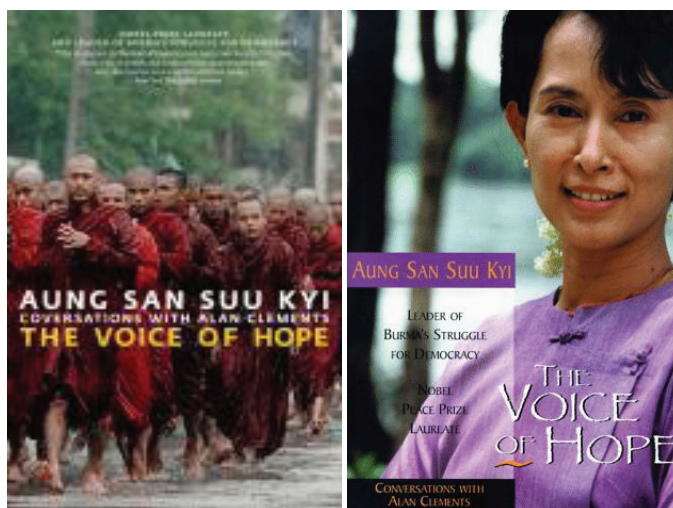


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The Voice of Hope

Aung San Suu Kyi: Conversations with Alan Clements



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REVIEWED BY WENDY LAW-YONE, A NOVELIST WHO WAS BORN AND RAISED IN BURMA.

In [reading *The Voice of Hope* I was] reminded of Trollope's line on the impossibility of revealing one's inner life in print: "No man ever did so truly, and no man ever will." As if that ever squelched the demand for autobiography. True or not, in the body of evidence defining a life, the horse's mouth is still a vital organ.

I mention autobiography [because *The Voice of Hope*] —about Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese dissident and Nobel Peace Prize laureate — falls into that category. Near to autobiography is *The Voice of Hope*, a series of conversations between Aung San Suu Kyi and Alan Clements, an American activist and scholar who spent five years in Burma as a Buddhist monk.

Conducted in Rangoon over a seven-month period, the interviews in *Voice of Hope* demonstrate clearly that the truth of a person's life is sometimes best articulated by that person. Speaking to the point is one of Aung San Suu Kyi's signature talents and helps explain her strong pull on audiences both private and public. Since her release in 1995 from six years of house arrest in Rangoon, she has drawn crowds by the thousands to her lakeside home, where they gather once a week in often punishing heat, risking arrest and imprisonment to hear her informal speeches calling for reform, civil freedoms, and an end to tyranny. Pithy, hard-hitting and above all simple, Aung San Suu Kyi's rhetoric recalls the language of the great civil disobedience proponents — Henry David Thoreau, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi — most of whom she has read and studied in depth.

Clements' interviews with Aung San Suu Kyi disclose the inspired obstinacy and vision of a woman often compared to Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel and Mahatma Gandhi as she speaks out against lethargy and injustice, fear and hate, corruption and violence. Here is a plain speaker par excellence who defines fear as a "habit," house arrest as a "job," saints as "sinners who keep on trying." Her answers to the well-considered

questions posed by the interviewer recall as well the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci, who spoke of his ordeal in Mussolini's fascist prisons as that of "an ordinary man who refuses to barter his deep convictions for anything in the world."

A similar style of self-assessment informs Aung San Suu Kyi's unsentimental remarks on her calling. "I suppose people think I'm extraordinary because I'm so simple they can't believe it . . . I cannot think of mine as a sacrifice. I think of it as a choice."

Aung San Suu Kyi is the daughter of independence leader General Aung San, modern Burma's most famous martyr, who was assassinated in 1947 when she was 2 years old. Educated abroad since age 15 — first in India, then in England, at St. Hugh's College, Oxford — her sense of identity, if not destiny, was clearly bound up with her father and homeland. One of her letters written to the man she would marry, British academic Michael Aris, conveys her sense of noblesse oblige: "I only ask one thing; that should my people need me, you would help me to do my duty to them."

That call of duty came in 1988, when Aung San Suu Kyi happened to be in Rangoon, visiting her sick mother, just as a violent popular uprising against the military government erupted. As the daughter of a national hero, Aung San Suu Kyi suddenly found herself addressing mass rallies, calling for democracy, drawing the world's attention with her forceful, graceful presence.

The pro-democracy movement was short-lived and brutally crushed, but in a gesture of deluded confidence the military rulers decided to allow free and fair elections. To their surprise alone, they lost — a defeat they avenged by placing Aung San Suu Kyi under house arrest and other National League for Democracy leaders in prison, along with scores of suspects. Testimonies given to the United Nations describe victims "tortured, beaten, shackled, and nearly suffocated . . . burned, stabbed," while others suffered "salt and chemicals rubbed into open wounds, and . . . psychological torture, including threats of death."

The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Aung San Suu Kyi at the halfway point in her sentence, lofting her onto the international stage as an icon of resistance (though failing to gain her release for another three years).

Today, [back] under house arrest, she remains cut off from her family in England, a virtual prisoner "in the larger prison of Burma under authoritarian rule," as she puts it, and of her own stature as non-violence advocate and human rights activist. She may leave the country, but only for good; therefore she cannot leave — at least not without seeming to abandon the struggle.

Leaders who grapple daily with questions of morality, freedom, action, responsibility and sacrifice are rare. Aung San Suu Kyi is one of them. How to bring about change peacefully? What is the relationship between corruption and self-deception? What are the responsibilities of a leader advocating nonviolence in a violence-driven state? Rare, too, is the freshness of her views, not least because of her singular blend of Burmese humor and Buddhist pacifism, of laughter under fire and meditation as a call to arms.

Recalling the example of Nelson Mandela, Aung San Suu Kyi has said, "something that moves people to identify themselves with what is happening in Burma will raise the level of their consciousness. And you can never tell what it is."

By now we can. It is Aung San Suu Kyi herself.

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