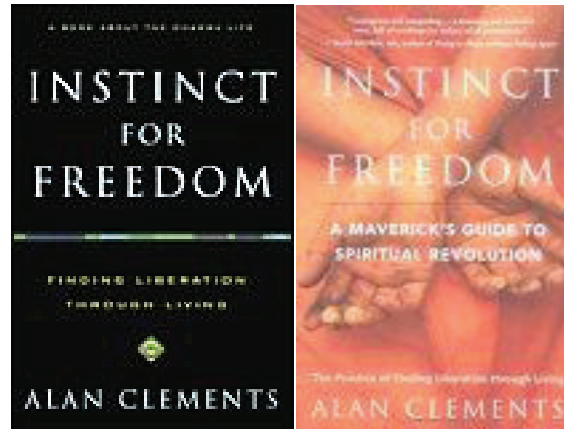


A Book Review by Sharla Sava

Instinct *for* Freedom

A Book About Everyday Revolution —
Finding Liberation Through Living



by Alan Clements

The ultimate aim of the new book by Alan Clements, *Instinct for Freedom*, is to empower people to embrace the joys and challenges of everyday life with unabashed vitality, courage and compassion. Starting from the belief that individual human consciousness plays a crucial role in the shaping of global events, Clements' call for a "revolution of the spirit" marks a timely attempt to infuse spiritual practice with political responsibility. Acutely aware of the contemporary conditions that erode our sense of well-being and individual responsibility, Clements is passionately committed to the idea that each of us plays a unique role in shaping the events of the world surrounding us. Furthermore, personal happiness depends on realizing just what this means for each of us.

Although the book is rich with spiritual insight, it does not contain a methodical outline of how to achieve individual liberation. Clements refuses to lay out a central plan of action, as is the model found in many of the current handbooks of the New Age, because stringent guidelines and cozy predictions invite conformity, complacency and, ultimately, disappointment. In the book Clements resolutely resists playing the role of a teacher or guru proffering access to absolute truth. Rather, what we find here is a more poetic vision of "engaged mysticism," where truth is an elusive, contingent and ultimately a mysterious journey.

The book relies on an energetic blend of three different narrative approaches. First, it is a personal memoir, a chronology tracing the life of an American man coming of age in the mind-expanding and turbulent era of the late 1960s and travelling around the world in search of spiritual meaning. Second, it is a handbook of accessible spiritual lessons handed down by a former Buddhist monk and experienced Dharma teacher. Third, it is a radical inquiry concerned with developing a new worldview that protects spiritual growth while strongly disavowing established dogmas and metaphysical certainty. Relying on metaphors such as "World Dharma" and "Natural Freedom," Clements' efforts share a similarity of intention with such notable figures as the Dalai Lama, Thich Nhat Hanh, Joanna Macy, and Alice Walker, establishing new inroads between universal spiritual truths and materially grounded activism.

There are any number of reasons to go out and get yourself a copy of *Instinct for Freedom*. Above all, it is eminently readable — dramatic, entertaining, and provocative. Because he has risked and travelled and witnessed so much, Clements has truly amassed a vast storehouse of life experience, and his writing reflects the adventures and lessons that he has encountered along the way. No doubt this spirit of adventure has something to do with the intensity of his idealism — whenever things appear to be getting too easy or too comfortable, he seems compelled to shake them up and set entirely new goals as a means to keep his inner awareness sharp and vital. From his days as a bohemian artist in the States, to his search for liberation in a Buddhist monastery and on the streets of South East Asia, to his involvement with Aung San Suu Kyi's fight against dictatorship in Burma or his time in former Yugoslavia, Clements weaves together an exciting wealth of stories. His writing moves from autobiographical description to thoughtful speculation, tackling matters such as how to safeguard against spiritual indoctrination and negativity as well as how to nourish confidence, creative expression and genuine spiritual growth.

Given Clements' background, it is not surprising that, in this book, Buddhist meditation appears as a vehicle of human liberation. As he says "...I think Buddhism should be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for bringing awareness-based intensive meditation into the world. As a means to explore enhanced states of consciousness it is unsurpassed."

After quitting college in 1971, Clements figures that the kind of spiritual wisdom he is looking for is unavailable in the United States. He goes on to explain how and why he eventually makes the decision to head off to South East Asia in pursuit of enlightenment. While the best known icons of the 60s — Ram Dass, the Beatles, Timothy Leary — would find their path via Indian gurus, LSD and Transcendental Meditation, Clements' own path would take him further afield. He talks about ending up in Burma, a neighbouring country to Thailand, eventually as the first American to ordain as a Buddhist monk, doing vipassana, or insight meditation up to twenty-hours a day for years at a time. Vipassana belongs to the tradition of Theravada Buddhism, and has been practiced in the monasteries of Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Sri Lanka for thousands of years. Clements devotes a good portion of the book to describing his training in the monastery and the kinds of mental transformations that he experiences over the years, as he moves along the spectrum of insight toward nirvana, the perfect state of meditative awareness.

Beginning in Burma and then moving elsewhere, Clements spends the better part of the next two decades intensely involved with insight meditation. This practice — as Clements aptly demonstrates — appeals to Westerners because it takes as its basis a stripped-down system of meditative awareness. Unlike other traditional spiritual practices, this path to awakening does not make extensive use of visualizations or highly formalized rituals. Instead, insight meditation relies on the premise that valuable truths about ourselves can be gained simply by observing and becoming increasingly conscious of our own mind-states as they change from moment to moment. During the 1980s Clements was to become one of the first wave of Dharma teachers who trained in the east and returned to the west to nourish the nascent community of insight practitioners that can be found around North America today.

But that is not the end of this story. Buddhism may be at the heart of the book, but it is never presented as the singular vehicle of human liberation. This is because while Clements may have assumed the posture, he definitely does not remain comfortably seated. And we, as readers, evolve along with Clements, as he is compelled to admit the messy and painful world of human struggle into his notion of spiritual truth. As a result of witnessing the atrocities and gross political injustices routinely enacted by the military dictatorship in Burma — which he sees as his spiritual home — Clements goes through a period of political awakening and remains forever changed. The insights gained in the meditation hall, while precious, are no longer sufficient.

These days, while Clements openly admits that the insights gained by his intensive meditation training remain precious, he definitely stops short of identifying himself as "a Buddhist." The goal that Clements strives for today is a way of life that increases individual happiness while also expanding our compassionate awareness of others. Along the way he has disavowed himself of much of the doctrine and framework that structure classical Buddhism. And this is where the idea of "freedom" comes in — and it is taken as a more

important goal than any sort of transcendent revelation or faithful adherence to religious doctrine.

The next thing that we might want to know, then, is what Clements means when he talks about freedom. Clearly, freedom is political — it has to do with the maintenance of a democratic civil society, a society in which universal human rights and individual political representation are guaranteed. *Instinct for Freedom* engages various instances of these epic battles for freedom: the Civil Rights movement in the United States, the fight against apartheid in South Africa, the democracy movements strategizing to overthrow state-run communism in the former Soviet Union, or the fight of Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy against the military dictatorship in Burma. Clements relies on these examples to show that political freedom can, and must, be actively sought.

But what about those of us already living in a democracy — those of us whose political freedoms — thankfully — remain largely unrestricted? This is, of course, where the question of freedom gets complicated. After all, freedom is what American society is all about, and it appears to be readily available. Consumer culture seems to offer me freedom every single day of the week — freedom from washing dishes by hand, freedom from long line-ups, boredom and aching feet. In my own frame of reference 'freedom' is what I see on the car ads when I watch TV; it's what is promised to me when I buy the latest Sports Utility Vehicle. I don't need to fight for freedom — I just need to earn enough to afford it.

Furthermore, this type of freedom represents the American way of life. And, since the horrifying events of September 11th, 2001, it has taken on a very deep political resonance. We are fortunate, indeed, to live in a world where freedom has largely become a question of greater efficiency, increased comfort and an improved quality of life. To be nourished by this world is a privilege that many will never know. When we fight to maintain this type of freedom we appear to join the morally bankrupt ranks of President Bush's Operation Enduring Freedom, where the preservation of the American way of life has become a project of global ambition and scale. Because of this situation, the question of freedom is eminently suitable to our current social moment. Clements evidently has his finger right on the pulse of things.

So where, exactly, is *Instinct for Freedom* situated in this complicated arena? These are very delicate questions, ideologically fraught and enormously difficult to resolve. For Clements the question of human freedom, at any and all levels, is bound by the biological and spiritual determinants of consciousness. As such, it is taken as an inherent quality, available to each one of us, here and now. Freedom can't be bought or sold. It must be mindfully attended to so as to counter the pervasive sensations of insecurity and disenchantment wrought by modernity. Following this line of thinking, we come to see that the movement toward material and spiritual liberty must begin with the transformation of personal beliefs and attitudes. Because they are produced within the prism of living human consciousness, even global political struggles have to be engaged with the right attitude. As such, it is the individual that is ultimately accountable. What is puzzling is why some people will stand up and fight for justice while others will remain behind, either watching the fight from a distance or turning completely away. Clements argues that this is where the recovery of our innate "instinct" for freedom must enter the picture, an instinct that honors universal human dignity and mutual respect and works to actualize these qualities. Freedom has to be realized from within and acted from without.

For Clements freedom is an inclusive goal. We can't truly know freedom if certain peoples or nations are overlooked or ignored. Its realization involves — and implicates — every person who is alive on the planet right now. As such, it is up to every one of us to locate that innate 'instinct' within ourselves and to empower it in whatever way we see fit. Clements doesn't pretend to know precisely how to accomplish this ideal, but he does suggest that the process involves vigilance, honest self-reflection and the recovery of a genuine and uncontrived way of being in the world. It also involves grasping our mutual interrelatedness as a human family. He is careful to admit that this is a challenging process, demanding an attitude of discovery and commitment. Clements' viewpoint suggests that the dark side of our own version of freedom — the freedom afforded by the First World — will be addressed as we work to engage this new kind of global conscience and accountability. Given the task at hand, it's no wonder that Clements' message emphasizes courage.

We do have a role to play. We can learn from the struggle for freedom by participating in it, in mind and

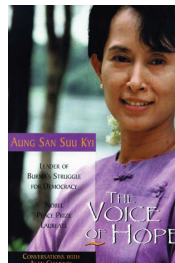
body, at home and elsewhere. This pursuit will lead us to greater happiness. The question of where we must begin this struggle, Clements suggests, is best answered by Aung San Suu Kyi, who says “[a] people which would build a nation in which strong, democratic institutions are firmly established as a guarantee against state-induced power must first learn to liberate their own minds from apathy and fear.” Working from this concept of liberation Clements strikes his most beautiful and timely chord. There is, without question, a need to train the conscious mind in order to liberate it from forces such as fear and apathy, but that is just the beginning of our collective struggle for freedom.

Sharla Sava is a freelance writer with her
Ph .D. in Cultural Anthropology & Global Communications,
Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

To excerpt “Instinct for Freedom,” interview the author, or foreign rights contact:

Alan Clements
Telephone: 1-604-251-1781
www.everydayrevolution.org
Email: contact@worldddharma.com

Additional books by Alan Clements



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Please contact:

World Dharma
Attention: Alan Clements
1950 West Broadway / P.O. Box 29004
Vancouver, BC, V6J 5C2 Canada
Telephone: 1-604-251-1781
www.EverydayRevolution.org or www.AlanClements.com
Email: contact@worlddharma.com

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