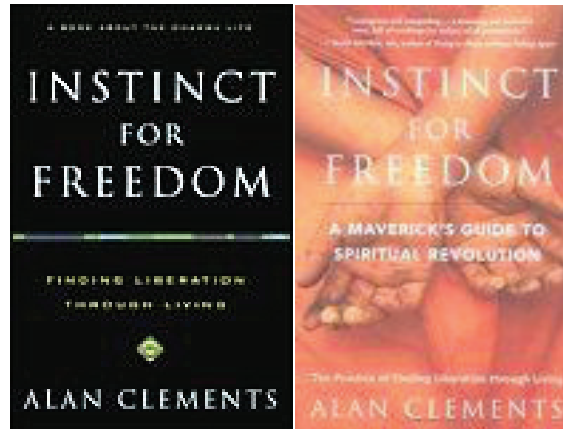


Instinct *for* Freedom

A Book About Everyday Revolution —
Finding Liberation Through Living

by Alan Clements



SPIRITUALLY INCORRECT

**AN INTERVIEW WITH ALAN CLEMENTS
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INQUIRING MIND - THE VIPASSANA BUDDHIST JOURNAL

Alan Clements was one of the first Westerners to become a Buddhist monk in Burma, where he lived for the good part of a decade, studying primarily under Sayadaw U Pandita. Since leaving the monastery, Clements has become a teacher of what he calls “World Dharma,” a spoken word artist, and an activist working for global human rights. Since 1988, Clements has played a prominent role in bringing Burma’s “revolution of the spirit” to the forefront of international awareness through his books: “Burma: The Next Killing Fields?,” “Burma’s Revolution of the Spirit,” and “The Voice of Hope,” a book of conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma’s Nobel peace laureate. In addition, Clements was the script revisionist and advisor for “Beyond Rangoon,” a feature film depicting Burma’s struggle for democracy, directed by John Boorman. Mr. Clements’ current book, “Instinct for Freedom: Finding Liberation Through Living” (New World Library, 2002) is his first to deal explicitly with the Dharma.

Inquiring Mind: You were the first to study with Sayadaw U Pandita. What was that like?

Alan Clements: My relationship with my teacher Sayadaw U Pandita, was an elegant kind of spiritual friendship, if you will. I went to Burma to learn how to look at myself, and he compassionately steered me into my own being. We touched at the deepest levels I had ever known. After years of training and watching many Westerners practice under his guidance, I found that he entered meditators in ways dramatically different from

anything I had previously known from other spiritual teachers. He was, in many ways, a type of Theravadan Trungpa Rinpoche—a provocateur of radical awakening, with a certain kind of crazy wisdom to him. He never coddled your ego. He asked trick questions. He was even ruthless at times. And just when you thought you were at your limit, he offered you ice cream, literally and metaphorically. He asked you to examine whether you were practicing the dharma to confirm your egoic-identity and your sense of comfort, or to really know the nature of the mind. I needed someone to help me through some very intricate styles of self-protection, and he's a master at that. And as far as I could see, he was propelled by one thing—nirvana; your realization of inner zero gravity.

Inquiring Mind: In your new book you describe a time that you were in great despair, and had lost sight of the value of that teaching.

AC: I've cried many times since I disrobed and left the monastery, but I don't think I ever lost sight of my desire for freedom, which is something I like to think of as the essence of those teachings.

I went to Burma in 1977 as a rebellious 26 year old artist who had done a lot of psychoactive substances and was existentially on fire. I desperately wanted to know why I felt so much pain and despair. And why was there so much hatred and war? I wanted to understand the cause of suffering, both inside and outside. A classic model of self-discovery.

At that time, my desire was to study with the elders in a meditative tradition that said, 'Self-awareness is the key quality of consciousness necessary to discover yourself and the source of your pain.' Basic vipassana.

And that early period of meditative training in Burma was profound. I felt that Sayadaw U Pandita was brilliant at helping me understand the colors of my own mind. As an artist his metaphor of meditation as art worked well for me. What was the color of love? The color of fear? The color of freedom? I apprenticed with him. As such, I learned the artistry, so to speak, of manifesting a more liberated expression of being. In that process, however, there was something else that came through that I would call ideology, dogma, religion. The teachings made it clear that the world we are born into—this samsara—is as an immeasurable sea of suffering. "Birth is suffering. Old age is suffering. All conditioned phenomena are suffering. You'll know that, in time, young man. Right now you still think that desiring sense pleasure is a good thing, but soon you'll see that it's pure folly, the grandest of all follies. Desire is the very source of your suffering. And the cause for your future suffering as well." Just like that, the theory of rebirth entered the equation.

Later it was explained that existence was not confined to just this one lifetime alone, nor just this one plane of perception. Rather, samsara was hyper-dimensional—a holographic infinity comprised of four hell realms, an animal realm, a human realm, six heaven worlds, and nineteen realms of pure consciousness, or brahma lokas, as they're called. Thirty one planes of existence in all. Suddenly, here was this whole Buddhist cosmology—a doctrine of totality—right in front of me. Resplendent with karma, rebirth, heaven, hell, nirvana, psychic powers, and Buddhahood, spiritual perfection itself. I had traveled to Burma to meditate—to explore the nature of consciousness—and here I was being taught this complete dogma. And one predicated on the belief that the Buddha was omniscient. It took seven years, but in good faith, I download an entire religion. I became indoctrinated.

I remember having a number of conversations in Burma with Dipama's sister, where she explained in great detail how both she and her sister had learned how to duplicate their bodies, fly through space and appear spontaneously in a room to meet with their teacher, Munindra-gyi. Oddly, I never once questioned her claims. I think I was so enamored with her goodness that I never asked to see the evidence, "like, where's the Rodney King factor here?" Give me a display and I'll film it.

IM: What made you question the beliefs you had accepted? When did your understanding begin to shift?

AC: In 1984, soon after disrobing as a monk, I came back to America, and at the behest of my old friend, Joseph Goldstein, brought Sayadaw U Pandita with me to conduct a special retreat at IMS for a handful of selected Western Buddhist teachers. At the end of the retreat I returned to Burma to continue my own practice for a good part of the next four years. Also, I began leading meditation retreats in different parts of the world. At the end of one such retreat in Australia, I picked up a copy of Time magazine. On the cover was a photograph of a group of Buddhist monks with the caption that read, “Bullets in Alms Bowls.” To my horror, it was a story about the democracy uprisings in Burma and their violent oppression by the military dictatorship. According to the article, the generals, fearing the power of the monks and nuns, began attacking the monasteries in Rangoon and Mandalay. I thought that my teachers and friends may have been imprisoned or killed. Since Burma was my spiritual home — I responded, I think, as any loyal son or daughter would to their own family.

I immediately went to Bangkok, hoping to get into Burma, but was told that the country had been sealed—no one was allowed in or out. I decided to go in underground. Once in, my heart cracked open. No amount of meditation or spiritual training could have prepared me for what I witnessed. I walked into a full scale “ethnic cleansing.” As a result, my views about life and the dharma have never been the same. I wrote about my experiences in my first book, *Burma: The Next Killing Fields?*

IM: When did you meet Aung San Suu Kyi?

AC: I met Aung San Suu Kyi for the first time in 1995, four years after she was awarded the Nobel Peace prize. It was at her home in Rangoon, shortly after her release from six years of incarceration. We were introduced through our mutual friend U Tin Oo, who just happened to be Aung San Suu Kyi’s closest colleague.

After our first meeting we realized that the three of us shared a common dharma bond—we were all closely aligned with the teachings of Sayadaw U Pandita.

Over the course of next five months Aung San Suu Kyi and I met on a regular basis. Our conversations were taped, transcribed, and smuggled out of the country. Soon after my return to Paris, where I was living at the time, the transcripts were published into a book called, *The Voice of Hope — Conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi*.

During our talks Aung San Suu Kyi would often emphasize how you cannot separate the political from the spiritual. At the root of both she would say is “human dignity and human freedom.” She helped me to understand the human in context —that we are in relationship all the time, to society, to culture, to politics, to everyday life. She revealed a revolutionary, secular dharma, that dealt with how to find liberation through living, outwardly and inwardly at the same time. “Love is an action,” she would say, “it is not a state of mind alone.” Just as generosity is an action, so too is loving-kindness. Think about it. Who would think that generosity is successful to the extent that one merely thinks about being generous? Imagine sitting there on your meditation cushion for eight hours a day in a ten day retreat saying to yourself, “may I be generous, may I be less stingy, may all beings be less stingy and more generous.” And meanwhile, all around you, you imagine seeing in your mind beggars with their hands out for food. And you go on saying to yourself, “may I be generous and less stingy.” Obviously, you become less stingy by getting up and going outside and giving something to a real beggar. Being generous in ‘real life’ develops generosity, not simply fantasizing about being generous. In the same way, love is an action. You’ve got to get up off your seat to express it. Otherwise it’s “fantasy metta.”

IM: So you went from a kind of focus on individual liberation through meditation, to feeling that true liberation is generated in the marketplace or in the political field, by what you confront and how you confront it. Is that what you’re calling world dharma?

AC: World Dharma is about making life one’s art—finding liberation through living, creatively, passionately, wherever and with whomever we find ourselves, without distinction. It’s also about being an individual—

embodying the beauty of our uniqueness as humans, our personal expression of self. I see meditation as a wonderful means to help establish an intimate relationship with one's own states of mind. What I object to however, is the idea often promoted by spiritual teachers, that the dharma life is about trying to empty one's self of self-identity. I believe just the opposite. I see "self"—our individuality—as the greatest gift in life.

IM: Self in what sense?

AC: Just as no two finger prints are the same, I see self in the same way. We are unique, each of us. No two of us are alike. So I mean 'self' in the sense of me being a man with a unique 'mind print.' My particular sense of self also has many idiosyncracies, contradictions, and competing appetites, including a love of life and a fear of death.

I'm also someone who knows that he'll never know the totality of anything, much less the totality of the cosmos, as we're led to believe that the Buddha knew. The classical texts state that the Buddha was 'the knower of all things that could be known.' That he could perform every type of miracle. That he could predict the future and see a hundred-thousand lifetimes into the past. A bit of stretch, wouldn't you say? No one knows the totality of the universe, do they? Am I missing something? To any extent, the projection of perfection seems to have gotten in the way of basic human understanding.

IM: Do you see the Mahasi system of Theravada Buddhism, as it is being taught here in the West, as transmitting this total belief system?

AC: I can't answer that. I don't lead retreats with anyone who teaches in that system, exclusively. But my issue is not with Buddhism, per se. It's with teachings that promote the idea that one should escape the most intimate, beautiful aspect of life, which is self, and all of our sub-selves—our own unique relationship to being human.

And why all this preoccupation with disappearing? Overcoming self? Becoming empty? Being present? Now, now, now. Now you see me, now you don't. I mean, who's going to feed the children? Who's going to steward the planet? Who's going to become the next Galileo? We need to escape the gravity of the now and leap out of the box into radical otherness...complete uncertainty.

My gut feeling is that self—the circuitry of our individual intelligence—is still in its infancy. We are new born. Embracing self is an invitation to nurture and love and explore this universe inside and outside called life by us humans. After all, we just got up off all fours several hundred thousand years ago and we are just beginning to understand the most basic workings of consciousness. I love the mind. I don't want to escape it. I want to inhabit it—all of it. I also want us to explore, peacefully, the galaxy, the universe, discover new dimensions of this mystery.

I don't feel that the best life is no life. That's what I feel is often taught and believed in many Buddhist circles. It's as if one nirvana fits all and the best life is when the last one is taken. All for what? So you can finally die forever?

IM: From what I have witnessed, the idea of escaping the self is usually presented as simply not being attached to your own set of desires and personal goals.

AC: As far as I understand, the Buddhist practice of non-grasping is meant as a means to discover anatta—that 'you' don't exist. My point is that we do exist and that we must do all that we can to learn how to embody our existence, our humanness, and not homogenize it or try to transcend it. And to me, that means desire. It's taken me a long time to see desire as a beautiful thing. I love drinking coffee in the morning. I love sex. I love...

IM: Don't you mean you love the satisfaction of your desires?

AC: I love both. I love desire—the heat of passion—as well as the satisfaction of desire when its met. But I can also live with restraint. I did it for years in a monastery and I do it every day of my life. And I've taken restraint to some provocative limits. In the monastery I lived for years without sex. Years without touching a woman. But I also found a kind of satisfaction in the desire to restrain one form of sexuality for another expression it. It wasn't as if sexuality went away. You transmuted it into another form. There was something very erotic about celibacy.

There were many other forms of restraint as well. I was silent for many months at a time. Still today, I can cross my legs and sit still without moving whenever I want. I'm not afraid of myself. And to me desire and passion are vital aspects of living as a free human being.

IM: Do you actually find the feeling of desire to be pleasant?

AC: Yes, I like the vitality and clarity that it brings. I also like the raw feeling of it. It's very organic. I like feeling that I like things and want things. For instance, I like that I'm excited that I'll be giving a public talk this evening in Santa Cruz. And I like knowing that I'll meet new people there. I'm equally excited about being here with you having this conversation right now.

IM: Didn't you have experiences in your meditation practice where you felt desires as painful? Or are you merely willing to accept the pain because you love life and don't want to cut yourself off from any of its manifestations?

AC: Abstaining from desire in meditation was just a basic means to experience what it meant to have a mind temporarily free of desire. Okay, desirelessness was cool. I got a taste of it. Now I know that I can have desires and also know that I won't be overwhelmed by them. And if I do, so what? I'm not afraid.

The freedom I'm speaking about today is much larger and more natural than the absence of something as human as desire. I'm simply no longer interested in being celibate, sexually, mentally, or emotionally. Freedom is an inclusive condition, not an absence from something.

Another complexity I have with classical Buddhism and vipassana meditation in general is its drive towards achieving a state of equanimity, as if perpetual balance is the best way to be in life. A bit too Dr. Spock-like for my taste. Flat lining the emotions isn't part of my picture. Nor am I interested in the idea that dispassion and stillness are characteristics of the highest states of consciousness. I'll be still enough when I die. For now, I like singing. I like music. I like dancing. I like yoga. I like hip hop theater. I like good wine. I like things, most things that is. Unless, I don't like it. Normal behavior, in other words.

In other words, embodying our humanness in all our dimensions, to me, is the sweetest embrace of life. What else is there? So a lot of the spiritual journey has been in overcoming the contorting projection of perfection cast upon the ordinariness of being human. I think we can afford to relax a bit, laugh more, and enjoy the ride.

IM: I think that a lot of people would say that meditation is simply a way of getting you in touch with all of those aspects of yourself, so that you can exist within your humanness with more ease and freedom.

AC: I agree. But meditation isn't just one thing, is it? The way I see it today, meditation is a means to usher one into life and away from ideas of escaping or transcending it. But one must be careful. Meditation is not a substitute for living. I think meditation is like a simulator for an airplane. It helps you to understand yourself so that you can get out there and fly.

Do I still meditate? Generally speaking, it's no longer that interesting to sit and watch my breath. It's

still cool to do every now and again, but I'm choosing to live more from the place of what a full breath affords me. I rarely, if ever, think that I need to be more quiet and still, or less engaged in this or that. Some years ago, I even got tired of introspection and self-reflection—always on myself to improve this or overcome that. Naturalness is my best method of awakening. From there, my most liberating sense of intelligence seems to arise by itself.

Frankly, I think there should be a moratorium on intensive meditation for most long term meditators. It's so easy to go to sleep through sitting. Worse yet, one becomes robotic, institutionalized, predictable, cut off from themselves. I've seen it happen this way to many people. Such individuals should be encouraged to dive back into the world, into their flesh, and live outwardly through their understanding. Life is the best teacher, not sitting and silence, only.

IM: Are there any spiritual teachers who you've met or studied with who suggest, at some level of maturity, a cessation of formal practice?

AC: Not really, but I'm not sure I really know, because I usually don't hang out with people who call themselves spiritual teachers, or I should say, I don't hang out with those who consider themselves "enlightened," or "beyond suffering," "or teachers of enlightenment," which we see and hear so much of today in the West.

IM: Are people claiming that? I don't think there are very many vipassana teachers in the IMS-Spirit Rock circles who would claim that.

AC: I'm not speaking about vipassana teachers in particular. But am I wrong in assuming that the senior vipassana teachers in your circles teach from within a Buddhist system of progressive enlightenment? Isn't that why vipassana is called vipassana? It's an ancient system that is firmly rooted within a tradition of enlightenment, right?

IM: I wouldn't define the standard vipassana teaching as being primarily about enlightenment. It emphasizes gaining wisdom about yourself and gaining freedom from your own drama and psychic traps.

AC: Hmm... I was taught that vipassana, the word itself, meant something like 'the incessant flow of awareness upon the mind in such a way that it discovers the three characteristics of conditioned consciousness—impermanence, emptiness of self, and dukkha—for the purpose of realizing nirvana, or enlightenment. But setting etymology aside, perhaps the funniest thing is that I've become enlightened in three different Buddhist traditions: Zen, Dzogchen, and Vipassana. And maybe more. Because when you take into account the different interpretations of enlightenment just within the many different traditions of vipassana, one sees that most of the traditions resolutely disagree with the other traditions understanding of enlightenment.

IM: What do you mean, enlightened?

AC: I mean just that, enlightened by classical standards. For instance, when I was in Nepal with a famous Dzogchen master, he gave both me and my friend the "pointing out instructions." At the end of the session we talked and he said through his translator, "You have now attained the same state of awakening as the Buddha." He also said "that doing more than twenty days of intensive vipassana meditation was generally counterproductive to this no-dual state of awakening." An interesting comment coming from the one of the greatest meditation masters of our era.

When I was in Burma practicing with my teachers I went through the classical stages of insight on many occasions and realized various states of consciousness that could be classified as nirvanic experiences. I've done Zen retreats in which I've had powerful moments of 'awakening.' But so what? Making love at

times has also blown my mind. As has smoking DMT. And witnessing genocide ripped me apart. But what does any of it show me today? Labels are irrelevant. What is the translation? What do we feel? That's all that matters.

What I've learned is that freedom is a very relative condition. It changes with the circumstances. Alzheimer's disease has shown us all that one can forget their own name. And so these so called "peak" experiences are no more the pinnacle of life than putting a man on the moon is the final answer to exploring the cosmos. We have just begun to understand life. And meditation is not the final solution to existence. (Sings) Do re mi fa so la.... It is a lovely way of learning more notes in the song of our life, but it is not the final say on how best to survive as a species.

Now don't get me wrong. I think that Buddhist meditation should be awarded the Nobel Peace prize for its power in introducing humans to themselves. I'm one of the greatest fans of meditation. But there came a point when I had to examine what I knew from direct experience and separate it from both projection and what I had inherited as dogma. And so much of Buddhism is about dogma, and therefore irrelevant to me today. I'm not sure who said it but religion itself is a form of neurological disorder. And Buddhism is just another religion. An interesting one, for the most part. But a religion none the less.

Just the other day I read something by a famous Tibetan Buddhist teacher, who may have even been quoting the Buddha, I don't remember for sure. But he was going on about Buddhist hell worlds, and how gruesome they are, and I was disappointed. Sure, it's fine that he speaks his mind. I'm into free speech. But enough about hell already. Don't you think? We have enough hell on earth today with all this terrorism and fear of small pox and dirty nukes. And then comes hell in our next life for not being a spiritually correct Tibetan Buddhist, or Burmese Buddhist, or Thai Buddhist. Spiritual correctness is dangerous.

I think we should start a campaign of spiritual disobedience towards all religions and preachers and teachers who espouse "rebirth in hell rhetoric." I'll begin right now. I'm calling for the end of hell, whether it be from the Buddhists, Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, or whomever. Come on. There's a much better way to control people other than threatening hell in their next life. It's called living as a free human being and respecting the freedom of others. We need to inspire each other, not scare each other with threats of being boiled in a pot for one-hundred thousand lifetimes. The only thing worse than Buddhist hell is Catholic hell. One's almost forever and the other is eternal. Men. What they come up with.

IM: And would you also banish teaching about heaven, nirvana or the unconditioned state?

AC: We are in nirvana right now. I think when we accept that life 'is', and that we are very limited creatures, we can get on with living as ordinary human beings doing remarkable things with this one and only life that we know. But let's not get stuck in some high, singular note called nirvana and just go on singing silently forever and ever. (Sings) Ahhhhh. Nirvana may be cool and peaceful, but I happen to be a complex, energetic, finite human being who happens to like being in a body at the moment. I don't like just sitting there all the time assuming that 'stillness' is freedom. I'm an active lover of the dharma, but I believe in finding one's liberation through living in the world, where it is often messy, and harsh. We need to develop human responses to life, not transcendent ones.

IM: Is that what you mean by what you call "world dharma?"

AC: World Dharma is another way of talking about the interplay of life meeting life. So it's an empowerment of shared space. In other words, I am my relationships. It's what Archbishop Desmond Tutu calls ubuntu. He says, "A person becomes a person through other persons. What elevates you, elevates me, and what denigrates you, denigrates me." It's all about interrelatedness.

With that said, we must be vigilant against spiritual indoctrination, and unscripted presence is one of the best forms of spiritual self-defense.

IM: I would guess that this unscripted presence would not try to be any particular way, and perhaps not even try to be mindful.

AC: Being intelligent is much more important than being mindful. And generally speaking, mindfulness itself is somewhat extraneous to me at this point. You can be so aware of yourself that it's a burden. Always watching, watching, watching. Frankly, I like being anyway I want to be, always and that includes not knowing at times. I love having a mind. Generally speaking, I love thoughts. I love the process of discovering intelligence...what is it?

And for the most part, I try to avoid being in the now, exclusively. It's way too narrow. Sure, it's okay when I'm reading a book. But I like imagination and contemplating the future. Can you imagine two or three generations from now, the kids saying, "Hey, you guys and gals, why were you so present and in the now? Why weren't you thinking of us? Why weren't you getting up off of your present moment awareness and thinking about something larger than your need to overcome yourself? Why weren't you thinking about us?"

IM: Why weren't you out saving the world?

AC: Yes, that too. I've come to see that love and compassion are time-based qualities. They care about things larger than oneself in the moment. But overall, all I'm saying is to be you—be an original, creative voice that's out there expressing the goodness of your life.

Yes, of course, speak out about human rights. We must do all that we can to give back, offer some creative expression from the uncontrived depths of our own soul. We must creatively exercise our freedom, and not disassociate from thoughts. So often, meditators are taught to believe that associating with the past or future is somehow wrong. I say go ahead, think of the future. Build a dream. We should use reason and reflection and intuition to develop our dharma intelligence. For me, this ideal of a disassociated peace is really an aberration of spirituality.

IM: So what exactly are you teaching now when you lead retreats?

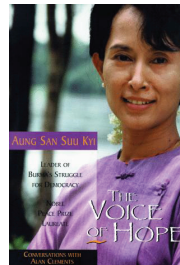
AC: I'm not really teaching anything, as such. I do share my thoughts. I impart what I know. But I don't teach and I don't believe in having students. I call my residential gatherings World Dharma Retreats. We meditate four or five times a day but for only 30 minutes at a time. We have lively dialogues about the most important issues we face in our lives. We eat good meals. Do yoga twice a day. Have plenty of breaks and a lot of free time to read, walk, and be in nature. And everything is optional. And we allow couples to be couples as well. Nor are my retreats silent. There are spaces for silence and other spaces for engaging. We create a sacred space. That's most important. And we explore the importance of being human and what it may mean to each person at the retreat.

"Favor the question, always question." Elie Wiesel said. "Do not accept answers as definitive. Answers change. Questions don't. Always question those who are certain of what they are saying. Always favor the person who is tolerant enough to understand that there are no absolute answers, but there are absolute questions." That's my challenge, to keep the questions alive.

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