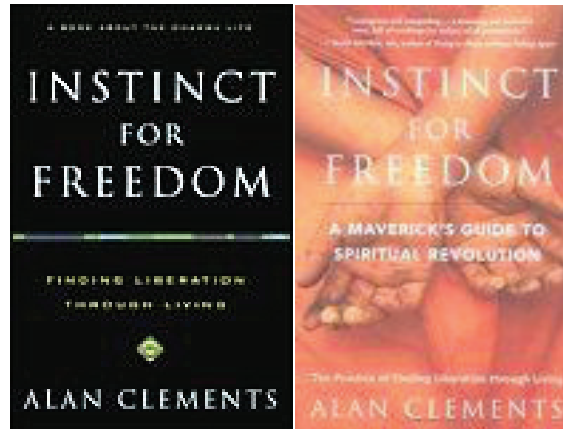


Instinct *for* Freedom

A Book About Everyday Revolution —
Finding Liberation Through Living

by Alan Clements



BEYOND DOGMA, INDOCTRINATION AND SPIRITUAL PROPAGANDA

AN INTERVIEW WITH ALAN CLEMENTS
SHARED VISION MAGAZINE 1997

by Marcia Jacobs

Alan Clements was the first American to have ordained as a Buddhist monk in the country of Burma, where he lived in a monastery in Rangoon during the 1970s and '80s. During those years Alan trained in classical Buddhist psychology (Abhidhamma) and Vipassana Bhavana (insight meditation) with the late Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw and his successor, Venerable Sayadaw U Pandita.

Since 1983, Clements has been an evocative spokesperson for the transformation of consciousness as the basis of freedom and dignity, lecturing and teaching retreats worldwide.

A number of years ago Clements decided to take an extended sabbatical, opting to live in some highly volatile areas of the world — first, in the jungles of Burma to witness and document a genocide of the ethnic minorities by the military dictatorship, which he wrote about in his first book in 1991, “Burma: The Next Killing Fields?” Then, he went to Croatia and Bosnia for nearly a year where he wrote the screenplay “Burning,” while consulting with members of the UN and NGOs on the role of human consciousness in politics and peace.

In 1995 he returned to Burma where he co-authored “The Voice of Hope,” a book of conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma’s (imprisoned) Nobel Peace laureate and the leader of her country’s nonviolent struggle for freedom. Clements is also the co-author, with Leslie Kean, of “Burma’s Revolution of the Spirit,” with a foreword by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

In addition, Clements was the script revisionist and advisor for “Beyond Rangoon,” a feature film depicting Burma’s struggle for democracy.

Alan has been interviewed on Nightline, CBS Evening News, Talk to America, Time and Newsweek and scores of other media worldwide.³

~~~~\*~~~~

Marcia Jacobs: Alan, what led you to stop teaching Buddhist meditation retreats and travel to such dramatic situations?

Alan Clements: It just felt right. Back in late 1990 or so, I had just ended a meditation retreat and picked up a copy of Time magazine with the cover story 'Bullets in Alms Bowls.' The military authorities in Burma had raided hundreds of monasteries, arresting many monks and killing others, based on the maniacal fantasy that the Sangha (the order of Buddhist monks and nuns) were attempting to over-throw the dictatorship. Since Burma was my spiritual home — the place where I spent a good part of my adult life as a monk — I responded, I think, as any loyal son or daughter would to their own family. The monks and nuns were my dharma parents, they nurtured me in a way I had never known. So I traveled to Burma in an attempt to support my spiritual family in one of its darkest hours.

MJ: And what would you say that you've learned the most from your time in war-zones and refugee camps?

AC: One of the first things that I learned living in conditions of tyranny was to simply feel, listen and love, in order to potentially support those who were suffering, without being so arrogant as to try to heal or fix them. In the process, serve with as little ego as possible — the less focus on yourself the better.

It reminds me of the Aboriginal woman approached by a white social worker who said rather presumptuously "I'm here to help you. What can I do?" And the Aboriginal woman replied, "If you are here to help me, please go. But if you see that my freedom and yours are linked, then please stay and we can serve each other."

MJ: Spirit-in-action is an essential point that I've found missing for the most part within many Buddhist traditions, and other spiritualities too. Or perhaps it's just not emphasized enough?

AC: Well, some people seem to think that sitting meditation and watching your breath or sending metta (the practice of developing loving-kindness and compassion) is action enough. But I wonder whether it's a self-indulgent excuse for dharma inaction. I think that real metta — real loving-kindness — is a behavior not just a feeling. It must be expressed through action. In fact, it was this very issue that prompted me to stop teaching and reevaluate my dharma understanding, to refocus it.

MJ: Why did you feel the need to re-evaluate your understanding?

AC: Well, after my journey to the jungles of Burma, witnessing a genocide, seeing people having been tortured and traumatized beyond belief, the local masses being herded up and murdered, women having been gang-raped, I came back to the West really shaken. It made me question, deeply.

MJ: But why would that motivate you to stop teaching retreats?

AC: It might seem obvious, but it took me some time to realize that it's one thing to speak about spiritual qualities, such a freedom and wisdom, in the safe and sanctified context of a meditation retreat, with an audience of silent and good-hearted people, while it's another thing altogether to manifest those qualities in more complex circumstances. When you teach all the time, as I was doing, you can become rather insulated in your so-called depth — your own insights and realizations. You speak about love, compassion and freedom, but have limited

parameters to express them in any dimensional way that could expand one's heart, say, to include a dear friend who has disappointed you, or a starving refugee, or a screaming child who has just lost his parents to sniper fire. It's plain easier to love calm and kind people, especially when they are silent. Essentially, I needed more life experience to discover the authenticity and the compassion missing in my dharma understanding.

MJ: So you questioned your own integrity?

AC: It was more like responding to a natural instinct. I think everyone has quiet inner voices that at some point can no longer be denied and must find genuine expression. It was the same reason why I decided to leave the monastery, back in 1983: I wanted to see whether what I had discovered there was real, and had any relevance to life and people. The same questions resurfaced years later with regard to teaching. See, I'm a slow learner, really. However, through it, I did find the next expression of my dharma journey. That's been the real gift.

MJ: And what was that expression?

AC: It was inspired by a concept attributed to the Buddha, when he explained his basic dharma attitude as a Bodhisattva. He said that he made each person he met his ultimate object of reverence. What that means to me is that as human beings, we are in relationship all the time. And to make each person we encounter our ultimate object of reverence is to empower our relationships as the most sacred space for our spiritual awakening. In other words, without people my liberation would not be possible. We cannot become free in isolation. That would be denying interrelatedness. It was just a recognition of the obvious.

MJ: Are you speaking of the difference between renunciation-based-dharma and engaged-spirituality that prioritizes people as a path for freedom?

AC: Absolutely. For example, what is the value of compassion when it remains confined to just a thought or a feeling? Obviously, for anyone who has ever been in need, compassion is real to the extent that somebody else is moved to assist, and doesn't just think about assisting. Thus, we become devoted to life, and not to dogmatic theories that insidiously separate us from it.

MJ: Do you still practice and teach intensive insight meditation?

AC: I see meditation, the infusing of space with awareness, as an 'always now' dynamic. So yes, in the sense that there can never be enough awareness, and yet awareness isn't the end all of spiritual life. I think awareness must be actively associated with self-inquiry and wise discernment. I see awareness as the waking up from a dream — the eyes are opened, you are no longer asleep. Self-inquiry is the process of discovering what you can do with your wakefulness. And wise discernment is actually getting out of bed and doing something special with your time. Perhaps something that enhances and safe-guards freedom, while elevating human dignity.

So, in my retreats I emphasize awareness as a way of life, as well as the use of conscientious self-inquiry, coupled with inspired-intuitive dialogue, that is ultimately in service of liberation of oneself and others.

MJ: I've attended several of your evening groups called The World Dharma Forum. I've been quite impressed by the quality of interaction with participants. You give people a lot of room to be themselves, without any noticeable need to set their views right. Which prompts the question, what is the purpose of the World Dharma Forum?

AC: The World Dharma Forum was created as a meeting place for open inquiry and wise discernment, exploring

the most compelling issues we face in daily life. In this milieu participants are respected in their fundamental right to free thought and speech. It's my belief, when encouraged to speak from their depth, people have the innate wisdom to learn from hearing themselves.

Also, for me the questioning mind is an essential quality that one should constantly develop. See, I found in exploring the mind of totalitarian regimes, like in Burma, is how they try to shape citizens into a faceless, dull sameness, where creativity, critical analysis, and even the slightest whisper of dissent are fiercely repressed. In a much more subtle level, the same repression occurs in some spiritual scenes, Buddhist included. In these cases dogma is mistaken for dharma and self-deception is considered realization. As a result, the cult of sheep are born, and the indoctrination of a mind occurs. It seems that a lot of people feel that it's better to 'believe and belong' than to authentically quest at one's edge. As mortals we are constantly struggling towards truth and are never in full possession of it.

MJ: How does the questioning mind apply to your edge?

AC: Before I went to the jungles of Burma or to the former-Yugoslavia during the war, I thought that I had some real relationship to freedom, until I realized how contextual and myopic my freedom was. Take away my comfort, my security, my clothes, my home, set aside other things like witnessing 'ethnic cleansing', I realized that my freedom was relative indeed. Also, I thought that I had a reasonable understanding of generosity, until I saw people sacrifice their lives to save others. I thought I understood compassion until I had a stranger shield my body with his to protect me from the shrapnel of a rocket attack. All I'm saying is that in our spiritual quest, the most important thing I've learned is to keep questioning.

MJ: A final question; you spent many months with Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's Nobel peace laureate, and the most famous political dissident in the world, and together you did a book of conversations — The Voice of Hope. In short, what did you learn from her?

AC: Many things. But two values remain strong, courage and dignity. The courage to stand alone in your truth if need be, and the dignity to speak out and act on behalf of one's own freedom, as well as the freedom of others.

\*\*\*

Marcia Jacobs, MSW, has been a psychotherapist and a student of Buddhist psychology for 20 years. She lives in Vancouver, B.C., having resumed her private practice after 4 years in Bosnia, providing services for the war- traumatized population.

\*\*\*

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  
The Voice of Hope - Conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi,  
Burma's imprisoned Nobel peace laureate (Seven Stories, NY).

