it. Say, more than an hour or two a day, give or take an hour. But if you increase it to 6, 8, 10, 15 or 20 hours a day for a week or two, generally speaking all hell breaks loose. One comes face to face with everything they wish to deny.

This is why I have been advocating mandatory month-long meditation retreats for anyone running for high office, Senators, Congressman, Cabinet positions, and of course, the Presidency itself.

In addition, the mandatory use of meditation for politicians should be coupled with the mandatory use of certain psychoactive substances. This is not some farfetched weird notion. I've actually put some thought into it. Politicians have great power and as such, they should be of the greatest spiritual and psychological health. Intensive meditation, like the use of certain entheogens, reveal aspects of psyche and soul that are otherwise, extremely hard to access. Through their use we can see, without a doubt, whether someone's hull is cracked.

Imagine, if good Americans really knew that prior to running for the presidency Bush was known to be the homicidal sociopath that he is? How many civilians have been killed in Iraq with America's precision guided weapons? What is it, 110,000 or so?

Imagine if we could have known prior that Hitler would go down in history responsible for 11 million murders? Stalin's 20 million ghosts? Pol Pots 2 million undesirables?

How can we see the early signs of a sex offender? An MRI of the psyche that detects deeply rooted psychopathologies? We must learn the early warning signs of how a Church is willing to burn 12 million women at the stake. And how white-American settlers will genocide 15 million Native American Indians in the name of Western civilization.

I think long term meditation practice coupled with a few months of supervised entheogenic therapy should be mandatory for any politician today. It is a cost effective conscientious solution to help curb the repressed murderous enthusiasm buried in the hearts of most political wanna bees who, once in office, often become obsessed with the biggest blood sport of all—war.

Humans need to end their hunger for blood and meditation helps to bring one face to face with the source of the hunger—self-hatred—which I think is the root of violence.

Bottom line is this: take responsibility for your mind, for your feelings, and not project your vomit on others. That's meditation: taking responsibility for your mind as a self-generated activity.

The art of meditation is learning to hold your ground, as in learning to be with yourself without running away, or blaming others for what you feel, or being so in contempt of yourself—your repressed negative self-image, as Bush is—that you want to either euthanize your inner wounded child or put the poor bastard to work in a Chinese sweat shop, and call it free trade, outsourcing our inner slave, the Globalization of carnivorous consumerism so that we collectively cannibalize the planet to death. And we are literally, eating ourselves to death.

Anyway, I have the dubious distinction of being enlightened in three different Buddhist traditions, and ironically, all three contradict each other. In other words, one nirvana doesn't fit all neuroses. In fact, in my case, enlightenment may have caused it.

JM: *(Laughter)*

Alan Clements: I'm not really joking when I said I'm a recovering Buddhist. Recovering from a bogus enlightenment, perhaps. In all honesty, my dysfunction, if you can call compulsive behavior, existential anxiety, difficulty suffering fools and hypocrites, contempt for evangelical Republican Christians, especially the one in the White House, and an inability to save money, characteristics of dysfunction, then I'm worse now than before any one of my three enlightenment experiences.

I must admit that not only is enlightenment a lie, a fairy tale similar to children's belief in Santa Claus, the entire pursuit of perfection, which is identical to the pursuit of enlightenment, is in itself neurotic.

I came to this conclusion, only after becoming enlightened, so although I'm speaking about neurosis, I'm bringing an enlightened neurotic perspective to an otherwise unenlightened enlightenment.

In all seriousness, I've written about this in my last book, *Instinct for Freedom*, and I include aspects of it in my show.

See, either I got a dysfunctional enlightenment or my dysfunction was so dysfunctional that a good middle class American Buddhist enlightenment got sucked into the black hole of my mega-dysfunctional psyche and didn't correct a thing. In more earthly terms, my enlightenment vanished like a plane does when it gets sucked into the Bermuda triangle, gone without a trace.

Or, a third option is that I was never dysfunctional to begin with and what happened was that I got sold somewhere along the way on the notion that my psychology was sick, a bit like how pharmaceutical companies broker psychological sickness, even to perfectly healthy people. And after years and years of pursuing enlightenment and then finally getting it, my perfectly fine working class psyche couldn't handle the prestige of such a noble state and I collapsed under the pressure of unworthiness.

Still yet, maybe enlightenment itself fucked me up. And finally, I thought, well, maybe enlightenment doesn't exist at all, that it is a lie, a lucrative artifact from Asia, transplanted in West, and like a carrot its what's dangled in front of perfection junkies like me to suck them in.

As you may have assumed, I do confess, I think enlightenment is a lie, a fairy tale. Perfection simply does not exist, and certainly not in the mind of mortals conditioned by a three pound brain.

It's sort of tragically funny but my first insight into enlightenment as a self-generated fable came when I met my first Alzheimers's patient. I figured, if the brain can forget the host's name, the host can certainly forget its enlightenment. So, the belief that one has achieved an unconditioned state, is pure poppycock.

My metaphor for meditation today, my metaphor for God-consciousness, my metaphor for love even, is my right index finger. My index finger is my Dalai Lama. My Christ. My Allah. My Universal Declaration of Human Rights. What I mean by that is my fingerprint! No two fingerprints are the same. That to me, means that no two of us will make love in the same way; no two of us dance in the same way; no two of hold hands in the same way; no two of us will kiss in the same way; no two of us will understand God in the same way; no two of us will talk, run, walk, laugh, cry in the same way. No two of us will make love in the same way. That means, in essence, no two of us will express freedom in the same way.

Repeatedly, we read in the Buddhist texts that the essence of the spiritual life is freedom. This is repeated by Buddhist teachers ad nauseam. Play it out. Take freedom to its philosophical end point. If freedom is never the same twice, then there is no such thing as "Buddhism"! In that case, if your idea of freedom involves two, seek consent. Otherwise, let your own finger be your dream. Live your own unique expression of life's diversity. What's the choice? To live in conformity? To mimic one's idea of freedom? Be free, don't seek it.

### **Spiritual Anarchy**

*Buddha, of course, was not a Buddhist and Jesus, of course, was not a Christian. You just referred to yourself as a spiritual anarchist, and you also quote Noam Chomsky, who describes himself as a fellow traveler of Anarchism. He supports the ideas you describe of a non-dogmatic, non-doctrinal lifestyle in which we can be pointed towards methods and ways of being but that truly we need to find in each of ourselves an individual way of freedom in living. What does spiritual anarchy mean to you?*

Alan Clements: It means being true to yourself, not your idea of fitting in. Let me explain. I was in Croatia during the last year of the war. We were surrounded by soldiers within ten miles of the city. It was intense. It was ethnic cleansing. Everyone knows that. At night, friends and I would often go out dancing in underground nightclubs and cafes. You didn't have to practice being present there. It was intrinsic to

the space. Many of us would make this unspoken vow: no two of us would dance the same way. And this became an act of our activism. We celebrated the one thing that we all shared in the face of this totalitarian nightmare, our individuality and diversity. That's the practice of spiritual anarchy.

Dictatorship and totalitarianism psychologies, whether political, spiritual, economic or sexual, seek to homogenize people and remove the features of their uniqueness to create faceless, expressionless people called... Buddhists, republicans, Sufis, Christians, Jews, Muslims, communists, Americans, etc... Whatever the label, it masks infinite diversity as faceless "Other" and reinforces myopic cults of "My Own Sameness."

That is the missing link in the paradigms that espouse absolutes. That is why Buddhism fundamentally doesn't exist and enlightenment is a lie. Meditation should release us into our uniqueness, not nullify us into a spiritually correct talking mannequin. As I said, earlier, there is no single nirvana to fit all psyches.

Freedom is like the wind. As soon as you try to box it, you are in self-deception. If you succeed in boxing it, obviously, you destroy it. Many Buddhists, many spiritual people, mistake the form for freedom. Buddhism is not the statue, not the form. No monastery or teacher can teach you what you must do for yourself—to honor your instinct for freedom and live freely in choice.

It's kind of funny imagining inviting a guru into your bedroom to show you the spiritually correct way you and your lover should kiss. At some point you just have to find a willing pair of lips and fumble around in your own unique beauty. To me, the dharma refers to our most intimate expression of being. Do we have the courage to be that free and the freedom to be that intimate?

Now, I've gone on record that meditation, specifically awareness meditation, should be awarded the Nobel peace prize. I say that with tremendous sincerity because although I am an iconoclast and a spiritual anarchist, I treasure my past. There was a very appropriate time and place for dogma for me. I have seen nothing that introduces the human being to herself or himself so intimately as the power of awareness. One must be very careful, however, not to download Buddhist dogma, spiritual dogma, or any dogma, in the name of intimacy. This is a big distinction.

Freedom is not a dogma. Freedom is the willing heart realizing, this very second, that it is free. You don't seek nature. We are in nature all the time. We are nature. You can't escape it. Try escaping the biosphere. Within that eight mile high photonic radiance we are free to fly and or abide in our own unique way. We are free to sing our own liberating music. That's the beauty of freedom. You can't practice it per say, but you can live it. So spiritual anarchy is the metaphor of the uniqueness of fingerprints. No two of us will express freedom the same way. Spirit is the innate fabric of eternity.

The mystery of life is beyond doctrine. What is so exciting about quantum physics is that the sub-molecular nature of this multi-dimensional universe in which we are embedded is unknowable at the moment. And it behaves in asymmetrical, illogical ways. There is no system yet that we can figure out the Theory of Everything. So we must be on vigilant look out for belief structures rooted in omnipotence, dogma, superstitions, and illusions.

The best form of spiritual practice is to develop spiritual self-defense, the techniques of wise discernment, critical inquiry and individual thought that protect us from indoctrination and propaganda. This is sorely missing in a lot of spiritual circles, I've seen, whether Buddhist, Christian, or Muslim.

How do we really confront the downloading of a teacher's neurosis or the collective neurosis of an entire religion? How do we maintain independent thought? Do we then become excommunicated from the club of Vipassana? The club of Buddhism, the club of Theravada, the club of Rigpa? The club of Iyengar yoga? The club of Auyasca? The club of activism? We need to cultivate individual, critical inquiry into all aspects of our political, cultural, spiritual institutions.

Spiritual anarchy for me means a passion for liberation tempered with compassion for others. So much of the freedom I feel today is not the result of meditation, per say. That helped stabilize a very neurotic young man.

My sense of freedom comes more through expression. Free expression. Using my voice and my body. My genitals, my heart and my mind. Loving America for the spirit of expression. Dancing. Making love. Learning how to act from this place, the soul of my fingerprint. Spiritual anarchy is a metaphor for knowing that you can be yourself. And I mean really, really go there. Not what you pose to be your self, but beneath that, beneath that, and beneath that, too.

Who has the courage to be that free? That takes a lot of courage.

### **Playing on The Edge Of Laughter: The Inspiration of U Par Lay**

*I want to talk a little bit about how, when, how and why you've developed your theater show, which has been described as sort of a cross between spiritual teaching and stand-up comedy.*

Alan Clements: On January 4, 1996 I had been invited, along with several hundred other guests, to Aung San Suu Kyi's lakeside compound in Rangoon for an afternoon of speeches and entertainment to celebrate freedom in the context, as it were, of a totalitarian nightmare. In Burma—a country with no human rights—gatherings of five or more are a crime against the State and punished with imprisonment and or confiscation of home and property.

Mid-way through the day's activities, armed soldiers arrived on the scene and surrounded Aung San Suu Kyi's compound. The likelihood of arrest and imprisonment was on the minds of everyone inside. Then a bit of a miracle occurred. One of the final people to come on "stage" for the day's festivities was U Par Lay, considered to be Burma's preeminent spoken-word comedian. Imprisoned for the previous six years for mildly satirizing the dictatorship, this performance came just two days after his release.

It was explained to me that Burma's spoken-word tradition is highly evolved. Unlike stand up comedians in America with a set up and punch line every few seconds, Burma's comedians are spiritual subversives, political provocateurs, confrontational storytellers, underground philosophers, existential psychotherapists, radical rebels — who, satirize the stupidity of governments ordained by God and or any other Orwellian lie. They are comedic activists as political dissidents who serve society by igniting conscience. As such, they are fearless liberators — spoken word renegades who use the power of the human voice to obliterate fear, interrupt compromise, and inspire a new love of freedom.

True to form, when U Par Lay took the microphone he announced that he had just spent the last six years in prison under hard labor pounding rocks in leg irons and that he'd been waiting all this time to perform again. He then stated that he knew his performance would likely land him back in prison but concluded, "So be it! Freedom is more important than fear."

For the next two hours he rocked—stirring the audience to both laugh and cry in a breathtaking performance—deconstructing propaganda and indoctrination, while satirizing totalitarian psychology— all done, through improv, theatrical storytelling, and blazing comedy. His prediction was accurate. A week later he was arrested, and without trail, sentenced to six more years of imprisonment, under hard labor, in leg-irons, pounding rocks 18 hours a day.

His fearless moral courage blew my mind. As did the hundreds of others defying Burma's equivalent of Bush's fantasy Patriot III Act—thou shalt not think for oneself unless such thoughts are first cleared through the Ministry of Karl Rove, Me, and God.

My experiences in Burma with Aung San Suu Kyi experiencing nonviolent revolution on a day-to-day basis with those who risked everything to speak their conscience, radically altered my self-identity, my commitments, and ultimately my understanding of freedom.

After returning to North America in 1997, I wanted more; a new edge of art; a more open, provocative expression of my heart. One day in a fit of outrage; this was around the time Bush was beginning his invasion of Iraq, I went down to my favorite theater in Vancouver where I live, and asked the

owner if could just hang out on the stage.

Standing there alone, in the semi-darkness on this empty stage, I remembered Aung San Suu Kyi and U Par Lay and said to myself. “U Par Lay risked it all to speak his conscience. Rosa Parkes took a great risk to sit at the front of the bus. Galileo took a great risk to say the earth was round. What risk am I willing to take to be true—radically true to my deepest, most honest expression of conscience? It was there, on that empty stage, I imaged, if I was wired to the world, and had but 90 minutes left to live, what would I want to say to my fellow humans? This was a very challenging moment for me.

At first, I thought, what am I doing? Then I dropped into a pure, scary, beautiful feeling of vulnerability. And I felt it to be the opposite of anger. I asked myself, is it possible to disarm the heart of violence? And what came to me was not a word, but a feeling. I began to cry. Crying expressed both my joy and fear and in having only ninety minutes left to feel— inhaling and exhaling my final breaths. How poignant. How powerful. How precious! And now what? What do I want to communicate? What do I want to say to the people of the world?

Two years later, when I walked out onto my first stage, “Spiritually Incorrect” was born.

*You call “Spiritually Incorrect - an anti-performance.”*

Alan Clements: I don’t want to memorize a sales pitch or a script or a dharma talk and therefore do it perfectly again and again, like some human seal that has learned to twirl a conceptual ball on its nose and entertain the people. It’s my expression of spiritual anarchy. The show came out of a desire to liberate myself from conformity and certainty and equally have explore a new form of joy in my life.

Improvisation, going out on that stage stripped of pretense and expectation and just opening up and speaking my naked heart is my way of foiling my own rigidity and indoctrination. It’s about synergy—making love with the audience in a way that I had never before said or done. For me, it was an original moment of God.

When fear gets the better of you, it is so easy to want to entertain people or evoke a particular emotion. I want instead to be naked, unscripted. Otherwise it would be like making love from a script. I just love the chance to be with people freely.

*It sounds very exciting, and in some ways, somewhat Buddhist...*

Alan Clements: (Laughter) If the Buddha were alive I think he’d love my show, but I’m not sure that Buddhist teachers would.

In large part, my show was born from a desire to laugh more, have more fun and joy, get down.

Can activism and satire, wit and comedy be mixed in such a way that we can co-create an existential catharsis, a non-denominational, non-violent party at the level of our souls, minds and hearts? Can we be that free together?

“Spiritually Incorrect” is an act of activism. It is in defiance of orthodoxy and conformity. This can be uncomfortable for a lot of people who have become rigid in their spirituality and systems of belief. People can become statues within their own so-called stillness, imprisoned in their nirvana, static and stone-like in their idea of oneness. One becomes boxed in by one’s own conformity, one’s allegiance to their precious concepts. It is hard to step out of the box of our own success.

One of the things you really do see in war zones is just how dumb the human can be. We just have to get over our sectarian thinking and start living from our hearts and making the world a better place. That is probably the sum and total of the spiritual life.

**Only When It’s Dark Out, You Can See the Stars”  
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

*Tell us about the current situation in Burma with Aung San Suu Kyi.*

Alan Clements: In May of 2003, Aung San Suu Kyi was imprisoned for the third time, held incommunicado. She has currently been removed from jail and is held under house arrest. I think for nine of the last fourteen years she has been incarcerated.

The country remains a black hole for human rights. The country is ruled by the iron hand of military dictatorship, a group of generals three-hundred thousand boy soldiers. There's wide-spread rape, forced labor, forced relocation, murder and wide spread malnutrition.

The regime is like a psychotic father of a household who abuses the children and beats the mother. That's Burma. That's the metaphor for the situation. A nation of 52 million prisoners held hostage by a band of generals acting more like a terrorist organization than a noble institution safeguarding the aspirations of the people.

Yet within this totalitarian darkness there are diamonds. One of those diamonds is Aung San Suu Kyi. She glistens. Martin Luther King said, "When it is dark out, you see the stars." There are many stars in Burma. These stars can help inform those of us in America, dharma practitioners and human beings all over the planet who want to live from their heart, myself included, how to confront injustice with the power of patience, compassion and courage.

Burma is in lockdown. It is under siege. If anyone wants to do anything specific to help Burma and Aung San Suu Kyi, first learn about the crisis. Educate oneself about their philosophy and about the circumstances.

Aung San Suu Kyi and many of her colleagues are very hopeful that their revolution will succeed, first and foremost, because it is a people's revolution. We cannot predict the epic moments of change. The dictators in Burma will not rule forever, and George Bush is not president forever. Democracy will be won in Burma. I am confident of that.

To participate in this global revolution for a free Burma, a free America, a free Iraq, for a world "free of want and suffering," we must listen to our hearts. We must study the circumstances and learn to read between the lines of propaganda. We must more fully integrate our spiritual lives, our principles as human beings, into our politics. So that as Gandhi said, "your life becomes your message." Your living dharma. Your living spirituality. Your living freedom.

### **AXIS: Bold As Love**

*Politics and spirituality really seem to point to the over all questions of how to relax fear and love more openly.*

Alan Clements: Where do we find hope? How can we relax this fear? What is required now?

I am a slow learner. I have seen changes in myself, slow as they may be. Patience and perseverance are crucial. Beyond that? Life itself is a metaphor for the sanctity of life. Full stop. That to me is the beginning of living. Simply enter this cosmological, ecological, psychological, existential eternity—as you are. And breathe into this indivisibility and feel life, as overwhelming as it is, most of the time.

What else to do? Surrender? Indeed, it is the best course of action, at times. That life exists is hope enough that life will self-generate. Life, by its very nature, will find its own subtle systems of self-correction to its own innate struggles within the larger metaspheres, beyond our own individuality.

Is there more? Yes. Action. We are endowed to take actions, of all kinds. That's our choice. We can choose to act on our instinct for freedom. That means, we—the individuals of this planet—have the power to create change. Who could have predicted that when Gandhi held up that handful of salt to the sun, that gentle gesture of protest against colonial rule, he would ignite a trans-religious movement across social castes for

the non-violent liberation of the Indian people? He did the math: a hundred thousand British police and soldiers to three hundred million Indians. Ultimately, he led India to regain independence from Great Britain through a many millions-strong “passive resistance to oppression.” And he walked the villages and said, “Stop work.”

What a unique idea. Imagine people walking through the countryside, towns and cities of America and saying, “we refuse to work in the economy of war and therefore we stop work. How radical that would be if all of a sudden the machinery stopped.

We can access the Mahatma Gandhi within ourselves and be willing to challenge normal avenues of reaction and embody the profundity of marching and fasting and sitting still to confront injustice. We have to think of the power of the individual to affect the whole. It may be a contradiction, but I come back to the old-fashioned Buddhist story of the Buddha when he was asked to sum up his own spiritual practice. To quote one of the commentaries, if we can trust the texts, he said that he made each person that he met his ultimate object of reverence. I stand by that statement as the abiding spiritual attitude for me.

My freedom and your freedom are as inseparable as the air we breathe. It is the shared well-being of ubuntu. It is to feel each person as we encounter him or her, one at a time. The check-out counter clerk. Your lover. Your cat, people you don't know, the bird in the sky. Each breath in meditation.

We begin to feel this inextricable interrelatedness. And it really matters to feel. It really, really matters to know deeply the way in which we walk on the earth, the way we look at the world around us—to really feel the ways we talk, give, receive and listen.

We can extend, as you said, “deep listening” to the conversations of life. We begin with our own body and heart, our own repression and denial, our own joy and laughter.

If we listen to our ‘entirety’ as we work from the collective experience of ubuntu, we make each moment of our life sacred in the process. Each encounter, each set of eyes, becomes a place for the spiritual and political transformation that will enable our children’s children’s children to enjoy what we are doing right now. Speaking our conscience on Free Radio Santa Cruz — without a license! (Laughter) Because, like U Par Lay, freedom is more important than fear. Freedom is greater than so-called “the Law,” if you know what I mean.

*Indeed, I do. Thank you Alan for being here on Free Radio Santa Cruz.*

Alan Clements: An honor.

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Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights specifically states that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

**On September 30th, 2004, the longest-standing pirate radio station,  
Free Radio Santa Cruz, was shut down by the FCC.**

Pirate radio station Free Radio Santa Cruz, which had been operating without a license for nearly 10 years, was raided yesterday for the first time and shut down. We go to Santa Cruz to speak with two of the station’s longtime programmers. Yesterday morning at 9:20 in Santa Cruz, California, two dozen armed federal agents with automatic weapons and riot gear raided pirate radio station Radio Free Santa Cruz. The station had just finished airing its regular broadcast of Democracy Now! when the agents arrived on the scene. Moments after the initial raid, 5 agents from the Federal Communications Commission arrived on the scene. They located the transmitter and seized all of the station’s broadcast equipment, including the antenna. More than 50 local residents showed up on the scene to protest the shutdown of the independent radio station.

Free Radio Santa Cruz has been on the air, operating without a license for nearly 10 years and has never been raided before yesterday. Despite its unlicensed status, the station recently won a resolution of support from the Santa Cruz City Council.

NOTE: This interview was generously transcribed and edited by Mary Beth Black.  
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Additional books by Alan Clements  
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