

Activist Theater



Alan Clements Standing up for Freedom

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*One-time Buddhist monk Alan Clements hopes to inspire activism
with his one-man satire Spiritually Incorrect*

Every so often, in the biographies of the great, and lesser-known, Buddhist masters, one comes across ruptures and separations, points of no-return and states of aporia: monks are expelled from monasteries, neglected by their teachers, ridiculed by their peers, sent even into banishment. Naropa abandons his own monastery of Nalanda, where he has attained to a position of high seniority and power. Milarepa is started on the work of penance without any benefit of the solace or teachings of his guru Marpa, Shantideva is ridiculed by his peers and teachers before he delivers them the Bodhicaryavatara, Han Shan quits his job in the monastery and walks off into a mountain solitude of pure renunciation. The life-myth of Shakyamuni Buddha, too, has him entering into a second great existential daring when he leaves his teachers and yogi colleagues after six years of forest austerities and practice with them, for an absolute solitude without benefit of the validation or religious succor of an authority, a master, a father figure.

Why would the future Buddha make these repeated moves toward a total autonomy, a total freedom from his prior context? What is it saying about his process, and what does it imply of his frustration in being compelled to do so at all? Is it, in fact, a frustration, or for him a necessary, even natural, development? One contemporary teacher in the world of the Western dharma is the ex-monk of the Burmese Theravada Buddhist tradition of Sayadaw U Pandita (and the first American so ordained, in 1979), Alan Clements, and this brief inquiry seeks to shed light on the ways in which Clements' Buddhist and post-Buddhist career of thirty years, and current work, speaks directly from and to that point of the path which I am describing as Gautama Buddha's second crisis of autonomy. It is a crisis not because it signals a panic, a despair, or a breakdown, though perhaps dimensions of those contribute to it. It is a crisis because it is a critical moment, perhaps compelled, or inevitable, but in any case a moment of existential urgency, where something critical to future progress is going to be tested.

It suggests that the crisis could be the Buddha's moment of greatest doubt, of his teachers' and his own capacity. It could as easily be his moment of greatest inspiration, throwing off all the conceptual models of awakening he already cherishes, of self-images of the expected behavior of his mind at this point in his progress. It interrogates the notion of progress itself. Gautama is, perhaps, at a moment of greatest complexity, depth, uncertainty, readiness and desperation, though of a very confident and sophisticated kind.

Yet the existential force of his action, simple as it is, an act both negation and aspiration toward an

unknown metamorphosis, a nexus of conclusions, as well as new beginnings, to his journey: he takes himself off, utterly alone, to face himself and his demons, for the very last time, and attain to the enlightenment that remains, still, a *fait accompli*. The Buddha is not yet a Buddha, he is a man merely, pinning all his profound need for freedom on what his mind, finally, is able to deliver up to him.

This second great renunciation, much less generally remarked than that of his first renunciation of worldly ties, is far more subtle because it appears superficially to be a response to his own failure, frustration or impatience with the context he has originally abandoned his worldly life to pursue. The deliverance he has hoped to secure with his contemporary Hindu gurus and apparently ‘realized’ beings, has left him it seems in some sense hollow, despite the great discipline, awareness and self-control to which he has attained. For Siddhartha Gautama, something is missing. He needs to go back, by going forward, to look at the assumptions and first ground from which he has started out. Stasis has been breached, contextual structures broken down and a fine point of surrender given total sovereignty.

In an interview of 2003 with the *Inquiring Mind* journal, Clements has spoken of his own apprenticeship as a monk under the guidance of Sayadaw U Pandita: “I apprenticed with him [and]...learned the artistry, so to speak, of manifesting a more liberated expression of being. In that process, however, there was something else that came through that I would call ideology, dogma, religion...Suddenly, here was this whole Buddhist cosmology — a doctrine of totality — right in front of me. Resplendent with karma, rebirth, heaven, hell, nirvana, psychic powers and Buddhahood, spiritual perfection itself... One predicated on the belief that the Buddha was omniscient. It took me seven years...I downloaded an entire religion.” (IM, Spring, 2003).

The parallelism with Gautama’s six years of apprenticeship is not completely fortuitous: it suggests that if the crisis of autonomy is going to come, it will follow a pattern in the psyche that passes from ingestion to rupture within a certain frame of archetypal, or spiritual, time. After seven years as a monastic, Clements disrobed to work as a lay retreat-leader and teacher of vipassana (insight) meditation.

Some years later the country that had sheltered and taught him the centuries-old authentic practices of Theravada self-inquiry was engulfed in totalitarian tyranny, his fellow-monks and friends imprisoned or killed by the rampaging military of General Ne Win, threatened by the nation-wide thirst for democracy, for a more open, liberated, self-determining and autonomous Burma. As individuals seek their own being, in peaceful co-existence with others, so do nations. The counter-force of authority functions in wide-ranging and various ways, but the topoi of freedom vs. oppression, of autonomy vs. dependency, of the insecurity of self-determination vs. the security of obedience, is one that ranges through multiple layers of Clements’ story, and the spiritual life generally: within the personal and the collective, the religious and the secular, the a-historical and the immediately political.

Clements entered Burma illegally, with a spontaneous desire to aid his loved friends in their hour of need: a remarkable impulse, when he might easily have returned to the comfort of worldly security in the U.S.A. He describes the return as such: “Once in, my heart cracked open. No amount of meditation or spiritual training could have prepared me for what I witnessed. I walked into a full-scale ‘ethnic cleansing’...My views about life and the dharma have never been the same” (ibid.) His subsequent experiences in the former Yugoslavia during the final year of their war in 1994 and 1995 only confirmed this profound confrontation with life unmediated by a frame of potential transcendence, release into nirvana, hopes of a pure realm: such intentions became, literally, irrelevant. Life in the raw was the most powerful revelation of ‘the facticity of being’. The confrontation, however, could only result in a deep apprehension, even awe, of its actual conditions, not a supposed transcendence from them. It seemed to Clements that if there was such a thing as ultimate ‘freedom’ from such conditions, a state where their currency of suffering didn’t exist, it would only be by enquiring radically into the self-nature of the world as it is, that it might be found.

Further, the assumption of a transcendent freedom might necessarily have its own bases radically interrogated, and found to be without needful foundation: not that it might be wrong as such, but that it might only narrowly engage with the existential task of being ‘in’ life, rather than outside of it: somewhere, hypothetically, ‘else’. Clements’ extreme experience was able to deliver a powerful moment of insight, a non-

dual satori of the indivisibility of experience as both the *mysterium tremendum* and only ontological ground from which to perceive the same: “there is no other life”.

With this realization, and his subsequent evolution into what might be described as a non-aligned, non-religious, life-affirming, existential dharma-in-immanence, Clements articulates a profoundly authentic, timely and difficult spiritual value that is paradoxically both wholly traditional, in archetypal religious-historical terms, as well as radically contemporary and living, if eluding convenient pedagogic or institutional classification. Yet it is a position that valorizes both of these, while unambiguously focusing deeply into its own expression of authentic freedom: that it is to be found in the given context of everything that has formed the unique self, and not another, even where that self partakes freely in a rich, ancient, collective, systematized, coherent class of universal religious values.

Clements is facilitating that empowerment in which the unique self, in its engagement with a plethora of competing metaphysics (even within the buddhadharma alone, let alone other religious systems, or even secular belief-constructs such as psychoanalysis, scientism, and so on), is able to enter into a universal process of awakening, itself necessarily unique, from the authentic ground of experience as-it-is.

Clements’ meeting, and published conversations, with Burma’s democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi in 1995 during her brief period of release after six years of house-arrest, deeply confirmed his personally-exploded frame of reference for the buddhadharma: “She helped me to understand the human in context — we are in relationship all the time - to society, to culture, to politics, to everyday life. She revealed a revolutionary, secular dharma that dealt with how to find liberation through living, outwardly and inwardly at the same time. ‘Love is an action’, she would say, ‘it is not a state of mind alone’.” (ibid.) For Clements such a secular dharma became the frame for his own ongoing enquiry into consciousness, self and the aspiration to bodhicitta, to freeing all beings from suffering, in the world: “World dharma is about making life one’s art — finding liberation through living, creatively, passionately, wherever and with whomever we find ourselves, without distinction. It’s also about being an individual - embodying the beauty of our uniqueness as humans, our personal expression of self” (ibid.).

The frame shifts, but nothing is thereby repudiated — it is merely seen as a part of the container for spiritual development that has been passed through, and out of again. The Buddha famously described the dharma as a raft that is used to cross the river of dukkha, but that it may confidently be let go of once the other side is reached. Insofar as the dharma has become truly interiorized it can’t be dropped in any case, so clearly the Buddha refers to the nominal identification with *nama-rupa*, which also includes his teachings. Further, the statement would not have been made if it didn’t signify a symbolic truth of the journey: it’s value is not merely that of a literal, diagnostic prescription, it is also suggesting the dharma as essentially a container, a vessel, a crucible for the transformation of immaterial consciousness, and that it too is empty of inherent existence. The dharma doesn’t finally have a literal or nominal value, but one that ultimately exists independently of name-and-form, of classification, of nominal identifications of any kinds, including ‘Buddhist’ ones.

After his own second crisis of spiritual autonomy, as with any sincere practitioner of the dharma, Clements was compelled to enter still more fully that enquiry that his earlier, institutional training and motivation had disciplined, empowered and matured. To identify the empirical self with the institution at that point, and the ‘imaginary institution’ of self that it offers (Castoriadis), would be a gratuitous restraining of the authentic spiritual impulse to further discovery, as symbolized also by Gautama, Naropa and so many of the apocryphal narratives of awakening alluded to. Interestingly, Clements shares this articulation of the ‘second crisis of autonomy’ with a number of other highly-respected, even institutionally recognized, dharma luminaries who have moved naturally from the religious-institutional container to a secular-autonomous one: Stephen Batchelor, Roshi Bernie Glassman, Lama Surya Das, and Peter Fenner, among others, are all engaged in uniquely-inflected bodhicitta activity in the contemporary world, sometimes with a more radically-empowered effectiveness and breadth that might otherwise be compromised in another container (such as those of monasticism, theological academia or organizational work).

Clements’ present work in the dharma, which includes regular retreat programs, an online experiential

dharma curriculum, and spoken-word performances based on his own experience, is not nominally Buddhist teaching though it is deeply and richly grounded in his own training and the metaphysical springs of the Mahayana. And yet the consistency of thirty years of passionate engagement on behalf of peace, individual and collective freedom, spiritual and political justice, is, manifestly, the dharma. Such unremunerative work could not be adequately described except as that which is made as an aspiration to help liberate all sentient beings from suffering.

As for the task of awakening itself, even Siddhartha Gautama, when he took himself off alone to a pipal tree, couldn't guarantee his own enlightenment, and was still on his own, inimitable, unique path, which Buddhists today are inspired to emulate in their own journeys to freedom. Gautama's awakening could only be his own, and known to him as such, as is Clements', as is ours, and all those who are still to come after us.

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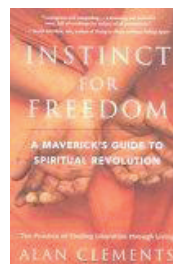
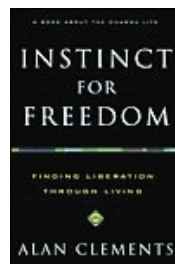
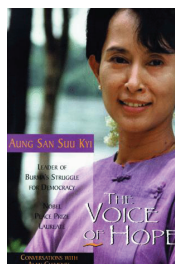
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