

The Revolution of Presence

Alan Clements in Conversation with John Malkin from Radio Free Santa Cruz

Nonviolence, Burma, Psychedelics, the Divine Feminine, and the Future of Human Consciousness

June 2026 from Bali

Introduction

The following conversation took place between broadcaster John Malkin, host of *Transformation Highway* on Radio Free Santa Cruz, and author, investigative journalist, former Buddhist monk, and spoken-word artist Alan Clements. Speaking from Bali, where Clements has spent the past several years recovering from a life-threatening illness while completing a series of new books and theatrical works, the conversation unfolds far beyond the boundaries of a conventional interview.

Beginning with mortality and healing, it gradually opens into a searching exploration of nonviolence, consciousness, Burma's democratic revolution, the psychology of authoritarianism, the promise and peril of psychedelics, the wisdom of the divine feminine, and the possibility that humanity's greatest political challenge is ultimately an interior one. Throughout, neither interviewer nor guest seeks definitive answers. Instead, both return repeatedly to the discipline of asking better questions, listening more deeply, and discovering whether dialogue itself might become one of the last remaining frontiers of genuine democracy. Rather than advocating a fixed philosophy, this conversation invites the reader into an ongoing inquiry—one that begins not with changing the world, but with examining the quality of one's own presence within it.

Part One

Healing, Burma, and the Discipline of Presence

John Malkin: Alan, it's wonderful to see you again. I think this may be the fifth or sixth conversation we've shared over the years, and every time we meet, I come away feeling that we've simply picked up an ongoing dialogue rather than begun a new interview. You look remarkably well—healthy, relaxed, genuinely radiant. You're speaking to us today from Bali, a place that has clearly become important in your life. Before we turn to your new book and the larger questions surrounding nonviolence and our troubled world, I'd simply like to begin by asking a very personal question. How are you? And what has this period of your life been teaching you?

Alan Clements: John, first, thank you. It's always a joy to be with you because you bring something increasingly rare into public conversation: genuine curiosity. You ask questions that don't feel like performances or invitations to defend a position. They feel like an opening—a place where two people can actually think together. That's become precious in our time.

Bali carries an emotional landscape for me that is difficult to describe without becoming sentimental. Nearly eighteen months ago, after leaving hospice on Maui, I arrived here carrying the assumption that my life was drawing to a close. These simple bungalows became the setting where I slowly came to terms with mortality—not as an abstract philosophical subject, but as something intimate, immediate, and deeply personal. Somewhere during those long months of solitude, something shifted inside me. I realized that the real work before me was not learning how to die. It was learning how to stop dying psychologically while I was still alive. That distinction became one of the quiet turning points of my life.

Returning here now is therefore both beautiful and deeply poignant. Every garden, every familiar path, every morning chorus of birds recalls those earlier days when I was living hour by hour, wondering whether there would be many more mornings to greet. Today, I feel something altogether different. I feel profoundly grateful simply to participate in another day of existence.

Physically, I couldn't feel better. My health is strong. My energy has returned. I eat well, I sleep deeply, I spend as much time as possible barefoot in nature, and I remain attentive to every aspect of caring for this remarkable body that has carried me through so many unexpected chapters. The diagnosis itself remains unchanged. My physicians still describe the condition as one of those silent illnesses capable of changing everything without warning. Yet paradoxically, it has almost no effect upon my daily experience. My cognition is clear. My strength is good. My heart, strangely enough, feels more open than at almost any other period of my life.

The deeper practice has become learning how not to participate unnecessarily in stress. That sounds obvious until one honestly examines how addictive modern life has become.

We're invited, almost every waking hour, to immerse ourselves in outrage, catastrophe, political polarization, algorithmic stimulation, and the endless performance of opinion. Burma remains in my heart every single day. Gaza remains in my heart. Ukraine, Sudan, Iran, America—none of that disappears simply because I choose to spend more time among trees than headlines. But I have gradually come to understand that carrying the suffering of the world without tending the quality of one's own consciousness eventually becomes another form of suffering. Compassion requires stamina, and stamina requires learning how to protect the conditions from which compassion itself arises.

John Malkin: One of the things I've always admired about your work is that you've never looked away from human suffering. Whether through your years documenting Burma's democracy movement, interviewing political prisoners, writing books, or creating performances that ask audiences to confront uncomfortable realities, you've consistently moved toward places that many people instinctively avoid. Listening to you now, it sounds as though another lesson has emerged alongside that lifelong commitment—the realization that remaining close to suffering also requires learning when to step back, breathe, and recover one's own center. That strikes me as a different kind of courage.

Alan Clements: I think that's beautifully put, John, and I wish I'd understood it much earlier in life.

I've been blessed with extraordinary mentors. Certainly, my meditation teachers in Burma—Mahasi Sayadaw and later Sayadaw U Pandita—profoundly shaped the way I understand consciousness. But some of my greatest teachers have been political prisoners, people who spent years, sometimes decades, in prison under unimaginably harsh conditions. They taught me something no monastery alone could ever have taught.

If you bring unmanaged fear into a prison cell, it eventually becomes another prison.

If you carry resentment into confinement, resentment becomes your jailer long before the guards arrive.

Again and again, I watched men and women refuse to surrender the one freedom no dictatorship could legitimately confiscate: the freedom to determine the quality of their own consciousness.

That wasn't optimism. It wasn't denial. It wasn't positive thinking. It was dignity.

That word has become increasingly central to my life because I saw it embodied under conditions where almost everything else had been stripped away.

Today, more than twenty-two thousand political prisoners remain incarcerated throughout Myanmar. Journalists. Poets. Musicians. Artists. Filmmakers. Students. Monks. Teachers. Democratically elected leaders. An entire generation of intellectual, moral, and cultural leadership has been systematically removed from public life.

Sometimes I try to make that reality more immediate for Western audiences. If you and I were conducting this interview inside Burma today—asking the kinds of questions you're asking, speaking with the candor we're sharing—there is every possibility that both of us would be sitting in separate prison cells, or perhaps we would simply have disappeared.

Yet the astonishing thing is this: they continue.

They continue writing.

They continue teaching.

They continue loving.

They continue protecting one another.

They continue believing that freedom ultimately begins not with political circumstance but with the discipline of conscience.

That realization has humbled me more than almost anything else in my life. Whatever challenges I may face physically seem very small beside people who awaken each morning behind prison walls and still choose not to surrender their humanity. Whenever I begin feeling overwhelmed by my own circumstances, I find myself returning inwardly to those remarkable men and women. They continue reminding me that the deepest form of freedom is never granted by governments. It is cultivated, moment by moment, within the architecture of one's own being.

Part Two

Nonviolence as Presence

John Malkin: Your new book, *Politics of the Heart: Nonviolence in an Age of Atrocity*, arrives at a moment when many people have become deeply skeptical of nonviolence. We continue to inherit the assumption that force is the only language power understands, even though history repeatedly demonstrates that violence rarely produces lasting peace. Domination still presents itself as realism, while compassion is too often dismissed as naïveté. In the opening pages of your book, you write that "atrocities and the unthinkable have become ordinary," and that beneath the visible conflicts of our time another war is unfolding—a struggle between awareness and ignorance, empathy and erasure. You also suggest that while the twentieth century constructed prisons of concrete, the twenty-first increasingly builds prisons of perception. I'd love to begin there. What does it mean to practice nonviolence in an age where consciousness itself has become contested territory, and where so much of modern life is mediated by technologies designed to capture our attention?

Alan Clements: I can only answer that personally, John, because I've grown increasingly suspicious of speaking about ideals that I cannot honestly embody. As I've grown older, I've become far more interested in practice than philosophy, in conduct rather than proclamation. The question that returns to me every morning is not, *What does the world need to do?* but rather, *How am I actually living today?* If my life contradicts my convictions, then my convictions deserve reexamination before the world deserves another lecture.

For decades I've tried, however imperfectly, to bring forward what I often call the wisdom of the divine feminine. I don't use that phrase as a slogan or an abstraction. I mean something very practical: the willingness to remain in relationship with difference rather than fleeing into certainty. Much of that understanding came from Burma, first through my meditation teachers—Mahasi Sayadaw and later Sayadaw U Pandita—and then through Aung San Suu Kyi and many of the remarkable men and women who devoted their lives to the democratic movement. Although they came from different backgrounds and spoke with different voices, they shared an astonishingly consistent understanding of what nonviolence actually required.

They never treated nonviolence as a political strategy alone.

They understood it first as a discipline of presence.

The Buddha used the word *ahimsa*—harmlessness. Over time I came to realize that harmlessness is not simply refraining from physical violence. It is asking, moment after moment, whether one's presence itself diminishes or enlarges the humanity of another person. That has become the central inquiry of my own life. How do I meet another human being without immediately trying to dominate, persuade, categorize, defeat, or diminish them? How do I cultivate respect for mutuality? How do I practice conversational reciprocity? How do I remain vigilant toward my own anger before I concern myself with someone else's?

Those questions sound deceptively simple until life begins testing them.

I want to be careful here, because I cannot pretend to know what I would do if my wife, my daughter, or someone I loved were under immediate attack. Nor can I presume to instruct those living under bombardment or occupation about what nonviolence should require of them. My mentors in Burma have lived for decades under circumstances that most of us can scarcely imagine. They have watched colleagues imprisoned, tortured, executed, and disappeared. Entire families have been shattered. Villages have been burned. Children have been orphaned. And yet what continually astonished me was not merely their courage but their refusal to allow hatred to become their organizing principle.

The prisons today remain filled with political prisoners whose only crime is doing exactly what you and I are doing now—speaking honestly, asking questions, refusing silence. Yet many of them continue describing their struggle not primarily as a political revolution but

as a revolution of the spirit. That phrase carries tremendous weight for me because it reminds us that the deepest battlefield is not territory. It is consciousness itself.

Again and again, they returned to dialogue.

Again and again, they returned to reconciliation.

Again and again, they insisted that the future Federal Democratic Union they hoped to build would have to be constructed upon the difficult art of learning how profoundly different people might continue living together without attempting to erase one another. That insight has only deepened for me over the years. Burma's greatest gift to the world may ultimately prove not simply its struggle for democracy, but its insistence that genuine democracy begins with learning how to belong to one another across difference.

One principle in particular has remained with me throughout my life. They often spoke of what I might call mindful non-vilification. The enemy was never reduced to a monster, even when terrible crimes had been committed. Ignorance, greed, fear, and hatred were regarded as the true adversaries. Human beings could participate in those forces, certainly, but they were never considered identical with them. That distinction demanded extraordinary discipline because it required refusing the emotional convenience of demonization.

The movement therefore devoted enormous attention to language itself. How do we speak? How do we disagree? How do we criticize without dehumanizing? How do we remain truthful without surrendering compassion? Meditation became one training ground for that work. Patient dialogue became another. Emotional intelligence, ethical restraint, and the cultivation of *metta*—loving-kindness expressed through action—were not peripheral spiritual practices. They were understood as the civic architecture of democratic culture itself.

Aung San Suu Kyi often reminded those around her that the success of the movement would never ultimately depend upon defeating an enemy. It would depend upon whether those seeking freedom could embody the very qualities of freedom before political victory ever arrived. That has never left me. It continues challenging me every single day.

So, when people ask how we practice nonviolence amid global catastrophe, my answer has become surprisingly ordinary. It begins with how I greet the person serving breakfast in Bali. It begins with how patiently I listen to someone whose politics differ from my own. It begins with whether my daughter feels genuinely heard when we speak. It begins with whether my friendships are strengthened by my presence or burdened by it. Those moments may appear insignificant beside the crises filling our headlines, yet I increasingly suspect that civilization is quietly constructed—or quietly dismantled—through countless encounters exactly like these. History certainly remembers wars and revolutions, but everyday dignity is what ultimately teaches a culture how to live.

Part Three

Beyond Vilification: The Courage to Tell the Truth Without Becoming the Enemy

John Malkin: One of the passages that stayed with me long after I finished *Politics of the Heart* comes from your recollection of something Sayadaw U Pandita once told you: "*Do not vilify, but do not lie—especially to yourself.*" It strikes me as one of those deceptively simple teachings that becomes more demanding the longer one lives with it. On one hand, it asks us not to reduce another human being to an enemy, no matter how destructive their actions may be. On the other, it refuses the comfort of sentimentality by insisting that compassion cannot come at the expense of truth. Those two commitments—refusing vilification while refusing self-deception—seem increasingly difficult to hold together in our present moment.

When people witness authoritarianism, war, corruption, genocide, or cruelty, something very understandable happens. Anger arises. The impulse to condemn arises. Sometimes the desire to retaliate arises. Yet if we become consumed by those reactions, we risk becoming psychologically organized around the very forces we oppose. How have you learned to navigate that paradox? How do we intervene in violence without becoming inwardly shaped by violence ourselves? How do we tell the truth as honestly as possible while refusing to surrender our own humanity in the process?

Alan Clements: John, I don't think that question ever gets answered once and for all. I think it's a lifelong inquiry, and perhaps the moment we believe we've mastered it is precisely the moment we should become suspicious of ourselves. Age has had one unexpected effect on me. It hasn't given me greater certainty; it has given me greater humility about the complexity of being human. The older I become, the less interested I am in presenting finished conclusions and the more interested I am in remaining faithful to the process of inquiry itself.

One reason I've never been entirely comfortable describing myself as a political leader is that my deepest training always pointed me in another direction. The monastery, and later the extraordinary people I met throughout Burma's democracy movement, kept returning me to a very inconvenient truth: before I concern myself with changing another person's consciousness, I must become intimately acquainted with my own. That sounds almost obvious until one honestly attempts it. We spend astonishing amounts of energy diagnosing the blindness of politicians, governments, institutions, religions, and ideologies, while remaining remarkably unfamiliar with the subtler forms of denial operating within our own minds.

My teachers had very little patience for that imbalance.

They weren't discouraging engagement with the world. Quite the opposite. They simply believed that activism detached from rigorous self-examination eventually begins

reproducing the very consciousness it claims to oppose. History offers countless examples. Revolutions overthrow dictators only to establish new dictatorships. Liberation movements become ideological bureaucracies. Moral outrage quietly transforms itself into moral superiority. The costumes change, the slogans change, but the underlying architecture of domination often remains remarkably intact because the consciousness producing it has never been deeply investigated.

That realization profoundly altered the way I began thinking about political engagement. Increasingly, I found myself asking a question that was simultaneously simple and extraordinarily difficult: What kind of human being am I becoming while attempting to improve the world? Not what causes am I supporting, not what books am I writing, not what speeches am I am giving, but what qualities of consciousness are actually becoming stronger inside me through the way I live? Am I becoming more patient? More curious? More capable of listening? Less reactive? More truthful? Or am I slowly becoming addicted to indignation because indignation provides the comforting illusion that someone else is always the primary problem?

Years ago, U Pandita challenged me in a way that permanently changed my understanding of activism. I'm paraphrasing, but faithfully. He said, "Alan, I know you care deeply about Burma. I know your friendship with Daw Suu is sincere. I know your concern for democracy is genuine. But you're still spending far too much energy thinking about what other people should become."

At first, I misunderstood him. I thought he was suggesting withdrawal from public life. He wasn't. He was pointing toward something far more demanding. He wanted me to recognize that every criticism I directed outward ought first to pass through the laboratory of my own experience. Before asking another human being to become less violent, had I honestly examined the countless subtle forms of aggression still operating inside myself? Before speaking about freedom, had I become attentive to the invisible habits that continued imprisoning my own consciousness?

That wasn't self-absorption.

It was accountability.

The monastery taught me that accountability begins precisely where blame ends.

U Pandita delighted in puncturing whatever idealized identity I happened to be constructing for myself at the time. One afternoon he looked at me with that wonderfully mischievous smile of his and said, "Alan, you speak beautifully about nonviolence. Let's examine that."

He reminded me that I still became impatient. I still became angry. I still participated in contradictions I preferred not to notice. Then he posed the question that has remained with me ever since.

"If someone were assaulting your wife and you had a gun, what would you do?"

The question bypassed philosophy altogether.

Years earlier, in *Burma: The Next Killing Fields*, I had already admitted publicly that under those circumstances I would probably use lethal force. U Pandita remembered.

"So," he smiled, "what does that do to your beautiful theories?"

It was one of the most compassionate moments of teaching I've ever received because he wasn't exposing hypocrisy in order to shame me. He was exposing attachment. I had become attached to the image of myself as a principled advocate of nonviolence. He wanted something much deeper than consistency. He wanted honesty.

There's an enormous difference between trying to become nonviolent and trying to appear nonviolent.

The first requires continual humility.

The second merely requires performance.

I think we live in an era that increasingly rewards performance. Social media has made identities astonishingly easy to manufacture. One can construct an entire public life around appearing compassionate, appearing radical, appearing enlightened, appearing morally courageous, while rarely submitting those appearances to sustained self-examination. That isn't simply an individual problem; it's becoming a cultural one. We are gradually confusing visibility with integrity and applause with transformation. Perhaps one of the quiet tragedies of our time is that reputation has become easier to cultivate than character.

For me, the antidote has always returned to intimacy. Not intimacy understood romantically alone, although love certainly belongs there, but intimacy with one's own contradictions. Intimacy with one's own fear. Intimacy with uncertainty. Intimacy with those aspects of ourselves we'd much rather project onto presidents, dictators, religious leaders, or ideological opponents. The moment I stop recognizing my own capacity for domination, I begin participating unconsciously in the very psychology I claim to resist.

That is why I remain so deeply committed to conversation—not debate, not performance, but genuine dialogue. Dialogue asks something argument never can. It asks whether I am willing to be changed by what I discover together with another human being. Once that willingness disappears, conversation quietly becomes another instrument of persuasion rather than an act of shared discovery. And perhaps that is where vilification truly begins: not with anger itself, but with the loss of curiosity.

Beyond Vilification: Truth, Humility, and the Revolution Within

John Malkin: Listening to you, I'm struck by the fact that you're describing nonviolence less as a political strategy than as a discipline of consciousness. Yet we live in a world where enormous decisions about war, surveillance, drones, artificial intelligence, and military intervention are being made every day by people occupying positions of extraordinary power. Many people listening might say, "That's all well and good on the personal level, but how does inner transformation translate into political responsibility?" In other words, how do we bridge the distance between personal awakening and public leadership? How do we ask leaders to become accountable without simply replacing one form of condemnation with another?

Alan Clements: That's precisely where I think imagination becomes indispensable. We have become remarkably sophisticated at criticizing power, yet comparatively unimaginative when it comes to envisioning how power itself might evolve. We know how to protest. We know how to denounce. We know how to expose hypocrisy. Those are all necessary civic functions. But I find myself increasingly interested in another question: what conditions actually help a human being become less violent?

That's a very different inquiry.

It asks us to move beyond punishment into understanding—not because accountability should disappear, but because accountability without understanding rarely transforms anyone. My experience, whether in monasteries, refugee camps, prisons, or intimate relationships, is that lasting transformation almost never begins with humiliation. It begins when someone is finally able to encounter themselves without the elaborate defenses, they've spent a lifetime constructing.

That is one reason I've become so interested in contemplative practice and, under carefully held circumstances, psychedelic-assisted inquiry. I don't regard psychedelics as magic, nor do I regard them as recreational escapes. Used irresponsibly, they can be profoundly destabilizing. But when approached with maturity, ethical guidance, psychological preparation, and genuine intention, they can temporarily soften the structures of denial that ordinarily govern consciousness. They do not manufacture wisdom; rather, they sometimes remove the obstacles preventing us from encountering truths that have been waiting patiently within us all along.

If someone asked me today what intervention I would most like to see among political leaders, it wouldn't be another media debate or another campaign rally. It would be an invitation to profound self-examination. Imagine presidents, generals, ministers, and corporate leaders spending time—not in front of cameras, not delivering speeches—but sitting quietly with highly skilled psychotherapists, contemplatives, trauma specialists, elder women, and indigenous wisdom keepers, asking themselves difficult questions they can no longer evade.

Who am I when no office protects me?

What grief have I never fully mourned?

What fear continues directing my decisions?

What humiliation have I converted into domination?

Those questions may sound deeply personal, but history suggests they are also profoundly political.

The Buddha spoke continually about *kilesa*—the obscurations of consciousness that distort perception. Greed, hatred, delusion, fear, pride, attachment. Modern psychology gives them different names, but the underlying dynamics remain remarkably familiar. We tend to imagine that power corrupts. Increasingly, I wonder whether power simply amplifies whatever remains unresolved within the person holding it.

That insight has enormous implications for democracy.

If consciousness matters—and I believe it matters more than any ideology—then the cultivation of consciousness cannot remain a private luxury reserved for monasteries or retreat centers. It becomes a civic responsibility. Democracies depend not only upon constitutions and institutions but upon the maturity of the human beings entrusted with them. Laws matter. Elections matter. Journalism matters. Yet beneath every functioning democracy lies a less visible foundation: the psychological and moral capacities of its citizens and leaders.

That was one of the extraordinary lessons Burma gave me.

People often imagine Burma's democratic struggle as primarily political. Certainly, it was political. But beneath the political movement existed something much deeper. The men and women I came to know understood that if they reproduced the consciousness of domination after achieving power, then the revolution would have failed regardless of who occupied government offices. Their struggle therefore became an education in character. They trained themselves to listen, to restrain reactive anger, to cultivate patience, to refuse humiliation as a governing principle, and to preserve the dignity of opponents without surrendering moral clarity.

That last distinction remains essential.

Refusing vilification does not mean refusing truth.

Compassion is not the opposite of accountability.

In fact, genuine accountability may require compassion because without it we become primarily interested in defeating people rather than understanding the conditions that

gave rise to destructive behavior. Understanding never excuses injustice. It simply prevents us from mistaking condemnation for transformation.

I've often imagined, perhaps somewhat playfully but also quite seriously, what it would mean if those seeking the highest offices in the world were required to spend time in places shaped by the consequences of their decisions. Not for a carefully choreographed photo opportunity, but quietly, anonymously, without cameras, speechwriters, or political advisors. Let them sit with families whose children have been killed. Let them listen without interruption to survivors of torture. Let them accompany physicians working in bombed hospitals. Let them walk through refugee camps and remain long enough for the abstractions of policy to dissolve into the faces of actual human beings.

Empathy matures most deeply when suffering ceases to be statistical and becomes relational.

The remarkable thing is that many political prisoners taught me exactly this. They rarely asked the world to pity them. Instead, they wanted the world to understand the interior consequences of violence—not only upon those who suffer it, but upon those who perpetuate it. Dictators imprison others, but in doing so they also imprison themselves inside increasingly fortified architectures of fear. Violence diminishes everyone it touches, although never equally.

That realization continually returns me to humility.

I no longer imagine that I possess solutions equal to the complexity of our age. But I do remain convinced of one thing. Every enduring social transformation begins as an interior transformation somewhere within a human being. Every act of reconciliation begins because someone chooses, however imperfectly, to interrupt inherited habits of domination. Every genuine democracy ultimately depends upon citizens capable of self-reflection, self-restraint, and deep listening.

Perhaps that sounds idealistic. I'm comfortable with that.

History advances because enough people become willing to imagine realities that earlier generations dismissed as impossible. The abolition of slavery, women's suffrage, civil rights, democratic self-government—each once appeared hopelessly unrealistic until conscience matured beyond the assumptions of its age. Idealism becomes dangerous only when detached from disciplined practice. Joined to humility, however, it becomes one of civilization's great evolutionary forces.

That, ultimately, is why I continue returning to dialogue. Dialogue isn't merely conversation. It is a disciplined encounter between consciences willing to risk being changed by one another. Once we lose that willingness, politics hardens into performance, ideology replaces curiosity, and democracy gradually becomes another contest for domination. Burma taught me something I hope never to forget: revolutions endure only when they begin inside the human heart. Everything else, however necessary, is secondary.

Part Four

The Divine Feminine, the Education of Feeling, and the End of Domination

John Malkin: One of the recurring themes in *Politics of the Heart* is your insistence that we have defined violence far too narrowly. We tend to recognize violence only when blood is spilled, when bombs fall, or when someone is physically assaulted. Yet throughout the book you suggest that violence begins much earlier. It begins wherever domination replaces relationship, wherever another human being is reduced to an object, wherever power is exercised without reciprocity or accountability. You eventually ask a haunting question: *Have we learned nothing?* Looking back across colonialism, slavery, genocide, world wars, environmental devastation, and now increasingly sophisticated technologies of surveillance and mechanized warfare, you seem to be asking whether humanity continues repeating the same psychological pattern under ever more sophisticated disguises.

Running alongside that argument is another theme that has become increasingly central to your work: what you call the wisdom of the divine feminine. I know you aren't speaking simply about gender, nor are you proposing some romantic inversion in which women replace men as rulers. You're pointing toward a different quality of consciousness altogether—a way of knowing that values relationship over domination, listening over certainty, and participation over control. I'm wondering whether these two ideas are inseparable. Is the crisis of our civilization fundamentally a crisis of consciousness? And does the divine feminine represent, in your understanding, a radically different way of inhabiting both ourselves and one another?

Alan Clements: I think that's beautifully framed, John, because you've touched the place where these two streams meet. More and more, I find myself believing that the defining crisis of our age is not primarily political, economic, technological, or even ecological. Those are all real crises, but beneath them lies something still deeper. We have become extraordinarily skilled at thinking while gradually losing confidence in our capacity to feel. I don't mean emotion in the sentimental sense. I mean the disciplined willingness to remain present with reality long enough for reality to change us.

That distinction has become enormously important to me because our culture often mistakes information for transformation. We assume that if people simply knew more facts, read more books, consumed more news, or acquired more education, they would naturally become wiser human beings. Yet history repeatedly demonstrates otherwise. Some of the most educated societies have committed some of the greatest atrocities. Intelligence alone has never protected humanity from cruelty. Technical brilliance has never guaranteed compassion. We have learned to manipulate matter with astonishing sophistication while remaining remarkably undereducated in the inner life. We know how to build machines capable of extraordinary precision, yet many of us remain strangers to

our own grief, our own fear, our own shame, and our own longing. That imbalance, I increasingly believe, lies at the heart of much of what we call civilization.

One of the great gifts Burma gave me was introducing me to a form of contemplative practice that was never primarily concerned with becoming calm or peaceful. People often imagine meditation as a technique for relaxation. That certainly can happen, but it wasn't what my teachers emphasized. Meditation, as I received it from Mahasi Sayadaw and later from Sayadaw U Pandita, was an education in radical honesty. It was the slow cultivation of a consciousness capable of remaining present with experience without immediately attempting to escape it, manipulate it, explain it away, or replace it with a more comfortable story. The question was never, "How quickly can I feel better?" The question was, "Can I remain here long enough for truth to reveal itself?"

I remember a monk from Thailand who lived with us during my early years in the monastery. He was widely admired because he possessed extraordinary powers of concentration. He could sit motionless for hour after hour, and many of us quietly assumed that we were living beside someone approaching enlightenment. Then, over a period of weeks, something began changing. He became increasingly agitated. His composure disappeared. His teachers noticed immediately, yet rather than offering explanations or spiritual advice, they simply created space for him to speak whenever he was ready. Eventually he confessed that many years earlier, as a young man, he had taken another person's life. Until that moment, he had never allowed himself to feel the full reality of what he had done.

What moved me most wasn't the confession itself but the response of the teacher. There was no condemnation. There was no reassurance. There was no attempt to rescue him from his suffering through religious consolation. The teacher simply encouraged him to remain present. Stay with it. Don't run. Don't explain. Don't justify. Don't hide. Feel completely what has finally come forward. Weeks later, that monk asked permission to leave the monastery. He wanted to return to the village where the killing had taken place in the hope that he might somehow find the family of the man he had killed and, if they were willing, ask how he might begin making amends. We never heard from him again. Yet that story has remained one of the defining teachings of my life because it demonstrated a level of accountability that I rarely encounter in contemporary public life.

I've often reflected that our institutions, our governments, and even our personal relationships might look profoundly different if we approached responsibility in that way. Today we devote enormous energy to defending ourselves. Politicians defend themselves. Corporations defend themselves. Religions defend themselves. Nations defend themselves. Individuals defend themselves. We have become extraordinarily sophisticated at explaining why our actions were necessary, understandable, justified, or unavoidable. Far less common is the simple willingness to stop defending ourselves long enough to ask a more uncomfortable question: "What have I actually participated in?" That question requires an entirely different quality of courage because it asks us to surrender the protective identities we've spent years constructing.

This is where the divine feminine enters the conversation for me. I don't understand the divine feminine as belonging exclusively to women. I've known men who embodied it beautifully and women who did not. It is, rather, a quality of consciousness that refuses to sacrifice relationship for control. It possesses the strength to remain emotionally available even in the presence of conflict. It does not confuse vulnerability with weakness, nor does it confuse domination with strength. It understands that genuine authority grows from the capacity to listen, to feel, to remain inwardly permeable while still holding firm moral boundaries. When I think of Aung San Suu Kyi during the years I knew her most closely, or many of the extraordinary women political prisoners and activists I've interviewed over the decades, what continually struck me was not simply their courage but their extraordinary emotional steadiness. They rarely allowed hatred to become the organizing principle of their lives because they understood that hatred eventually colonizes the consciousness of the one who carries it.

For that reason, I've gradually become convinced that the future of democracy depends at least as much upon emotional evolution as it does upon constitutional reform. We can redesign institutions endlessly, but unless we simultaneously cultivate human beings capable of relationship, accountability, and self-reflection, those institutions will eventually mirror the same patterns of domination they were created to replace. Politics ultimately expresses consciousness. Governments become enlarged reflections of the psychological lives of the people who create them. That may sound idealistic, but after spending much of my adult life in monasteries, refugee camps, prisons, conflict zones, and among people who have endured almost unimaginable suffering without surrendering their humanity, I no longer think it is idealism. I think it is one of the deepest forms of political realism.

John Malkin: As I'm listening to you, I'm reminded that one of the remarkable qualities of the great contemplative traditions is that they rarely begin by asking how to change the world. They begin by asking how to become sufficiently awake that one no longer contributes unconsciously to the world's suffering. Yet there's another dimension to what you're saying that I find especially compelling. You're not advocating withdrawal from public life. You've spent decades documenting political violence, challenging dictatorships, and standing beside movements for democracy. So you're clearly not suggesting that meditation replaces activism. Rather, it seems you're asking whether activism itself can emerge from a different quality of consciousness. How do you understand that relationship today?

Alan Clements: I think that's precisely the distinction, John. There has always been a misunderstanding—particularly in the modern West—that contemplative life somehow requires retreat from the world. My own experience has led me to almost the opposite conclusion. Genuine contemplative practice doesn't remove us from reality; it removes the illusions through which we habitually perceive reality. Once those begin dissolving, one often feels an even greater responsibility to participate in the world, but to participate differently.

When I first went to Burma as a young monk, I carried all the enthusiasm, idealism, and impatience of youth. Like many people of my generation, I believed that enough

intelligence, enough moral conviction, enough courage, and enough activism could fundamentally change history. There is still something beautiful in that aspiration, and I hope we never lose it. But Burma taught me that political transformation without psychological transformation remains tragically incomplete. One may replace a dictator and yet preserve the psychology of dictatorship. One may establish democratic institutions while continuing to govern oneself through fear, resentment, certainty, and domination. If those deeper structures remain untouched, history simply repeats itself under different names.

That realization became unmistakably clear during my years with Aung San Suu Kyi and so many of the remarkable individuals surrounding Burma's democracy movement. What continually impressed me was not merely their willingness to sacrifice their freedom, although that was extraordinary in itself. It was their determination to ensure that the methods of the movement reflected the society they hoped eventually to build. They understood that means and ends cannot be permanently separated. If one hopes to establish a culture grounded in dignity, dialogue, mutual respect, and constitutional democracy, then those qualities cannot simply appear after victory has been achieved. They must already be alive within the movement itself.

That insight has stayed with me because it applies far beyond Burma. Every family, every institution, every political party, every religious community, and every culture is quietly educating itself through the way it conducts disagreement. The quality of our conversations is never merely a reflection of our values; it is one of the principal ways those values are transmitted. Children learn democracy long before they understand constitutions. They learn it around dinner tables. They learn it by watching how parents disagree. They learn it through whether differences are welcomed, tolerated, feared, or punished. The same is true of nations. Democracy is not sustained primarily through elections. Elections are essential, but they rest upon something even more fundamental: a citizenry capable of listening without immediately reaching for domination.

That is why I return so often to dialogue. Dialogue is not simply exchanging opinions. It is the disciplined willingness to remain present while another person's experience reshapes one's own understanding. It asks us to suspend, however briefly, the compulsion to prevail. It asks us to become more interested in discovering reality together than in defending identities we have already constructed. That is extraordinarily difficult because the ego finds certainty intoxicating. Once we become identified with being right, curiosity quietly disappears. We stop listening in order to understand and begin listening only for opportunities to respond. The conversation has already ended, even though words continue passing between us.

This, for me, is where the divine feminine again becomes indispensable. It introduces another mode of intelligence into public life—one rooted less in conquest than in communion. I don't mean communion in a sentimental or religious sense. I mean the recognition that human beings are profoundly relational creatures whose flourishing depends upon reciprocal dignity. The divine feminine continually reminds us that truth need not be separated from tenderness, that courage need not be expressed through aggression, and that moral clarity becomes more persuasive, not less, when it arises from

compassion rather than contempt. The extraordinary women I have known throughout my life have repeatedly demonstrated this. They possessed immense strength, yet almost never confused strength with hardness. They could oppose injustice with unwavering determination while remaining astonishingly free of hatred. That combination has become one of the deepest aspirations of my own life.

I often think we have misunderstood evolution itself. We celebrate technological evolution because its results are immediately visible. We celebrate economic growth because it can be measured. We celebrate scientific discovery because it produces tangible innovations. Yet the most important evolution may be almost invisible. It occurs when a human being becomes slightly more patient than yesterday, slightly more capable of listening than yesterday, slightly less governed by fear than yesterday, slightly more willing to acknowledge error than yesterday. Those transformations rarely make headlines, yet they alter families, communities, institutions, and eventually civilizations. History, for all its dramatic revolutions, is also quietly shaped by countless unseen revolutions of character.

When I look back over my own life, I realize that the people who most profoundly transformed me were seldom those with the greatest public influence. They were teachers, political prisoners, contemplatives, journalists, artists, and close friends whose lives embodied a remarkable coherence between what they believed and how they lived. They taught by presence before they taught by argument. Looking back now, I suspect that presence may be the most persuasive language any of us ever speaks. Before another human being remembers our opinions, they remember how they felt in our company. Before they remember our theories, they remember whether we listened. Before they remember our accomplishments, they remember whether our presence enlarged their own sense of dignity. If there is one lesson that has become increasingly clear to me through age, illness, love, and Burma itself, it is that consciousness is always contagious. We are constantly educating one another by the quality of our being, whether we intend to or not. That realization leaves me both humbled and hopeful, because it suggests that every authentic act of presence is already participating in the quiet reconstruction of the world.

Part Five

Anger, Accountability, and the Moral Imagination

John Malkin: Listening to you, I'm struck by something that seems increasingly rare in public life. You're asking us to hold two truths simultaneously. On one hand, you're insisting that domination, militarism, authoritarianism, and systemic violence must be confronted honestly and without euphemism. On the other hand, you're warning against allowing resistance itself to become psychologically organized around hatred. That's a difficult balance to sustain, particularly at a time when so many people feel overwhelmed by the brutality they witness every day. I wonder if this is also why you've become interested in what you describe as the moral imagination. You're asking us not merely to criticize existing systems of power but to imagine forms of leadership that have not yet fully appeared. What would that actually look like? If you could redesign the moral preparation for leadership in the twenty-first century, where would you begin?

Alan Clements: I think I would begin by asking an almost embarrassingly simple question: *Has this person learned how to feel?* Not sentimentality, not theatrical displays of emotion, but the disciplined capacity to remain inwardly available to another person's suffering without immediately defending oneself against it. The more I reflect on the history of war, authoritarianism, patriarchy, and institutional violence, the more convinced I become that one of their common characteristics is emotional distance. It is extraordinarily difficult to destroy another human being while remaining intimately connected to their humanity. Somewhere along the way, abstraction takes over. People become statistics. Refugees become policy questions. Casualties become military objectives. Civilian deaths become collateral damage. Language itself begins anesthetizing conscience.

That concerns me enormously because language is never neutral. Every civilization tells stories about itself, and those stories eventually become the architecture through which moral decisions are made. If our language gradually separates us from feeling, then our politics will inevitably follow. This is why I've often said that violence begins long before the first weapon is fired. It begins when consciousness becomes sufficiently insulated from relationship that another person's life no longer carries the same emotional reality as one's own. Once that separation is normalized, almost anything becomes administratively possible.

One of the remarkable qualities I observed repeatedly among Burma's democratic leaders was their refusal to allow abstraction to replace relationship. Even while confronting one of the world's most brutal military regimes, they continually returned to the human dimension of political life. Aung San Suu Kyi often reminded those around her that democracy was never simply about replacing one government with another. It was about cultivating a society in which people learned how to live together without fear. That distinction is easily overlooked because constitutions can be drafted relatively quickly.

Laws can be rewritten. Elections can be organized. But trust develops much more slowly. Mutual respect develops even more slowly. The habits of dialogue, restraint, and reciprocal dignity require years, often generations, of deliberate cultivation.

That's why I've become increasingly interested in what I sometimes call the civic architecture of consciousness. We speak constantly about rebuilding nations after war, yet we devote comparatively little attention to rebuilding the psychological conditions that make democratic life sustainable. Roads can be reconstructed. Schools can be rebuilt. Institutions can be reestablished. But unless people also recover the capacity to disagree without dehumanizing one another, every political victory remains fragile. Democracy, at its deepest level, is not simply a governmental arrangement. It is a way of relating. It is the ongoing practice of granting another human being equal moral reality, even when profound disagreement exists.

If I were asked to redesign the preparation for political leadership, I honestly think it would look very different from what we presently reward. Before asking someone how effectively they can command armies, negotiate trade agreements, or manage economies, I would want to know whether they have ever spent meaningful time among those who bear the consequences of political decisions. Have they sat quietly with families whose lives have been shattered by war? Have they listened, without cameras present, to survivors of torture, displacement, or systematic humiliation? Have they experienced enough unguarded human suffering that statistics once again become faces, voices, names, and relationships? Leadership, as I increasingly understand it, is not primarily the accumulation of authority. It is the expansion of moral imagination through direct encounter with reality.

I sometimes imagine inviting presidents, prime ministers, military commanders, and corporate leaders to spend several weeks not inside conference rooms but inside refugee camps, rehabilitation clinics, trauma centers, and communities attempting to rebuild after violence. Not to give speeches. Not to offer promises. Simply to listen. Simply to witness. Simply to remain present long enough for the abstractions of policy to dissolve into the concrete reality of human lives. I don't know whether such experiences would change everyone. Human beings remain wonderfully and tragically unpredictable. But I do know this: very few people emerge unchanged after allowing themselves to encounter suffering without the protective insulation of ideology.

Perhaps that sounds idealistic. Yet history repeatedly reminds us that nearly every moral advance once appeared impractical until enough people possessed the courage to imagine it differently. The abolition of slavery, universal suffrage, international human rights, truth and reconciliation processes—none of these emerged because people accepted the inevitability of domination. They emerged because individuals dared to enlarge the moral horizon of what civilization considered possible. That remains, I believe, one of humanity's greatest responsibilities. We must continually educate our capacity for imagination, because every humane future first appears as an act of imagination before it becomes a political reality.

Psychedelics, Humility, and the Possibility of Another Kind of Leadership

John Malkin: One of the more provocative aspects of your book is that you don't stop at criticizing the psychology of war. You also propose possibilities that many people would regard as unconventional, even radical. You speak openly about meditation, contemplative psychology, and psychedelic-assisted inquiry as ways of helping human beings confront denial rather than merely accumulate information. Some readers may immediately dismiss that as unrealistic. Others may hear it as one of the more hopeful ideas in the book. I'm curious about how you understand that relationship today. Are psychedelics, in your view, another form of political activism? Or are they something altogether different? And why do you continue returning to the importance of elder women in that conversation?

Alan Clements: I understand why the subject makes many people uncomfortable, and I think some of that discomfort is healthy. Anything capable of profoundly altering consciousness deserves enormous respect. One of the mistakes we've made, particularly over the past decade, is allowing psychedelics to become another cultural fashion. They're discussed as lifestyle accessories, productivity tools, or shortcuts to enlightenment. I don't believe they are any of those things. If approached casually, they can become just another form of distraction. If approached with reverence, preparation, ethical guidance, and psychological maturity, they may become extraordinary instruments for self-understanding. The distinction is everything.

When I speak about psychedelics, I'm really speaking about the courage to encounter oneself without the usual protections of identity. Meditation attempts something similar, although through very different means. Sitting quietly for long periods gradually reveals the mind's astonishing capacity for self-deception. One discovers how quickly attention wanders, how persistent fear can be, how deeply desire conditions perception, and how tirelessly the ego constructs narratives to protect itself. Psychedelic inquiry, when responsibly facilitated, sometimes accelerates that encounter. It doesn't manufacture wisdom. Rather, it temporarily weakens some of the psychological defenses that ordinarily prevent us from seeing ourselves with greater honesty.

That is why I've occasionally said, somewhat playfully but also quite seriously, that if I had the opportunity to spend time with the world's political leaders, I wouldn't begin with another policy briefing. I would begin with an invitation to examine consciousness itself. Not because altered states automatically produce ethical behavior—they clearly do not—but because they can sometimes introduce a degree of humility that ordinary consciousness resists. The greatest danger associated with power is not simply corruption. It is the gradual conviction that one's own perception of reality no longer requires questioning. The moment certainty becomes absolute, curiosity quietly dies. Once curiosity disappears, dialogue becomes almost impossible.

Throughout my years in Burma, I repeatedly encountered individuals whose moral authority had very little to do with status. Some had spent decades in prison. Others had

lived in exile. Many had lost family members, careers, health, and almost everything that contemporary society uses to measure success. Yet they possessed a remarkable absence of psychological grandiosity. They knew how vulnerable they remained. They knew how easily fear could return. They knew how difficult forgiveness actually was. That awareness didn't weaken them. It grounded them. It prevented conviction from hardening into self-righteousness. The more I observed people like that, the more I became convinced that humility is not merely a private virtue. It is a civic necessity.

This is also why I continue speaking about the role of elder women. I don't mean that women are inherently wiser than men. History doesn't support such simplistic conclusions. What I mean is that patriarchal culture has overwhelmingly rewarded traits associated with conquest, competition, certainty, emotional suppression, and domination, while systematically undervaluing relational intelligence, emotional literacy, receptivity, and collaborative wisdom. Those latter capacities have often been preserved, though certainly not exclusively, by women who have had to develop them in order to survive within patriarchal systems. When I imagine political leaders sitting with wise elder women—not as symbolic gestures but as genuine students—I imagine something much deeper than gender politics. I imagine a civilization finally becoming willing to learn from forms of intelligence it has historically marginalized.

Perhaps that's why I continue returning to the phrase *the divine feminine*. It names a quality of consciousness that asks different questions. Instead of asking, "How do I win?" it asks, "How do we remain in relationship?" Instead of asking, "How do I dominate?" it asks, "What conditions allow everyone to flourish?" Instead of measuring success through conquest, it measures success through the quality of life created for others. These are not sentimental questions. They are profoundly political questions because every civilization eventually reflects the questions it habitually asks.

I recognize that some people hear these ideas and conclude that they are impractical. I understand the criticism. Yet I find myself asking another question in return. How practical has our existing model of leadership actually been? We possess more military power than at any previous moment in human history, yet wars continue multiplying. We possess unprecedented technologies of communication, yet loneliness, polarization, and distrust continue deepening. We produce extraordinary wealth, yet vast numbers of people remain trapped in conditions of profound insecurity. Perhaps what appears unrealistic is simply unfamiliar. Perhaps what appears idealistic is merely a possibility whose time has not yet arrived.

For me, the conversation ultimately returns to one very simple principle. No political system will ever become more conscious than the people entrusted with sustaining it. Constitutions matter. Elections matter. Laws matter. Journalism matters. But beneath all of those lies consciousness itself. Every institution is eventually shaped by the interior lives of the human beings who inhabit it. If those lives remain dominated by fear, denial, humiliation, and the compulsion to control, no amount of institutional reform will permanently solve the problem. If, however, enough individuals gradually cultivate greater honesty, humility, compassion, and relational intelligence, institutions

themselves begin evolving because they are expressions of the consciousness that created them.

That, ultimately, is why I continue speaking about these subjects. I'm not trying to persuade everyone to meditate or participate in psychedelic inquiry. I'm trying to invite a larger conversation about what it actually means to educate a human being. We have become extraordinarily accomplished at educating intellect. The twenty-first century may ask us to become equally serious about educating consciousness. If we fail to undertake that second education, we may continue advancing technologically while remaining emotionally and morally underdeveloped. If we succeed, however imperfectly, we may yet discover that humanity's next great evolutionary leap is not artificial intelligence but awakened intelligence—the intelligence of a heart that has finally learned how to think, feel, and act as one.

Part Six

Mortality, Love, and the Art of Remaining Human

John Malkin: Throughout our conversation, Alan, I've been struck by how naturally you've moved between subjects that many people would ordinarily keep separate. We've spoken about Burma, political prisoners, authoritarianism, democracy, meditation, psychedelics, the divine feminine, and now we're arriving somewhere unexpectedly intimate. Underneath everything you've said runs another current—mortality. You've spoken openly in recent years about confronting what you believed might be the end of your life, and it seems to have altered not simply your priorities but your way of seeing. I'm wondering whether living so closely beside death has changed the questions you ask. Has it altered your understanding of what ultimately matters?

Alan Clements: Completely. I don't think anyone can live honestly in the company of mortality for very long without discovering that so much of what once appeared urgent begins quietly falling away. Death has an extraordinary way of editing consciousness. It removes illusions with a precision that no philosophy ever could. Things that once occupied enormous emotional territory simply lose their authority. Status loses its glamour. Recognition becomes less compelling. Arguments one felt compelled to win begin looking strangely insignificant. What remains begins revealing itself with remarkable clarity.

When I first received the diagnosis that eventually led me into hospice, I certainly wasn't serene. I was frightened. I was grieving. I was trying to reconcile myself with the possibility that I might never again see my daughter grow older, never complete the books I still carried within me, never love again, never have another opportunity simply to sit beneath a tree watching light move through leaves. Those are not abstract losses. They are profoundly human ones. But something unexpected happened during that period.

Rather than becoming preoccupied with death itself, I found myself becoming increasingly attentive to life—to the astonishing privilege of ordinary existence.

A cup of tea became extraordinary.

The sound of birds before sunrise became extraordinary.

Walking barefoot became extraordinary.

A conversation with someone I loved became extraordinary.

Nothing external had changed, yet everything had changed because attention itself had changed.

I think we spend much of our lives assuming that fulfillment lies somewhere ahead of us, waiting for the next accomplishment, the next relationship, the next insight, the next destination. Mortality interrupted that illusion for me. It gently but unmistakably asked another question: What if this moment, exactly as it is, is already asking for your complete participation?

That question continues accompanying me every day.

One consequence has been an even deeper appreciation for relationship. Earlier in my life I might have answered questions like yours by speaking about enlightenment, meditation, political freedom, human rights, or the transformation of consciousness. I still care passionately about every one of those things. But age, illness, and the proximity of death have rearranged their order. Increasingly, what feels most sacred are the relationships through which all those values become real. Friendship. Family. Love. Conversation. Shared silence. Mutual trust. The privilege of being genuinely known by another human being and of offering that same recognition in return.

Perhaps that's one reason I've become so interested in dialogue during these later years. Dialogue is simply relationship becoming conscious of itself. It is two people recognizing that neither possesses the whole truth, yet together they may discover something neither could have reached alone. When that happens, conversation ceases to be an exchange of information. It becomes an act of communion. Looking back over my own life, I realize that nearly every important turning point arrived through conversation—with my teachers, with political prisoners, with Aung San Suu Kyi, with journalists, artists, friends, lovers, and complete strangers whose honesty altered the trajectory of my thinking.

Love has also acquired a different meaning for me. When we're younger, love is often experienced primarily through attraction, longing, romance, and possibility. Those dimensions remain beautiful, but I think love gradually reveals another face. It becomes less concerned with possession than with presence. Less concerned with excitement than with stewardship. Less concerned with finding completion in another person than with participating together in each other's unfolding humanity. That has become one of the

great surprises of growing older. Love doesn't become smaller with age. It becomes quieter, deeper, and infinitely more spacious.

There is another dimension to mortality that I rarely hear discussed, yet it has become central to my own experience. The hardest part of facing death wasn't actually contemplating my own disappearance. It was recognizing the suffering experienced by those who loved me. Watching their anxiety, their grief, their anticipatory mourning—that was often more difficult than confronting my own fear. It taught me that our lives are never solely our own. We exist within intricate webs of relationship, and every life touches countless others in ways we rarely perceive while we're living it.

That realization has made gratitude almost unavoidable. I find myself increasingly grateful not for extraordinary events but for ordinary faithfulness: people who remain beside one another through difficulty; friends who continue calling after decades; children who teach their parents new ways of seeing; strangers whose unexpected kindness alters the emotional atmosphere of an entire day. These gestures rarely appear in history books, yet they are continually holding civilization together beneath the headlines.

Burma taught me many things, but perhaps one of its greatest gifts was introducing me to people who had lost almost everything and yet refused to surrender generosity. I would ask former political prisoners how they survived years of solitary confinement, torture, and uncertainty. Their answers varied, but again and again they returned to one word: dignity. Not pride. Not ideology. Dignity. The conviction that although another person may imprison the body, only we can decide whether to imprison the heart. That understanding has accompanied me through illness more faithfully than almost any medical treatment. Whenever fear begins whispering its familiar stories, I remember those remarkable men and women. They continue reminding me that life is measured less by its duration than by the quality of consciousness with which it is lived. If mortality has given me any lasting gift, it is this: an ever-deepening reverence for the ordinary miracle of being alive together, if only for a little while.

Listening at the Edge of Suffering

John Malkin: One thing I've admired about your work over the years is that you've consistently chosen to move toward places that most people instinctively move away from. You've spent time in refugee camps, interviewed political prisoners immediately after their release, documented torture survivors, and listened to people whose lives have been permanently altered by war and displacement. You recently mentioned your hope of returning to the refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border, places you haven't visited in decades. Many people might wonder why anyone would voluntarily return to environments saturated with so much grief. Yet listening to you, I have the sense that you don't primarily see those places as locations of despair. You seem to regard them as places where something essential about our humanity becomes visible with unusual clarity. What continues drawing you back there after all these years?

Alan Clements: That's a deeply perceptive question because I don't think I'm drawn there by suffering itself. Suffering, by itself, teaches very little. Human history is filled with suffering that has produced only more suffering. What continues drawing me back are the people I meet within those circumstances who somehow refuse to allow catastrophe to become the final definition of who they are. Again and again, throughout Burma and elsewhere, I've encountered men and women who have lost homes, family members, livelihoods, and entire worlds, yet who continue embodying an astonishing generosity of spirit. Their lives quietly challenge many of the assumptions by which those of us living in comparatively privileged societies often measure success.

The phrase *refugee camp* itself has never adequately described what those places represent. Certainly, they are places of displacement and profound trauma. No one should romanticize them. They exist because human beings have failed one another politically and morally. Yet if one remains there long enough—long enough not merely to photograph, interview, or document, but simply to listen—another dimension gradually becomes visible. One encounters extraordinary resilience, humor, tenderness, improvisation, friendship, and acts of generosity that frequently exceed anything found within more comfortable environments. I have often left refugee camps feeling less impressed by my own accomplishments and more educated about what it actually means to remain fully human under conditions that appear almost impossible.

Perhaps that's why I resist reducing people to victims. Victimhood may describe what has happened to someone, but it never fully describes who they are. Some of the freest human beings I've ever met possessed almost nothing materially. Some of the most imprisoned people I've encountered occupied positions of enormous wealth and influence. Those experiences permanently altered the way I understand freedom. Increasingly, I see freedom less as the absence of external constraint than as the presence of an unconquered conscience. Political freedom matters profoundly—I would never diminish its importance—but the political prisoners I came to know repeatedly demonstrated that consciousness possesses dimensions no prison can entirely contain.

Returning to the camps, then, isn't an act of nostalgia. It is a return to one of the places where I first learned to listen more carefully. Journalism at its best has never been, for me, the collection of dramatic stories. It is the practice of making oneself sufficiently available that another person's experience can enter one's own consciousness without being immediately translated into ideology, commentary, or personal opinion. I sometimes think we've become too quick to explain the suffering of others before we've fully allowed ourselves to encounter it. Explanation has its place, certainly, but explanation that arrives before listening often becomes another subtle form of distancing.

One of the greatest gifts Burma ever offered me was the discipline of listening without assuming I already understood. That lesson repeatedly humbled me. I would arrive believing I knew what questions mattered, only to discover that the person sitting before me was quietly inviting an entirely different conversation. Many former political prisoners wanted surprisingly little time describing torture itself. They wanted instead to speak about friendship, dignity, faith, humor, music, memory, and the quiet interior practices that had prevented despair from colonizing their minds. They understood that

if their identities became organized exclusively around what had been done to them, then the prison would continue exercising authority long after the prison gates had opened.

That insight has never left me because I think it applies far beyond zones of conflict. Every one of us experiences losses, betrayals, disappointments, illnesses, and grief. We cannot prevent those experiences from entering our lives. The deeper question is whether we will organize our identities around them. Will we become biographies of injury, or will we gradually discover dimensions of ourselves that remain larger than what has happened? The former political prisoners of Burma taught me that dignity begins precisely at that threshold. They neither denied their suffering nor allowed suffering to become the entirety of their story.

Being in Bali during these past several years has reinforced that understanding in unexpected ways. I spend time in the same cafés and small restaurants, gradually getting to know the people who work there. Eventually I became curious about the lives that remained invisible to most visitors—the dishwashers, maintenance workers, kitchen staff, cleaners, gardeners. They rarely appear in travel brochures, yet they make possible much of what tourists experience. Asking permission simply to meet them, to learn their names, to thank them personally, and occasionally to offer a small gesture of support has reminded me how easily privilege narrows perception. One doesn't have to travel to a refugee camp to encounter invisible lives. They exist all around us. The question is whether we have cultivated sufficient attentiveness to notice them.

Living in Bali has also made me more aware of the complicated legacy of colonialism. One sees extraordinary beauty alongside extraordinary inequality. Luxurious villas sit not far from communities where families survive on incomes that many Western visitors might spend on a single evening meal. I don't mention that to induce guilt. Guilt rarely produces lasting transformation. I mention it because awareness changes the quality of relationship. Once another person's humanity becomes visible, indifference becomes more difficult to sustain. Small acts of generosity begin arising less from obligation than from recognition.

As I grow older, I find myself increasingly drawn toward those simple acts. They may appear insignificant beside the immense crises facing humanity, yet I no longer believe that history is transformed only by dramatic events. History is also quietly shaped by innumerable moments in which one human being chooses to recognize the dignity of another. Those gestures accumulate. They educate children. They reshape communities. They remind us that civilization is not sustained primarily by governments but by the countless relationships through which ordinary people continue extending kindness toward one another despite everything that might justify withdrawing it.

That is why I hope to return to the refugee camps. I don't imagine myself bringing wisdom there. Quite the opposite. I expect once again to become the student. After all these years, I still believe that some of the greatest teachers on earth are not necessarily found in universities, monasteries, or political institutions. They are often found among those who have suffered deeply without allowing suffering to extinguish their capacity to love. Every time I encounter people like that, I leave with the same quiet realization: I understand a

little less than I imagined, and yet I trust the possibilities of the human heart a little more than I did before.

Part Seven

Asking Better Questions: Why Dialogue Still Matters

John Malkin: Alan, listening to you over the course of this conversation, I keep returning to one thread that seems to weave through everything you've shared. Whether we're speaking about Burma, political prisoners, meditation, psychedelics, democracy, or even mortality, you continually come back to dialogue. Not simply conversation as the exchange of opinions, but dialogue as a moral discipline—a way of encountering another human being without immediately trying to defeat, persuade, or diminish them. That strikes me as increasingly radical in a culture that rewards certainty far more readily than curiosity.

You've spent much of your adult life engaging people whose lives and worldviews differ profoundly from your own. You interviewed Aung San Suu Kyi over many years. You've spoken with former dictators, military officers, refugees, Buddhist monks, Christian ministers, trauma survivors, journalists, artists, and political prisoners. You seem consistently drawn not toward agreement but toward understanding. What have those decades of listening taught you about dialogue itself? Why do you continue believing that conversation remains one of humanity's greatest untapped resources at a time when public discourse often appears more polarized than ever?

Alan Clements: That's probably the deepest question anyone could ask me today because, if I'm honest, dialogue has gradually become the center of my life's work. Earlier in my career I might have answered differently. I might have spoken first about meditation, Buddhist psychology, investigative journalism, human rights, or Burma's democratic struggle. Those remain integral parts of who I am. Yet over time I began recognizing that each of those pursuits depended upon something even more fundamental. They all required human beings willing to remain present with one another long enough for understanding to emerge.

I've come to believe that dialogue is one of civilization's least appreciated arts. We assume conversation is something we naturally know how to do simply because we speak. Yet speaking and dialogue are not synonymous. Most conversations today consist of parallel monologues. We wait politely for another person to finish so that we may continue presenting the position we already held before the exchange began. Very little genuine listening occurs because genuine listening requires something that the ego finds extraordinarily difficult. It requires the willingness to risk being changed.

That distinction has become increasingly important to me. Whenever I think about the extraordinary individuals who most profoundly influenced my own life, what I remember isn't primarily the information they shared. I remember the quality of attention they brought into the room. Mahasi Sayadaw possessed that quality. U Pandita certainly

possessed it. Aung San Suu Kyi possessed it in abundance. Many of the political prisoners I interviewed possessed it as well. They had learned, often through tremendous suffering, how to listen without immediately imposing themselves upon another person's experience. There was an unusual spaciousness about them. You felt not judged, not managed, not instructed, but genuinely received. Looking back, I realize that this quality of presence was itself one of the most transformative teachings they offered.

Aung San Suu Kyi often reminded those around her that the purpose of dialogue was not agreement. That surprised many people because dialogue is frequently misunderstood as a strategy for eliminating conflict. She never believed that. Burma is home to well over one hundred and thirty ethnic nationalities, multiple religious traditions, distinct histories, languages, and political aspirations. Agreement on every question was never realistic. The real challenge was something much more demanding: could people learn how to remain in relationship despite enduring disagreement? Could they discover forms of political life in which diversity ceased being regarded as a threat and instead became the very foundation of a future Federal Democratic Union?

That insight has only grown more relevant with time. Increasingly, I think one of the greatest misunderstandings in modern politics is the assumption that unity requires sameness. Nothing in nature suggests that. Forests flourish through biodiversity. Healthy ecosystems depend upon extraordinary complexity. Human consciousness itself is infinitely diverse. Yet politically we continue searching for forms of unity that often require conformity. Burma taught me another possibility. It suggested that authentic unity might arise precisely because difference is honored rather than erased. If that experiment succeeds, it may become one of Myanmar's greatest gifts to humanity—not merely a democratic achievement for one nation, but a living demonstration that diversity and belonging need not exist in opposition to one another.

That realization has shaped almost everything I'm trying to do now. Increasingly, I find myself less interested in persuading people than in creating conditions under which deeper listening becomes possible. Persuasion has its place, certainly, but dialogue begins somewhere earlier. It begins with curiosity. It begins with the recognition that another human being's experience may contain dimensions of reality that my own life has not yet revealed. Without that humility, conversation quietly becomes another instrument of control.

One of the reasons I continue returning to Burma is because its democratic movement consistently embodied this principle under circumstances where hatred would have been entirely understandable. Many of the people I interviewed had endured imprisonment, torture, exile, and unimaginable loss. Yet remarkably few organized their identities around revenge. They certainly wanted justice. They certainly opposed the military dictatorship. But beneath those political commitments lay something deeper. They understood that if the future society they hoped to create merely reproduced the psychology of humiliation, then victory itself would remain incomplete. Democracy, as they envisioned it, required a profound education in relationship.

That may ultimately be why dialogue has become so precious to me. It reminds us that another person's humanity can never be fully captured by our assumptions about them. Every authentic conversation quietly interrupts the stories we've been telling ourselves. Every genuine encounter enlarges the moral imagination just enough to make another future conceivable. I no longer think dialogue is simply a communication skill. I think it is one of the highest expressions of democratic consciousness. Before constitutions can endure, before institutions can flourish, before reconciliation becomes possible, people must first rediscover how to encounter one another without immediately reaching for domination. Everything else, in one way or another, grows from there.

The Spirit of Dialogue and the Future We Choose Together

John Malkin: As we've talked today, I've had the feeling that this conversation isn't simply about your latest book. It feels as though *Politics of the Heart* is part of a much larger journey you've been moving toward over many years. Again and again, you've returned to dialogue—not merely as conversation, but as a civic practice, a spiritual discipline, and perhaps even a new form of democratic culture. Before we finish, I'd love to hear more about what you're working on now. You've mentioned something called *The Spirit of Dialogue Summit*. What is it, and why does it feel so important to you at this stage of your life?

Alan Clements: It feels important because, quite honestly, I don't know that another book by itself is enough. I say that as someone who has devoted much of his adult life to writing. Books matter. They have shaped my life, and I'm grateful for every reader who has ever entered into conversation with something I've written. But we now inhabit a culture where information has become almost limitless while understanding often feels increasingly scarce. We don't necessarily need more opinions. We need more places where people can learn, in real time, how to think together.

That realization has gradually evolved into what I'm calling *The Spirit of Dialogue*. I don't think of it as a conference or a lecture series. I think of it as an experiment in human possibility. My hope is to bring together an extraordinary diversity of voices—artists, scientists, contemplatives, indigenous elders, journalists, psychologists, political leaders, peace-builders, educators, young people, and those whose lives have been shaped by conflict itself—not to debate one another, but to enter into an intentional practice of deep listening. The emphasis would not be on arriving at consensus. Consensus can sometimes become another form of conformity. The emphasis would be on demonstrating that profound disagreement need not prevent profound relationship.

One of the things Burma taught me, perhaps more than anywhere else in the world, is that democratic culture cannot simply be legislated into existence. Constitutions are indispensable. Institutions are indispensable. The rule of law is indispensable. Yet beneath all of those lies something more fragile and more foundational. People must gradually acquire the habits of dialogue itself. They must learn how to remain in conversation when emotions become intense, when histories diverge, when identities feel

threatened, and when no obvious solution presents itself. Those capacities are rarely taught in schools. They are almost never taught in politics. Yet they may be among the most essential democratic skills any society can cultivate.

The vision for the summit is therefore both simple and, I hope, quietly ambitious. I would like people not merely to hear ideas about dialogue but to witness dialogue unfolding between individuals who genuinely differ. Let them observe what careful listening sounds like. Let them watch how misunderstanding is repaired. Let them experience what happens when curiosity gradually becomes stronger than certainty. I sometimes think that one authentic conversation can accomplish more than a hundred speeches because it models a way of being rather than merely describing it.

Another aspect of the project excites me enormously. We now possess technologies that, despite all their dangers, also offer unprecedented opportunities. Imagine documenting these conversations with extraordinary care and then making them freely available throughout the world. Imagine using artificial intelligence not to manipulate perception, but to translate wisdom into every major language, allowing students, educators, civic organizations, and communities everywhere to explore these dialogues in forms appropriate to their own cultures. Technology itself is morally neutral. Its ethical significance depends entirely upon the consciousness directing it. The same digital revolution capable of amplifying outrage could also become one of humanity's greatest instruments for cultivating understanding, if we choose to employ it that way.

As I reflect on this stage of my life, I find myself increasingly drawn toward projects that outlive any single individual. Books eventually go out of print. Performances conclude. Interviews end. But if we can contribute, even modestly, to strengthening the human capacity for dialogue, perhaps that work continues unfolding long after we're gone. The older I become, the less interested I am in building a personal legacy and the more interested I am in participating in what I sometimes think of as an inheritance of consciousness—a tradition of relational wisdom that each generation receives, enlarges, and then offers to the next.

That aspiration has also become deeply personal. Facing mortality has clarified something for me. There was a time when I thought primarily about what I wanted to accomplish. Increasingly I think about what I hope to leave behind. Not in terms of possessions or reputation, but in terms of qualities of consciousness. Have I encouraged people to become more curious? More compassionate? More courageous? More willing to ask difficult questions? More capable of remaining present with complexity rather than fleeing toward simplistic answers? Those feel like far more meaningful measures of a life than any conventional success I might once have pursued.

Ultimately, the Spirit of Dialogue isn't really about creating another organization. It's about helping restore a forgotten human art. Every child enters the world longing to be heard before longing to be admired. Every meaningful friendship depends upon listening. Every enduring marriage depends upon listening. Every healthy democracy depends upon listening. Somehow we've managed to make this most ordinary of human capacities

seem almost revolutionary. Perhaps that tells us something about the moment we're living through.

I remain, despite everything, profoundly hopeful. Not optimistic in the sense of believing history inevitably bends toward justice. History offers no such guarantees. Hope, for me, is something much more active. It is the decision to continue participating in the unfinished possibilities of our shared humanity even when outcomes remain uncertain. Burma's democracy movement taught me that. Political prisoners taught me that. My teachers taught me that. Illness taught me that. Love continues teaching me that every day.

If I have one enduring faith after all these years, it is not that humanity possesses all the answers. It is that we remain capable of asking better questions together. And perhaps civilization advances less through certainty than through the quality of those questions and the generosity with which we accompany one another while living into them. If we can recover that discipline—if we can once again make dialogue one of the central practices of democratic life—then I believe we may discover that the future is far more open than our fears presently allow us to imagine.

Part Eight

A Future Worth Becoming

John Malkin: Alan, before we conclude, I want to return to something that has quietly accompanied this entire conversation. Over the years I've watched your work evolve through many different forms—your years as a Buddhist monk in Burma, your journalism, your human rights advocacy, your books, your theatre, your spoken-word performances, and now these larger conversations about dialogue itself. Looking across that arc, it seems that the thread connecting everything you've done has been an enduring faith in the possibility of human transformation.

At a time when many people feel overwhelmed by political polarization, ecological uncertainty, technological acceleration, and seemingly endless war, it can be tempting to conclude that we've reached a point where meaningful change is no longer possible. Yet listening to you today, I don't hear despair. I hear urgency, certainly, but I also hear an unwavering confidence in the human spirit. As we bring this conversation to a close, I'd like to ask perhaps the simplest question of all. After everything you've witnessed—after the monasteries, the prisons, the refugee camps, the revolutions, the illnesses, the losses, and the extraordinary people you've encountered—what continues giving you hope? And what would you most want readers to carry with them after finishing this conversation?

Alan Clements: Hope, for me, has never been optimism. Optimism depends upon believing that circumstances will improve. Hope asks something much more demanding. It asks whether we're willing to remain faithful to what we know is true, even when circumstances suggest otherwise. Burma taught me that distinction more powerfully than any philosophy ever could. I met men and women who had every rational reason to

abandon hope. They had spent years in solitary confinement. They had watched friends disappear into prisons from which many never returned. Entire villages had been destroyed. Families had been scattered across borders. Yet what continually astonished me was not simply their endurance but the extraordinary dignity with which they continued inhabiting their lives.

That dignity wasn't based upon predictions about the future. It wasn't sustained by guarantees of political success. It arose from something far deeper. They understood that conscience possesses a freedom no government can ultimately confiscate. The body may be imprisoned. One's voice may be censored. One's work may be prohibited. But there remains an interior domain over which each human being retains a remarkable degree of responsibility. Again and again, they reminded me that the deepest victory over authoritarianism is refusing to allow authoritarianism to determine the quality of one's own consciousness. That insight has remained one of the defining inheritances of my life.

As I grow older, I also find myself trusting ordinary human goodness far more than I once did. Earlier in life I was captivated by extraordinary individuals—great teachers, remarkable activists, visionary political leaders. I remain grateful for every one of them. Yet the longer I live, the more convinced I become that civilization is sustained primarily by people history rarely notices. Parents who continue loving their children despite exhaustion. Teachers who quietly awaken curiosity in another generation. Journalists who refuse to surrender truth for convenience. Artists who preserve beauty in difficult times. Friends who remain loyal through illness. Nurses who comfort the dying. Strangers who extend unexpected kindness without ever imagining that anyone will remember their names. These people rarely occupy the front pages of newspapers, yet they are continually repairing the fabric of the world beneath the level of public attention.

That realization has changed my understanding of activism itself. I no longer think transformation begins primarily with movements, although movements remain indispensable. I think it begins whenever one human being refuses to allow fear, humiliation, or resentment to become the governing force of his or her life. Every act of genuine listening interrupts the momentum of domination. Every gesture of unexpected generosity weakens the logic of separation. Every conversation in which another person leaves feeling more deeply seen rather than diminished quietly alters the moral atmosphere we all inhabit. Those moments appear almost insignificant when measured against wars and governments, yet history is composed of precisely such moments accumulated over time.

I've often thought about something Aung San Suu Kyi once said to me during the years when we were working together. She insisted that the revolution in Burma would ultimately succeed not because it defeated an enemy but because it refused to become one. At the time, I understood those words politically. Today I understand them much more intimately. Every day presents us with countless opportunities either to enlarge another person's dignity or to diminish it. The future of democracy may depend less upon the grand decisions made in parliaments than upon those innumerable encounters through which people gradually learn whether disagreement must inevitably lead to dehumanization. That, to me, is the real revolution of the spirit.

If I were to leave readers with one invitation, it would simply be this: become exquisitely attentive to the quality of your own presence. We live in an age that constantly encourages us to look outward—to react, to comment, to judge, to accumulate information, to construct opinions with increasing speed. Much more rarely are we encouraged to ask what kind of human being all that activity is quietly shaping. Are we becoming more patient? More generous? More capable of listening? More available to wonder? More honest with ourselves? Those questions are not retreats from political life. They are the foundation upon which every humane politics must eventually rest.

I also hope people remember that no one arrives at wisdom alone. One of the greatest myths of modern culture is the ideal of radical individualism. My own life has been shaped by extraordinary teachers, courageous political prisoners, dear friends, beloved companions, journalists like yourself, artists, monks, and countless individuals whose names most readers will never know. Whatever insight I possess has emerged through relationship. Whatever courage I have discovered has been borrowed repeatedly from people who embodied it before I could. We become ourselves through one another. Once that truth is deeply understood, dialogue ceases to be optional. It becomes one of the essential practices of being human.

Finally, I would simply encourage people not to underestimate the significance of their own lives. We often imagine that history belongs to famous leaders, celebrated intellectuals, or charismatic movements. Yet history is also being written this very evening around dinner tables, in classrooms, in hospitals, in refugee camps, in prisons, in neighborhoods, and in quiet conversations between two people willing to listen without immediately reaching for certainty. The future is never created only by extraordinary moments. It is created through the accumulated integrity of ordinary days.

That may be the deepest lesson Burma has given me. It may also be the greatest lesson illness has given me. Life is astonishingly fragile. None of us knows how many conversations remain. None of us knows how many opportunities we will have to say, "I love you," "I was wrong," "Please forgive me," or "Tell me more." Once mortality becomes real rather than theoretical, those simple phrases begin carrying extraordinary weight. They become the vocabulary of a life consciously lived.

If there is any faith, I continue carrying after all these years, it is faith in that possibility: that human beings can still learn, can still awaken, can still love more deeply than fear, and can still choose dialogue over domination. I don't know whether that possibility will prevail. None of us does. But I cannot imagine a more meaningful way to spend whatever time remains than participating wholeheartedly in helping bring that future into being.

John Malkin: Alan, every conversation we've shared over the years has left me with something to contemplate long after the microphones were turned off. I have no doubt this one will do the same. Thank you—not only for your generosity today, but for the decades you've devoted to asking difficult questions with such sincerity, and for continuing to remind us that the quality of our presence may be one of the most consequential gifts we ever offer another human being.

Alan Clements: Thank you, John. Our friendship has always reminded me that good interviews are never really interviews. At their best, they're shared acts of discovery. From my heart to yours, thank you for your friendship, your integrity, your artistry, and for creating a space where conversation can still unfold without haste. That's becoming a rare and beautiful thing. I hope we continue it for many years to come.