

The Revolution of the Spirit
Alan Clements and the Literature of Resistance
By John Malkin

**Based on an interview for “Transformation Highway”
with John Malkin, KZSC / Free Radio Santa Cruz**

On a warm September afternoon in Santa Cruz, I welcomed Alan Clements back onto my radio show, *Transformation Highway* — a program devoted to politics, culture, and the possibilities of human awakening. This was the fifth time in more than twenty years that Clements had joined me on air, each conversation not just a dialogue but a threshold in his evolution — from Buddhist monk to war journalist, spoken-word artist, and tireless witness to Burma’s democratic struggle.

His new book, *Conversation with a Dictator: A Challenge to the Authoritarian Assault*, may be the most audacious work of his life: a 492-page illustrated dialogue staged between Clements and Myanmar’s Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the man who has imprisoned Nobel Peace Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and dragged his country back into the darkness of military tyranny.

The book is not a biography, nor a straightforward work of reportage. It is something stranger, riskier — what Clements calls a “literary feature film,” a hybrid of testimony, dialogue, and psychedelic séance conjured in the unconscious of a dictator. Its visual centerpiece is more than 300 stark black-and-white illustrations — not merely x-rays of denial but a spectrum of images: fractured circuitry of tyranny, smoldering ruins of villages, hollow eyes of the disappeared, and, interspersed, symbolic visions of reconciliation and redemption. At once surreal and lifelike, the drawings unfold with a cinematic rhythm — sequential frames in a fevered dreamscape. They do not simply illustrate; they consume, as though the reader has stumbled into a film projected directly onto the mind.

Its textual heartbeat is a choreography of imagined mirror-scenes, where Clements dares the tyrant to descend into the hidden recesses of his own mind — to strip away the alibis of cruelty, dismantle the scaffolding of self-deception, and stand unclothed before the mirror of conscience as if it were his final day. In that chamber, the pathology of patriarchy is laid bare: fear as intoxication, domination as narcotic, the monologue of dictatorship that annihilates dialogue itself. And yet, within those fractures, Clements plants a faint but luminous seed — the possibility that even the most brutal heart might be pierced by grief and turned toward humanity.

Into this haunted chamber he summons *Ashoka* — not merely as history but as specter. The Indian emperor who slaughtered hundreds of thousands only to collapse in grief before the corpses of his own making. His tears transformed him into a ruler of compassion, spreading the *Dharma* instead of conquest. “The question,” Clements told me, “is not simply whether Min Aung Hlaing can change, but whether any man, stripped

of delusion, can look into the mirror of his cruelty and still find within himself the embryo of humanity.”

The stakes are staggering. More than 22,000 political prisoners languish in Myanmar’s gulags. Nearly 10,000 have been killed since the coup. Over 3.5 million are homeless. Twenty million people — one-third of the nation — are in urgent need of humanitarian aid. This, in a country that has given the world *vipassanā* (insight) meditation, where almost 5,000 monasteries and more than a million monks and nuns once embodied a refuge of conscience. Today, that refuge lies under siege. In Myanmar, nowhere is safe.

And yet — improbably — this is a book of hope.

Alan Clements: A Life of Books, Performance, and Witness

For more than three decades, Alan Clements has been one of the West’s most consistent and courageous chroniclers of Burma’s long night of dictatorship. His first book, *Burma: The Next Killing Fields?* (1991), carried a foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and sounded an international alarm about the junta’s atrocities. Six years later, *The Voice of Hope* (1997) published Clements’s six months of clandestine conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi, recorded during her brief release from house arrest.

He went on to co-author *Burma: The Revolution of the Spirit* — a landmark work also introduced by the Dalai Lama and endorsed by eight Nobel Peace Laureates — which helped etch Burma’s nonviolent struggle into the world’s conscience. *A Future to Believe In* (2011) explored the ethical and spiritual foundations of social change in extended dialogue with global human rights visionaries. *Instinct for Freedom* (2002) traced his unlikely path from drug addiction to Buddhist monkhood in Rangoon, and then into the life of political witness.

Clements also served as the principle advisor, script consultant and co-writer for John Boorman’s acclaimed film *Beyond Rangoon* (1995), which brought Burma’s pro-democracy uprising to international cinema audiences.

In the years since, he has continued to expand the literary record of the struggle. *Burma’s Voices of Freedom* (2019), a four-volume series co-authored with Fergus Harlow, gathered more than two thousand pages of oral histories from dissidents and former prisoners. His most recent work, *Unsilenced* (2025), resurrects Aung San Suu Kyi’s moral vision from the confines of prison, placing her voice back into the global conversation on authoritarianism.

But Clements’s art has never been confined to the page. He has staged spoken-word performances across North America and beyond — part theatre, part *dharma* talk, part political manifesto — weaving satire, scripture, and testimony into what he calls “psychedelic activism.” On stage as on the page, he speaks with the urgency of one who believes words can save lives.

As a monk, he trained under Mahasi Sayadaw and Sayadaw U Pandita, two of the twentieth century's foremost meditation masters, and has never abandoned the *Dhamma* as his compass for political engagement. As a writer, he has spent four decades resisting erasure and amplifying what Aung San Suu Kyi once called the "Revolution of the Spirit."

Silence as a Weapon

The timing of *Conversation with a Dictator* could not be more urgent. Aung San Suu Kyi, now eighty, remains disappeared from public life. Since the February 2021 coup, she has been held in solitary confinement, dragged through sham courts, and cut off from her family. She suffers from heart disease; her son Kim Aris has reported that she may be gravely ill. For years, no one outside the junta has seen or heard her voice.

"Her silence is no accident," Clements told me. "It is the regime's engineered crime — and its most damning confession. They seek not only to erase her voice but to incinerate the memory of her existence. That is the psychology of tyranny: to kill twice — once in the body, and again in the imagination of the people."

Dictators, he explained, weaponize absence. Silence becomes their sword. Erase the voice, and you erase the memory; erase the memory, and you fracture the movement itself. This is why Clements has built his life in defiance of erasure — resurrecting the voices the regime has tried to crush.

The Making of a Witness

Clements's path to Burma was as improbable as the book he has written. Born in the United States, he fell into addiction as a young man — morphine, cocaine, nicotine, the full pharmacopeia of escape. He stumbled, half-broken, into Rangoon's Mahasi monastery in the late 1970s, where he ordained as one of the first Western Buddhist monks under Mahasi Sayadaw and later Sayadaw U Pandita. "Detox became a life," he said — a vow to stay present instead of vanish.

"I didn't come to Burma to save anyone," Clements reflected. "I came broken. The monks taught me that awareness is the highest form of courage — to stay in the fire and not turn away."

Immersed in years of relentless mindfulness training, he learned what his teachers called "moral courage as awareness." The monastery was not an escape but a crucible — where meditation was forged into a weapon of conscience.

But Burma was no sanctuary. The "rule of law" was terror. Many of his friends were imprisoned, tortured, or killed. He saw firsthand the machinery of dictatorship — and the resilience of those who resisted it.

After leaving the robes, he became first a *dharma* teacher then a journalist. His first works — *Burma: The Next Killing Fields?* *Burma's Revolution of the Spirit*, and *The Voice of Hope* — introduced the world to a country the generals were determined to erase.

“She wasn’t simply a politician,” Clements told me of Aung San Suu Kyi. “She embodied what her people call the *Revolution of the Spirit*: the fusion of conscience, courage, and compassion as a political force. She insisted we must not vilify the enemy. We must recognize the possibility of transformation in all beings — even dictators.”

Aung San Suu Kyi’s Feminine Revolution

It is impossible to separate Clements’s new book from his decades-long dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi. She was not only a nonviolent revolutionary in the lineage of Gandhi, King, and Mandela. She brought something else — what Clements calls the “*divine feminine*” of leadership.

“She faced her torturers without hatred,” he said. “She insisted on reconciliation, on sacred reciprocity. Her mantra was simple: hope in action, love in action, compassion in action.”

Her meditation teacher, Sayadaw U Pandita — who also trained Clements — became a hidden strategist of conscience, quietly guiding her and other leaders in the *Dhamma of nonviolence*. In Clements’s words, he was one of the unseen architects of Burma’s nationwide struggle for freedom — *a revolution infused with the intelligence of the Dhamma*.

That spirit infuses *Conversation with a Dictator*. It is a book that dares to imagine that even the most brutal tyrant may still contain the seed of transformation. “If *Ashoka* could change, why not Min Aung Hlaing?” Clements asked me, his voice carrying both challenge and hope.

Literature as Weapon

Clements calls the book a form of “psychedelic activism.” Not because it is about drugs — though he is candid about the role psychedelics have played in his own healing — but because it seeks to jolt the reader out of numbness, to shatter the trance of normalized atrocity.

“This isn’t punk rock,” he told me. “It’s existential rock — art designed to wake people up. If we can’t out-create the death machine with words, images, and conscience, what chance do we have? Silence isn’t neutral; it’s complicity.”

The book is being sent directly to world leaders and cultural figures. With his colleague Fergus Harlow, Clements has launched *UseYourFreedom.org* — a campaign to gift hundreds of copies worldwide. Among the first recipients were U.S. President Donald

Trump, Julian Assange, Yoko Ono, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Pope Leo XIV, and U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres.

“All it takes is one,” Clements said. “One leader, one voice, one act of conscience. That’s how revolutions turn.”

The Stakes in Myanmar

Artists and musicians have been targeted. Clements’s friend Zeyar Thaw — co-founder of Burma’s hip hop movement and later a member of parliament — was executed last year. His crimes were poetry, music, truth itself.

“Imagine if, in America, every member of Congress and the Senate were arrested in a single night after an election,” Clements said. “That’s what happened in Myanmar on February 1, 2021. And instead of outrage, the world shrugged.”

But Myanmar is not isolated. It is one node in a web of crises that stretch across the globe. In Ukraine, Russia’s assault has torn through lives and landscapes. In Gaza, millions face the slow violence of blockade, bombardment, and genocide. In Burma as in Gaza, as in Ukraine, ordinary people are trapped between the ambitions of the powerful and the silence of the world.

“Authoritarianism always speaks in a monologue,” Clements told me. “It insists on one voice, one truth, one order. But democracy — real democracy — is dialogue. It is the willingness to listen, even to those we fear or despise. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi embodied that for decades. She refused to reduce generals to demons. She insisted that transformation was possible through conversation, conscience, and compassion. She showed us that reconciliation, not vilification, is the heart of freedom.”

Beyond Burma: Authoritarianism Everywhere

For Clements, Myanmar is not an isolated case. It is a microcosm of a global authoritarian turn.

“Look at Gaza. Look at Ukraine. Look at the rise of autocracy in Western nations,” he said. “It’s the same logic in different clothes: demonize the other, normalize atrocity, weaponize silence. Authoritarianism is government turned against its people — power inverted, consuming rather than serving.”

“The lesson of Burma is not foreign,” Clements continued. “It is here — in Australia, in the EU, in America. The same forces — fear, propaganda, silence — can hollow out democracies from within. The question is always the same: will we collapse into the monologue of dictatorship, or defend the dialogue of freedom? Dialogue is messy, imperfect, vulnerable — but it is the only thing that makes us human.”

This is why, for Clements, the stakes of his book extend far beyond Myanmar. “We are living in an era where atrocity is being normalized,” he told me. “Mass graves, bombed villages, children starved as a tactic of war — it scrolls by on our phones, and we call it news. But it is not normal. It is horror. The danger is when horror begins to feel ordinary. My work — this book — is a refusal to normalize atrocity. It is a counterspell, a reminder that nonviolence is not passive. It is the most radical weapon we have against cruelty.”

He paused. “So, the question is: what does nonviolence look like in the age of atrocity? That’s what I want this book to show. It’s not about turning away. It’s about stepping into the fire with conscience, with love, with art, with dialogue — when every instinct tells you to hate or despair. Nonviolence is resistance with a human face. And it may be the only antidote we have left.”

“That’s the gamble,” Clements concluded. “That somewhere in Min Aung Hlaing, as in *Ashoka*, there’s a fracture in the armor — a moment where grief can break through cruelty. I wrote this book for that sliver of possibility.”

Toward a Film, Toward a Movement

Clements is already adapting the book into a 75-minute performance film — part spoken word, part documentary, part visual explosion. “Imagine *A Clockwork Orange* colliding with *Schindler’s List* and Spalding Gray’s *Swimming to Cambodia* — with perhaps a dash of *My Dinner with Andre*,” he said, grinning. “And maybe even a sprinkle of AI to add a strange organic class,” he added with satirical bite. Subtitled in Burmese, it is intended not only for the world but for the dictator himself.

“Transformation sounds improbable until it happens,” he said. “But history shows us: it happens.”

The larger vision is what Clements calls a “Virtual Live Aid for Burma” — flooding the world with conscience, harnessing artists, musicians, monks, and activists to pressure the junta. “If they can weaponize silence, then we must weaponize beauty,” he told me. “That is the counter-spell.”

The Revolution of the Spirit

What makes Clements unique is not only his knowledge of Burma but the moral voltage he brings to it. He speaks in a lexicon that fuses *Dhamma* and poetry, conscience and compassion, psychedelic vision and political realism.

At the end of our conversation, he returned to the phrase that has defined his work for decades: *the Revolution of the Spirit*.

“It’s what Aung San Suu Kyi taught us,” he said. “Revolutions aren’t only political. They are existential. They are about conscience, love, redemption. That is what makes them unstoppable. Revolutions don’t unfold in abstractions. They happen in letters mailed, in

books smuggled across borders, in voices that refuse silence. That is how Burma will rise again.”

A Call to the Reader

What does he want readers — in Santa Cruz, in New York, in London — to do?

“Read the book. Share it. Send it to someone in power. Buy ten, buy a hundred. Flood the system with conscience. *Use your freedom to amplify ours.* That is what Daw Aung San Suu Kyi asked of us. That is what this revolution requires.”

The question, as always, is not whether tyranny will end. It will. The question is how much suffering it will inflict before it collapses.

Alan Clements has staked his life on reducing that suffering — one book, one conversation, one act of conscience at a time.

About the Author

John Malkin is a musician, activist, filmmaker, photographer, and radio/print journalist based in Santa Cruz, California. For more than two decades he has hosted *Transformation Highway* on KZSC / Free Radio Santa Cruz, an independent program dedicated to exploring politics, culture, music, spirituality, and movements for liberation.

Malkin’s journalism focuses on the intersections of social justice, personal liberation, and creative expression. He has written extensively about nonviolence, prison reform, war resistance, and the role of the arts in political and cultural transformation. His essays and interviews have appeared in *The Sun*, *Alternet*, *Z Magazine*, and *The Santa Cruz Sentinel*, among others.

In addition to his political and spiritual reporting, Malkin has made significant contributions to documenting music as a vehicle of resistance. He has interviewed hundreds of artists, writers, and activists associated with the punk movement, exploring the myriad ways punk has shaped activism and been shaped by it in return. These conversations were collected in his book *Punk Revolution! - An Oral History of Punk Rock Politics and Activism* (2023). The second book in his punk rock series is being released in November 2025 by Bloomsbury and is titled *Punk Spirit! - An Oral History of Punk Rock, Spirituality, and Liberation*.

As a musician and filmmaker, himself, Malkin brings a unique sensitivity to his work, bridging the worlds of art and activism. His previous books include *Sounds of Freedom: Musicians on Spirituality and Social Change* (2003) and *The Only Alternative: Christian Nonviolent Peacemakers in America* (2004).