An Interview with Alan Clements

by Catherine Ingram

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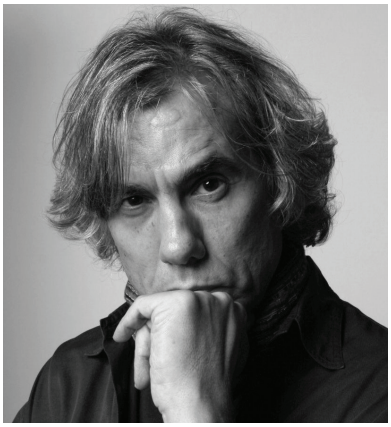

Biography

Alan Clements began training in Buddhism and Vipassana (Insight) meditation in 1974, and spent nearly eight years in Southeast Asia studying with some of the most renowned Vipassana teachers in the world. He ordained as a Buddhist monk and lived for five years at the Mahasi Meditation Center in Rangoon, Burma, studying under the guidance of the late Mahasi Sayadaw and his successor Sayadaw U Pandita. Since disrobing in 1983, Alan has been leading retreats in North America and Australia. His teaching focuses on not only intensive meditation practice but on bringing a passion for spiritual and psychological growth to all aspects of life.

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Catherine Ingram: Alan, you've spent many years in Southeast Asian monasteries, primarily in Burma but also in Sri Lanka and Thailand, and you've trained very strictly in Buddhist psychology and insight (vipassana) meditation. In the last seven years since you've disrobed, you've been living in the U.S., lecturing, teaching retreats, and attempting to integrate your understanding in a Western culture. Will you speak about this evolution?

Alan Clements: My initial movement from the world into monasticism in Burma came from a deep feeling that my life was empty and that life itself was devoid of purpose or meaning. I was restless and struggling to make sense of it. At the same time, I was awed by the study of the mind and I desperately wanted to learn more about it, especially the aspects of it that were so painfully on fire.

CI: So essentially, your motivation was one of dissatisfaction with your life?

AC: Yes, at that time in my life I saw pain everywhere. On the one hand was my own internal uncertainty, and on the other hand I saw a world in conflict. In myself I experienced insecurity, fear, anger, loneliness, and a deep sense of my own mortality.

Outside I saw a planet in flames -- genocide, war, hunger, pollution, rape, torture. "Why?" I kept asking. Why is the world like this? Why so much suffering? It was dismal.

I was familiar with Buddhist principles and had practiced vipassana meditation at that point in my life, so I had some small degree of distance on some of this -- there was some balance and joy in my life -- but on the whole, my inner and outer worlds appeared treacherous. It wasn't simply an issue of changing environments, settling somewhere on a piece of beautiful land, being more creative, having more money or

another relationship nor did it feel merely like a psychological issue. I felt that I had played out what the world had to offer, and now resolution had to come from within. There was a deep quaking at the root of my being driving me to understand the nature of life. The existential despair was overwhelming. I know many people have felt this way at one time or another. It was my dark night of the soul, and the fire to resolve the issue burned deep in my core. So I decided to become a Buddhist monk and live in a monastery in Asia, more or less out of spiritual desperation. I had no other choice but to devote my life to facing this mystery and this pain.

CI: Why did you choose Burma?

AC: I had visited Burma during the mid-seventies and I had fallen in love with it then. The elegance of the people, their generosity, their grace, their extraordinary devotion to the teachings of the Buddha, and also the beauty of a land which had been basically Buddhist for nearly 2,000 years. This touched me like no other place I had ever been. I felt on that first visit that I would like to study dharma there, but at that time one could get only a seven-day visa.

Two years later, things had changed somewhat in Burma and it became possible to get extended visas if you were practicing in a monastery. So I ordained with Mahasi Sayadaw, an elderly Burmese monk and renowned meditation master, in New York during his first trip to America, and the next day I flew off with him and a group of monks to Burma, where I lived for many of the next eight years.

It was important to me to study with the elders of the Theravada Buddhist tradition, the banner-holders of traditional Buddhism and vipassana meditation. I was aware of how precious an opportunity it was even then, and now it has become more so. So many other Buddhist countries had fallen--Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam. Who could say how long Burma would last?

So I plunged into this alien world, shaved my head, renounced food after noon, became celibate, and lived in a foreign culture with teachers I didn't know and with little support of friends or family. After an initial adjustment period, this whole experience of living as a monk began to sparkle with beauty for me. I found myself in a world where people spoke to the issues of my heart. They provided a place where meditation could be practiced on a full-time, open-ended basis, and they provided everything needed to do that--shelter, food, medicines, robes - all given with such love and kindness. The teachings were shared in the same way, openly and freely. I had finally found an environment which greeted and expanded my own intensity of questioning with teachers who challenged me to my depths.

CI: Those teachers being...

AC: The first was Mahasi Sayadaw. He was a dharma eagle. He inspired a fascination in me to explore human consciousness as deeply as possible. He also taught me about dignity and keeping alive the courage to truly be free at the highest level. Then there was Sayadaw U Javana, my first vipassana teacher in Burma, who grounded me in the basics of how to objectively observe the mind. Then there was Sayadaw U Sujata, who embodied great warmth and humor coupled with the outrageous. He supported me in not being so frightened of myself. Then came Sayadaw U Pandita, who became my dharma father, brother, mentor, teacher and best friend. I had never known a relationship to be so dynamic, provocative, and stimulating. He seemed to bring out the best that I had, and he enjoyed chiselling away at the rest. It was a no-holds-barred relationship.

Anyway, U Pandita is the only one of these still alive.

CI: I know you were at Mahasi Sayadaw's side when he passed away.

AC: Yes, back in August of 1982. I was with Sayadaw U Pandita in his cottage when Mahasi Sayadaw's attendant ran into the room and said that Mahasi had been writing at his desk and had suddenly said that he had a sharp pain in his head. The attendant helped him to his bed where he laid on his back and then became

unconscious. Two days later he died. It happened that I was the only Westerner there in the monastery at that time. As he took his last breaths, the room fell silent. We carried his body upstairs and put a new set of robes on him. He then lay in state for the next seven days while tens of thousands of devotees came to the monastery to pay their final respects to one of the greatest meditation masters to have lived in modern history. At the site of the cremation, over a hundred thousand people stood fixed as Sayadaw U Pandita took the microphone and led the gathering in a short Pali chant. I think he quoted the final words of the Buddha, spoken just before his death. It translates as, "All conditioned things in this world are impermanent. To understand this law is the highest happiness. Strive on, friends, with diligence."

U Pandita then encouraged us to reflect on this occasion not with grief but with inspiration and urgency as an opportunity to deepen our commitment to understanding the true nature of the mind and life.

These teachers provided a visual expression on a day-to-day level of extremely refined human values. In my relationship with U Pandita, I faced for the first time in my life, the issues of honor and surrender. He demanded of me complete honesty and a surrendering to truth, not to my opinion of it. He initiated me in how to conscientiously relate to others and myself. He also opened me to the expansiveness of what the vipassana system of meditation practice could offer. He was a great spiritual friend. As time went on in Burma, and as I learned some of the language, there was a wonderful sense of nurturance. I had never felt happier in my life. There were times when I literally wept with joy at having found my tribe, my family, my purpose. My burning heart and mind began to feel safe. I felt blessed, as though I were riding in a golden chariot into the unknown. It became timeless.

Yet, all things change. After years of training and living in the monastery, there came a new dawning of the dragons of my mind. Issues which were so large in my life before becoming a monk began to raise their heads again. These other forces in my psyche which had seemed resolved in the monastery began to present themselves again.

CI: What were those issues?

AC: Well, I found my manhood and relationship issues coming alive again in desiring intimacy with a woman. And I've had to come to terms with that attraction as well as my fear of intimacy. Also, the monastic and meditative isolation began to feel counterproductive. Although my memory of American society scared me, monastic solitude was becoming even more disturbing. I wondered what my work was now? Perhaps I should teach to whatever extent I am capable. Should I consider a creative livelihood to make money? What could I do to help out in a world that I still saw to be burning? What was my life purpose and vision? Where would I live out my years? What about old age?

At the same time I wondered if my place wasn't simply to sit still, quietly watching my mind in this monastery 10,000 miles away from my homeland and to just see these yearnings and fears as more elaborate faces of the psyche parading across consciousness. It was a moment of deep unrest. There was an internal deprivation, and a quiet inner voice said that the world was the place to understand it, not the monastery.

CI: How was the adjustment to worldly life?

AC: Initially it was shocking. I immediately felt the aloneness, the separation, the isolation, the frivolity of American society. The onslaught of sensory bombardment was overwhelming, the technological hum, deafening. It was all moving so fast and it felt so harsh. In the monastery there was a great sense of protection and quietude. There was simplicity. There was never a choice of what to wear, always the same robes, the same color. No telephones, no flights, no driving, no parties, no cooking, no sex, no movies. It was always the same schedule, day after day. Up at 3 AM, asleep at 11 PM, meditating, studying and discussing dharma, year after year. There was such a refined alliance of purpose with almost everyone there. It was an intimate dharma family, a close knit community of seekers.

All of a sudden I was in this altered reality. The distance and struggle in most peoples' eyes saddened

me. Most everyone seemed preoccupied with money, survival, security and diversion. Life felt consuming. I too began to feel these pulls. Few people seemed to have much time for their hearts' higher calling, for themselves. I had no idea how sensitive I had become as a monk. So I concentrated on connecting with good friends, and I also began to lead vipassana retreats. This gave me a great sense of joy and eased the transition tremendously. I loved being around seekers, people striving to know themselves more fully. In fact, in some ways this period was a continuation of my time in the monastery. But I really no longer had the safety of the monastic form. I was just another human in the great sea of life. It was as if I were stripped of all protection, and I felt naked. There was just my human consciousness manifesting right in front of me.

In coming back, I felt that I was cast into a situation where I was my own guide, ultimately, and that all the encouragement and kindness I had relied on from my teacher would now have to be provided by me. I kept hearing U Pandita's final words to me the day I disrobed. "Trust that the seeds of purification are within you. Nurture them and you will awaken. The form is useful, but it is awareness that liberates."

However, the most important adjustment was in becoming more aware of the power of my psychological conditioning and its mostly unconscious effect on my life. I began to see some of the underlying psychological patterns to the energies that were only felt as unconscious stirrings while living as a monk. This became a fascinating new area of discovery and exploration for me.

CI: What were those patterns?

AC: The main issue was self love. There's a tendency to identify with the spiritual struggle rather than the joy of just being. I also began to see some of my self-defeating demands for perfection and how this sabotaged my sense of well being. Self criticism and conscious self-reflection are so closely linked that sometimes it's difficult to distinguish the two. One masquerades as sadness or arrogance, the other manifests as humility, joyful hope, positive action. I also began to see that due to my own inner isolation, and the insecurity from that, I sought refinement, approval, and satisfaction from others. I have begun to appreciate the power of projection onto someone else, and I see that this is how I had dealt with what was perceived to be missing in myself.

CI: Your monastic training and meditation practice did not give you insight into those issues while you were in Burma?

AC: No, not in any significant way. I don't feel that my monastic training or my meditation practice brought that much clarity to the psychological nature of my mind, by Western psychological standards anyway. It did many other things, but not that.

CI: Would you explain this further. Perhaps you could give some background as to how something as basic as your own psychological conditioning was bypassed by your teachers, your monastic training, and your meditation practice?

AC: I had very little idea of what was in store for me, of what living in a Burmese Buddhist monastery would be like. I was the first American allowed into the monastery for any length of time since 1951 when the country had been closed after the military coup d'etat. Except for visits of seven days only, few Westerners have spent any extended time in Burma.

So this was all uncharted territory. It was a great leap of faith. I was also still a kid in many ways, I was a brash young 27 year old American renegade artist, with an extremely rebellious nature, conditioned by the sixties. That was all on top of being the youngest child within a complex military family. It's only recently that I have come to appreciate my psychological makeup at the time I entered the monastery and how my vipassana practice and monastic training only superficially uncovered that level of my unconscious. In fact, with traditional vipassana teachers, the ones I practiced with, there is great emphasis to avoid that realm of exploration, not only in intensive practice, but, for the most part, in general. I listened to my teachers. I wanted

to understand and resolve the root causes of my conflict. I wanted to remove greed, anger, and delusion along with all the nuances of those three roots of my neurosis.

CI: So the psychological realm was more or less ignored in the hope of eradicating the three unwholesome roots of suffering.

AC: Yes. At that time I also felt that indulging in my psychological drama seemed endless, not pointless, but endless. I thought, Why bother, when the meditation practice can deliver you right to the source of the struggle? But in more recent years, coming out of monastic life and many sustained periods of long-term intensive practice. I have seen that one doesn't live at that level of mind subtlety. You come out of that realm of consciousness and you must face your personality and your neurotic programing, your shadow and darkness. I know of no one who has gone that deep in their practice as to completely remove the afflictive emotional forces within the psyche through vipassana meditation. Even after deep levels of insight in intensive practice, you quickly come back into your psychological being and once again begin to act according to your healthy and unhealthy patterns, with only slight modifications, if any.

Furthermore, it is my experience that the deeper you go, the greater the potential split in your ability to integrate back into the world. The Buddha confirmed this. According to the traditional texts, this split wasn't expressed as a problem, but rather as something to be sought. He said that after the third stage of enlightenment, anagami, one would no longer want to have sex. And that after the attainment of full enlightenment, arhantship, you would automatically want to completely remove worldly life and become a monk or nun. This is a complex area of discussion. The vipassana practice on one hand works a miracle in how it clarifies consciousness and eases internal conflict. On the other hand, it can alter your self identity, your priorities and involvements so dramatically that your life and perception of the world is never the same, thus making it very difficult to re-integrate into what was once familiar.

CI: Let's talk more about this potential split. How does meditation practice contribute to this?

AC: I feel that it's possible to practice in such a way that you exacerbate an already existing psychological split that most everyone has in their emotional world. You potentially cut off emotionally through the constant attempt to mindfully observe everything within you. In so doing, there is the high risk of interspersing those moments with many moments of frustration and then suppression. It is such a fine line. Through the practice one can develop a denial of a major part of their mind and body experience. This denial and subsequent suppression begins to masquerade as calmness. It's easy to hide in the concepts of Buddhism or one's idea of what vipassana practice is and the experiences one has had. Thus the denial/suppression split occurs.

CI: Would you speak more about how vipassana meditation, the actual practice level experience, bypasses the psychological realm ?

AC: If our quest is for true freedom, true understanding, it seems essential to come to terms with the totality of our being. We must investigate our life on every level--physically, intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually--if we expect an integrated, full expression of ourselves in this lifetime. Classical vipassana meditation, as I understand it, isn't about coming to resolution or clarity on all levels of consciousness. It attempts resolution of conflict at the innermost level by examining why consciousness arises in the first place. Investigation of one's psychology serves a different function. Freud said, "The best I can do is exchange your neurotic misery for ordinary human unhappiness". Vipassana meditation aims at the complete end of suffering.

Vipassana meditation takes you to where you are most adamantly locked in your consciousness and there the meditative confrontation or friction begins. If you uncover obsessive thoughts and strong emotions with

distinct themes around childhood traumas, sexual issues, economic concerns, life purpose themes, creativity concerns, or relationship issues, that's what you deal with. Through the practice you come up close to your most predominant inner veil. What happens there depends on the skill of the teacher, the style of teaching, and on the courage, awareness, and finesse of the practitioner. If the obsessive emotional pattern or theme is deeply rooted, it's likely the meditator will stay there rubbing up against it repeatedly. Since the practice is to do everything within your power to simply observe the thoughts and emotions, no matter how continual or strong they might be, and since you are not encouraged to investigate the content of the issue, you often remain psychologically in the dark about why you experience what you do. Through repeated bare attention, strong concentration, and determined effort, it is possible to move past the gravitational pull of these issues and energies, but in most cases, people don't. If they do, the issues become bypassed and temporarily suppressed. This is considered a beneficial type of suppression due to the influence of concentration. The aim of practice is to move through veil after veil of these energies until a type of mental zero gravity is achieved. The mind is extremely fluid and buoyant at this stage. Here you begin to observe the most fundamental microscopic level of mind, the fabric of consciousness. You begin to glimpse rapidly arising and vanishing mind units of experience. Vipassana insight dawns as you witness that who you are is nothing more than a quickly arising and disappearing moment to moment sequence of mental and physical phenomena and that there is no permanent self within it all; even the observer of all this is recognized as arising and passing away with each moment, too. Ultimately, it's seen that no one is home. At the same time you begin to see that these separate, yet interrelated and conditioned microscopic mind moments of experience, are the canvass of what our individual personalities, our psychological legacies, concepts, memories, hopes, and dreams are painted upon. The psychological and conceptual realm is seen as illusory, ephemeral, and endless from this vantage point. Like a hologram, empty and real at the same time. Real in that it exists, and empty in that it is empty of self. This is a fascinating discovery in that it weakens one's identification with the story world. Here the Buddha's comment begins to make sense: "The path there is, but no one who walks it; deeds are done, but no one who does them; suffering exists, but no one who suffers; enlightenment is, but no one who is enlightened."

CI: Yet surely, the teachers you studied with must have had to deal with psychological issues, at least with their Western students.

AC: Yes, to some extent this is true, but Buddhist theory and the teachers I practiced with conveyed what they felt to be the essential issue: understand the source of the conflict, that of greed, anger, and delusion, and the life riddle is solved. Suffering then ceases. Traditional Buddhism has it that life is intrinsically flawed because it's incessantly changing on every level of conditioned existence and that it's empty of anything permanent. That because of one's deluded misperceptions of permanence or our identification with things as belonging to "me," then greed, anger, jealously, fear, worry and sadness will inevitably arise. Thus, due to these emotions the individual suffers. Only through the practice can you actually see this truth, they tell us. Therefore remove this deluded belief in a separate self and attain freedom. Psychological issues were all tied into an idea of self. Buddhist theory depersonalizes everything with the notion of anatta, emptiness of a permanent self. My practice experience confirmed this. The problem is that you return to the dream, and it becomes as real as real can be, and this is where most of us live our lives--in the dream.

Vipassana meditation is a brilliant vehicle into the mind, it can weaken one's identification with the dream, but one must be very watchful in how it is used. Be clear about what it is and what it isn't.

CI: Are there other aspects of living in the monastic context and practicing intensive meditation that you would caution someone about?

AC: Yes, this is an important question. I would seriously caution people against thinking that monasticism or intensive meditation practice, in and of itself, is the solution. It's what you do with your mind in meditation

or within active life itself that makes the difference. I know this sounds simple, but it can be an addiction or a deflection to be a nun, a monk, to be part of a spiritual community, to be a vipassana meditator, a Buddhist, a teacher, a dharma practitioner. You obviously take your mind wherever you go. And neurotic strategies, self-deception, denial, suppression, unconscious negative programing follow you like a shadow.

All monasteries and spiritual scenes that I've been involved with have their version of a dysfunctional family structure. I also feel that primordial and childhood negative patterning can be so intact that in some cases one chooses "spiritual refuge" in places, teachers, and practices that keep alive those very strategies. It's very subtle stuff. In some instances, it's very obvious. But denial is a powerful energy and defense strategy. Keeping alive our self honesty, our ruthless swordsmanship is essential in the spiritual life.

For most Westerners, vipassana meditation must be coupled with skillful dialogue to help individuals understand their complex personality spheres and how they keep you stuck.

CI: Who might provide the skillful dialogue since, traditionally, most vipassana teachers do not engage in the personality / psychological level?

AC: I don't see the "psychological" sphere of the mind as separate from the practice. It's the primary habitat of consciousness for most of us. That's where we live our lives. Vipassana teachers that I know teach in a way that they feel is important to them, and I respect that. However, wisdom and the skill to communicate and guide others are often separate issues. On the other side, even the Buddha said that there were individuals he encountered that he could not help. There is something magical about this dance of consciousness. As I reflect back over my own spiritual journey thus far, there is now greater trust. We seem to get just what we need from someone until it no longer fits and then we move on, hopefully. As we all develop in our understanding of the mind and the psyche, our skillful means in supporting others will expand and sharpen too. But a teacher is at best a conscious mirror, someone who points out the obscure or hidden. What you choose to do with the information remains another issue.

I've come to see that teachers, teachings, and spiritual forms can serve our liberation or be elaborate escape mechanisms. There is no guarantee either way. Monasteries and meditation centers can be an easy place to hole off from the world, from your mind. The form can be used to anaesthetize an aspect of your consciousness rather than awaken it. And you can easily identify with the form as being the source of freedom. This can potentially result in complacency and a lack of courage or willingness to challenge your state of mind, your conclusions; you might then compromise your inner exploration. A spiritual innocence can be lost and a spiritual arrogance or posturing assumed.

We also tend to project a lot more nobility and consciousness on monasteries, meditation centers, and teachers in general than is actually there. We have purity models that we transfer onto the outer, onto others. I don't know that anyone is free of positive and negative projections. And this can be the cause of great disappointment. We need to be watchful of how we lose ourselves in another, in a teacher, in a particular practice, in a spiritual system of belief. The mind is so slippery. In a heartbeat the projection occurs and the charade begins. Teachers are not free of this either. Collusion is very insidious and it often gives the feeling of safety, confidence, devotion and even a sense of awe at times. Of course, the opposite effect can happen, that of anger, fear, a feeling of being coerced, manipulated, or controlled, or simply a quiet sense of stagnation. The litmus test is in the willingness to be free and open to talk about one's feelings with your teacher. One should seek intimate and provocative dialogue as a way to explore and come to a greater clarity about what is going on inside of you, and within the teacher too. Otherwise, complex emotions can easily be harbored, denied and repressed. Openness, respect, and honesty are the requisites of a healthy teacher/student relationship, on both sides.

CI: Do you feel it is important to work with a teacher who is the embodiment of freedom, or can you practice with someone who isn't completely free but who has a great deal of understanding nevertheless?

AC: Does the embodiment of freedom you are referring to mean freedom and total enlightenment within a teacher?

CI: Yes. When I speak of enlightenment, I mean it in terms of being fully awake, of being in a state of pure awareness, and freedom to me includes freedom of spontaneity.

AC: The Buddha said that he taught one thing: that as long as there were deluded tendencies within one's consciousness, there is suffering, and he taught the release from it. I've come to see that 100% of my own internal conflict and the suffering I perceived in the world, the chaos among humans was, without exception, due to the emotions of greed, anger, and delusion, and the subtle nuances of those three energies.

My interest along this journey has been the teachings of liberation, not teachers. As essential as they are, even the Buddha said that he could but point the way, each person must walk the path themselves. This is why the vipassana practice is so important to me. He also said that by oneself alone is one purified and by oneself alone is one defiled. However, it's such a fine balance between personal responsibility and outside guidance. In fact, I don't think they can be separated. To understand wise and skillful relationship is crucial in navigating the mind or in walking the spiritual path. The Buddha made this perfectly clear, according to the traditional texts. We can read that he told his attendant Ananda that the whole of the dharma life was noble friendship. The Pali words used for noble friendship were Kalayana Mitta. This has a very specific meaning in that it doesn't refer to ordinary friendship but to friends who are experientially conversant with the Four Noble Truths, especially the fourth truth which is the Eight-fold path leading to the purification of the mind.

Teachers have been essential to me along my own journey. To whatever level a teacher can point out the Eight-fold path, which includes the totality of the mind, and refer me back to a deeper freedom within myself is fine. The Buddha also said that as the ocean has but one taste, that of salt, so does this teaching have but one taste, that of freedom. The heart's release from deluded misperceptions is what I refer to when I speak of freedom and enlightenment. Also, there are many moments along this human journey that the heart is cool, moments of release, peace. When I teach, I encourage others to cultivate these moments. The practice of awareness does this quite beautifully. I point to life as an evolving paradise as well as fostering a faith in the ultimate goal, that of complete freedom, total enlightenment, the complete end of delusion and conflict. However, we should not assume the work is done, that you're truly free or enlightened until the complete removal of those conditions is accomplished.

But, it's a very rare being who actively aspires to that level of liberation. On one hand, this level of refinement is rather idealistic and theoretical. It sounds good. The truth is that everyone I know still deals with complexity, and we are all, in our own ways, trying to understand it. Some are addressing the issue more realistically than others.

It is my firm belief that true freedom is the freedom from the mental conditions that create conflict. Not that you don't see conflict around you, but that you are no longer at the effect. As suffering is understood and relinquished, compassion and love arises. That is why I feel that those who know suffering the most are the deepest, most loving, and compassionate people.

CI: I just read a quote from Thorton Wilder: "In love's service, only the wounded soldiers can serve."

But getting back to the question about enlightened teachers--do you feel it is necessary for a teacher to be enlightened before he or she teaches others about enlightenment or before suggesting a path which leads to enlightenment?

AC: Yes, if you wish to teach others how to experience enlightenment, you should first know this enlightenment yourself. But I'm somewhat cautious about the word "enlightenment" and about those who claim it. There are definite experiences through the meditation practice and through living life that are illuminating and could be taken as enlightenment. In fact, many compare those experiences with those that they read about in the traditional texts and commentaries written by respected teachers and conclude that what they experienced

is indeed enlightenment on some level. Still others practice under certain teachers tell the student that their experience was that of enlightenment. I have heard this many times from people over the years.

What I feel is most essential, if you teach, is to be clear about what you know from direct experience and what you are inferring out of faith. Integrity and honesty are essential. Also, one needs to be very careful about the labels used to describe insights or experiences.

There are many levels to the wisdom-freedom game. I like to keep it simple, just be clear where you are and where you're not. Every level is important and if you can get it all in one person, all the better. However, I have never met a teacher who is the living embodiment of complete freedom or total enlightenment--at least according to my model--someone who was completely free of deluded tendencies, greed, and anger. On the other hand, who am I to say! I'm not completely free.

CI: Suppose it's possible that greed and anger can arise in one who is completely free or fully enlightened--that being enlightened means being fully awake from the dream, yet ready to passionately and spontaneously respond to life on the relative levels. When Jesus threw the money-lenders out of the temple, he wasn't exactly in a state of equipoise, according to the Bible.

AC: See, I'm all for being fully awake from the dream. It's my grand ambition. But we tend to see that which we want to believe. Our belief systems can serve to free or imprison us. We should carefully examine what we think and be brutally realistic about our ideas of "fully awake", "complete freedom", and "total enlightenment." These are grandiose ideals, seductively alluring. Unfortunately, we mortals are confined to discuss these issues from within the dream prison, so I must admit that it's a bit embarrassing to get too carried away from any definitive standpoint anyway. For the sake of dharma discussion, however, I feel that in order to be "fully awake," you need to fully remove that which obscures or denies wakefulness. The Buddha defined delusion as mental blindness or the opposite of clear seeing. He went on to say that the blindness was to reality. What you did see, you saw filtered through delusion, which simply gives an obscured perception of reality. You see reality unrealistically. And because of these moments of unclarity, the emotions of fear, greed, anger, sadness, anxiety, and so on, arise. So "fully awake" means fully awake to reality and free of any moment of delusion. According to this thinking, I feel that a mind that still has greed and anger is not "fully awake." As long as any nuance of greed or aversion is present in consciousness, the mind is automatically gripped by those energies and that, to me, is not a free condition. Anything short of this complete freedom, is incomplete, requiring a continuation of one's spiritual work. This is the goal I aspire to.

But, I think you can only see the clarity of another to the extent you are clear, and even that is difficult to rely upon. So whether Jesus was in a fully aware state of mind behind his apparent upset, I can't say. This is what I mean about how deluded projection often comes into play. Our models of wisdom, purity, and enlightenment filter our perceptions. I'm all for uninhibited action, spontaneity, boldness, authenticity, and realness, free of consensus spiritual conformity. I'm not advocating anarchy to traditional models of how purity and wisdom manifest, but who can say what a fully enlightened person looks or sounds like? Is it that they appear more intimate in their relationships, that they have a greater capacity for spontaneous joy and laughter, that they are eloquent in their discussion of the mind and inspire in others a sense of love and magic, that they have great confidence and personal power, that they have large devoted followings, that their words follow their behavior? I can't say.

I like to keep it simple. Teach what you know from your direct experience and make it clear what you are inferring out of faith. To expect a fully enlightened person to appear on your block is a nice idea, but not practical. And yes, it is true, that if you teach others with partial insight or enlightenment, there is always the risk of misguiding them. You can't be sure about the path to full enlightenment until you've walked it yourself. As to the needs of students, if one is hungry, one eats what is available. This is a reality. There are a lot of good people out there making themselves available in making a spiritual path visible to the best of their ability. Let's keep the dharma alive today as best as we can with as much integrity as possible. As long as we all keep doing

the work on ourselves, it's fine to offer a hand to others.

Personally, rather than being so concerned with whether a teacher is fully enlightened or not, I'm more for the individual and, as Jung said, the individuation process. I think we should all come back more into ourselves as the source and be very watchful of transferring authority to the outside. While we need to be humble enough to take teachings where we feel we need them, we should also keep a watchful eye on the relationship with the teacher.

CI: What about the world of other kinds of interpersonal relationships? Aren't there experiences, particularly of love, tasting a few moments of the divine in that sense of union with another, which are equally as important for our growth as the ones gained from meditation practice?

AC: There are over five billion of us now on earth. Understanding conscientious relationship to ourselves and others is the essence of the spiritual life. The world is the setting of our dharma dance; the planet, our monastery; events and people, our guides and teachers. The varied faces of life and our daily encounters become our vehicle for liberation. Every situation, every person we relate with can become the seed for the unconscious to become conscious, ever expanding into a greater depth of being. In a singular and solitary sense, individual meditation practice is one avenue into the heart. In a more expansive sense, it embraces everything, every moment of our existence. Meditation is developing a simple and realistic relationship with that which is. Our awareness delivers us to the moment. Relationships are the medium for the transformation. It's all so inextricably interrelated. We are not separate from life.

Meditation cannot be practiced in a vacuum. We must come out of the belief that intensive meditation practice and the insights gained are better or deeper than the learning developed by living. Why prioritize anything? I say drop all the beliefs and feel who you are where you are. Be a lover of learning. Keep it simple.

The Buddha said that we should make each person we meet our ultimate object of reverence, because without others it would be difficult to know one's own heart. Intimate partners and our dearest friendships can be an extraordinary learning ground where we mirror each others' psyches. They show us our projections and limitations. They become the resources for us to cultivate truthfulness, patience, generosity, love, wisdom and compassion. But if we are still looking outside of ourselves for inner resolution, we remain blind. If we assume personal responsibility for ourselves, everything and everybody becomes the reflection back in support of our self transformation. There is such a delicate balance between aloneness, personal responsibility and the surrendering to a relationship, especially an intimate partner. How we are in intimate relationships is an expression of our spiritual depth, or lack of it. For most of us, it is a fascinating area of personal discovery. Almost everyone that I come across wants to be loved, understood, to have another match their reality and have wise, heartfelt intimacy in their lives. It's such a natural pull of the heart to want to pair off, to have a companion to share your days with. Someone to share the struggles, hopes, dreams and insights of your life with. To grow with. Doesn't everyone yearn for this kind of contact?

But it's important to see that one's partner is not going to be the salvation, is not going to be the place of ultimate refuge. When I think of being with a woman in a conscious and committed relationship, I also have to remember that she will die. Or I will die first. So it is to know that I can challenge my attachments by being that close to another person and yet also know that she cannot take the spear from my heart, she can only help put my hand on it. True liberation, true love must come from within. So I firmly believe we should cultivate love and freedom through our relationships and also support it through the insights gained in our meditation practice.

CI: What is the place for social awareness in your life?

AC: I often struggle with the fact that our world is filled with horror and pain. It is terrifying to know that there

is torture, starvation and genocide going on right now in this world, that 40,000 people die of starvation every day, that world pollution is spewing toxicity everywhere, that the U.S. still builds five nuclear bombs everyday on top of the already existing capacity to annihilate the earth many times over (despite the moves towards disarmament) that our rainforests are being slashed at the rate of an acre a minute, that the earth is heating up. In general, that the quality of life is being so radically compromised that a safe future for our children and our children's children is beginning to look unlikely from some vantage points. Nevertheless, I have a very optimistic attitude about the direction of the planet due to the collective consciousness that is emerging. I'm continually inspired to see among many people a dedication in challenging their own complacency.

For me personally it is a real balancing act in not shutting out those who suffer while I enjoy the comfort of my own life or deal with some small struggles that I encounter in comparison.

Making one's life as dignified as possible, living with as much integrity and honor as one can, being content with little, striving towards greater honesty, personal responsibility--to do all this while keeping an eye on the star of liberation is the best one can hope for.

CI: What is your current practice?

AC: For a long time I tried to put aside my passions. Now in my life I am trying to fully embrace them and work with them. I see that creativity, service, love, and awareness are all interconnected, and I want to integrate these energies as consciously as I can. In actuality I think it's quite simple for me now. My practice is to feel my heart...and to have the courage and freedom to follow it.