

Following Our Instinct for Freedom A Night on Stage with Alan Clements

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By Paul W. Morris

Most of us would need several incarnations to accrue the amount of life experience Alan Clements has under his belt. After more than 30 years of spiritual exploration — during which time he has been a painter, journalist, yoga practitioner, Buddhist monk, freedom fighter, world traveler, and spoken-word artist; Clements was commissioned to write a book about his provocative life. The result is *Instinct for Freedom: Finding Liberation Through Living* (New World Library, 2002), a thoroughly engaging and often harrowing account of the time Clements spent in intensive meditation retreat and on the front lines of two genocidal wars. It is part memoir and part dharma teaching, though he is wary of using the latter label. “There is no ultimate teaching to learn,” says Clements, who was the first American to be ordained a Buddhist monk in Burma. “Life experience is our greatest teacher and therefore our greatest source for spiritual awakening.”

Nevertheless, *Instinct for Freedom* has much to offer beyond its compelling nonlinear narrative, which jumps across years from the war-torn jungles of Burma to the bombed-out ruins of Sarajevo. In particular, the concept of “World Dharma,” a term Clements has coined to describe his inclusive approach to spiritual transformation, is an important contribution to Western dharma.

Combining his understanding of Buddhist psychology, or Abhidharma, with the words of contemporary world leaders and human rights activists, he defines World Dharma as “a vision rooted in a deep recognition of our inherent interrelatedness.” Simply put, liberation isn’t about transcending personal suffering or healing ourselves alone, rather it’s about immersing ourselves fully in the world and in our relationships as the genuine place for awakening.

This idea isn’t wholly new. From Dwight Goddard’s seminal Buddhist Bible of the 1930’s (reprinted by Beacon Press in 1994) to Joseph Goldstein’s *One Dharma* (Harper San Francisco, 2002), attempts to synthesize Buddhism’s varied teachings into a coherent whole have taken many forms over the years. *Instinct for Freedom* will likely draw criticism from purists who see its kind of generalizing as a watering down of the dharma. But Clements’ intimacy with Buddhist practice specifically, insight meditation — lends the book an authenticity that speaks directly to one of the most pressing concerns in spiritual practice today: how to help alleviate the suffering of others while focusing on one’s own spiritual growth.

The book is dynamically alive with quotations from political figures and advocates for social change (for example, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Vaclav Havel), which Clements uses like building blocks to construct his World Dharma model. He also cites spiritual mavericks to drive his points home, so says Rumi: “Forget safety. Live where you fear to live. Destroy your reputation. Be notorious.”

Taking this rule to heart, Clements has confronted one of his own fears, namely, that of speaking in front of a live audience without a memorized script. For the past two and a half years, he has performed his one-man spoken-word show *Spiritually Incorrect* in theaters in the United States, Canada, and Australia. These “monologues with a message” are largely raw and spontaneous, resulting in what he calls “unscripted presence.” Whereas *Instinct for Freedom* has a subtle and felicitous style, *Spiritually Incorrect* is a scorching, comedic romp through the world of “{spiritual} indoctrination and the co-modification of mind states.”

“I think a lot of people are fed up with their pet guru, their pet teachings, their designer spiritual lifestyles,” he tells audiences who come to hear his show, the message of which is “having the courage to be true to yourself.”

The idea for *Spiritually Incorrect* was born in the mid-90’s, during one of his visits to Burma, where

he coauthored a collection of conversations with Noble Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi, *The Voice of Hope* (Seven Stories Press, 1998). Living in a community that had endured years of persecution by a totalitarian regime, he was awed by the profound bravery of the people he met while working on the book. In Burma, some activists push the boundaries of orthodoxy and are often seen as comedians, satirists, and raconteurs. “There’s this great oral tradition of truth-saying that mixes art, activism, politics, dharma, and comedy to convey a radical message,” he says of the spiritual activists he encountered there.

However, those individuals who spoke out against the dictatorship were jailed and often faced severe prison conditions. One night, Clements attended a performance by Burma’s premier spoken-word artist, U Par Lay, who had just been released from a six-year prison term for mildly satirizing the regime. Although the comedian risked re-incarceration by performing, he did not let that stop him from speaking his conscience. Clements was inspired. Later, after his return from Burma, he asked himself, “If I had 90 minutes left to live, what would I want to say to my fellow humans?” And so *Spiritually Incorrect* was born.

Often incendiary onstage, Clements doesn’t pull any punches with his rants against gurus and the self-help industry. So when he pauses at one point during the show to give the advice “Don’t be so in the moment,” he’s not just being contrary for controversy’s sake, although he might be splitting semantic hairs. His point, as with his concept of World Dharma, is that we need to be engaged with the world, not detached from it; the idea of “being present” often can be misleading, and can blind us to learning from our past or preparing for the future. Instead, he suggests that we be on guard against spiritual and political indoctrination. “Do not let anyone shape you in the image of his or her dogma,” he writes. “Don’t even let teachers call you their student, unless that’s what you want.”

In creating *Spiritually Incorrect*, Clements says, he wanted to take his dharma out of spiritual centers and bring it into theaters by infusing it with irony, comedy, and wit: “Levity is what’s often missing from spiritual seekers.” In addition to U Par Lay, he counts among his influences Lenny Bruce, Bill Hicks, Spalding Gray, Eric Bogosian, and Bill Maher, whose canceled ABC-TV talk show *Politically Incorrect* inspired the title of Clements’s show.

Spiritually Incorrect works best when it stays true to its improvisational comedy roots, as when Clements quotes Monty Python’s *Life of Brian* or riffs like a rapper at an urban poetry slam. Onstage, he’ll sit lightly on a stool or pace the floor with mike in hand, depending on the energy of the audience.

He attributes this physical and psychological flexibility to his yoga practice of 32 years. “I love the interrelation of the senses, of the breath and the body,” he says. “As a spoken-word artist, I’m always working with yoga stretches that open my throat, face, and neck. Yoga is a way on inhabiting my body and perceiving through my senses.”

After 40 performances throughout the world, he has learned a thing or two about relating to his audience...and about himself. His improv style resembles the Buddhist concept *upaya* (skillful means), where the dharma is best conveyed by addressing the particular needs of a given listener. “The whole performance is interrelated and fluid,” he says, “The less I know going in, the better.”

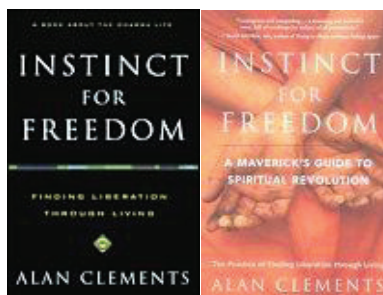
Occasionally, *Spiritually Incorrect* falls short, especially when Clements ventures into the nebulous realm of consciousness theory. A better place to look for a lucid discussion of the mind and meditation is the middle section of his book. For it’s in *Instinct for Freedom* that Clements’s sensitivity as a writer truly shines brightest. He takes the reader into the heart of his five-year intensive retreat at a Burmese monastery full of 20 hour-long days sitting in silence and describes the many pitfalls and switchbacks of his evolving practice. Readers searching for insight into the meditative mind will find much of substance in these chapters. In this way, *Instinct for Freedom* and *Spiritually Incorrect* complement each other nicely. Just as the book expounds upon the complexity of meditation practice hinted at during his performances, so Clements’ oral storytelling technique enhances the written narrative of his life. A memorable event that appears in the book, for instance - about an affluent Western couple that he meets in Calcutta - is spun into a hilarious yarn when it is related in front of a live audience.

Clements says he was a reluctant author and was urged to write the book for the benefit of others.

Now that it's published, though, he remains faithful to his anti-guru mission statement and jokes that if he could, he would add a disclaimer to the book's jacket: "Under no circumstances follow anything in this book. There's only one spiritual path: yours."

When asked what the next incarnation of Alan Clements will look like, he says he has no intention of stopping performing anytime soon (and in fact, he has shows scheduled in California and Hawaii this fall, with others in the works). Indeed, he has been working with a director to see how he can take Spiritually Incorrect even further, transforming the show and himself in the process. "The dharma is intuitive and often clumsy and erratic," Clements writes in the book. "You can say much the same thing about my show." After all, he concludes, "who needs to be perfect when you can be human?"

To excerpt "Instinct for Freedom" or "The Voice of Hope" or interview the author, or for foreign rights, contact:

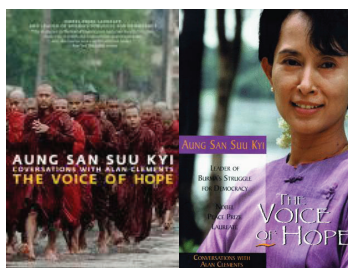


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Additional books by Alan Clements



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