

The Web of Consciousness Or, how a former Buddhist monk took to the Internet to merge the disparate worlds of inside and out.

By Dave Watson
November 10, 1999

At 49, Alan Clements has already logged enough journeys — physical and spiritual — to fill several lifetimes. Born in Boston, he's been an artist, entrepreneur, author, Buddhist monk, teacher, lecturer, and activist. He's traveled to more than 50 countries and lived in more than 20, including troubled spots such as Sri Lanka, Indonesia, Croatia, Bosnia, Burma, and Afghanistan.

Clements is most known for his efforts to publicize the systemic acts of injustice and cruelty conducted by the military dictatorship in the Southeast Asian country of Myanmar, formerly known as Burma—the home of the “world's most famous political dissident” — 1991's Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, and leader of her country's ongoing non-violent struggle for freedom and dignity. It's a nationwide struggle rooted in courage and compassion, known among the people as a “Revolution of the Spirit.”

Alan Clements has dedicated his life to transporting Burma's spiritual revolution, not only to the United States, but to the world and beyond, into our own hearts and minds. “Everyone can understand the beauty of challenging fear and breaking free of the barriers that confine us,” he says. “Freedom is the scent of God, it's the highest truth, the most precious of all human qualities to protect in this world.”

Alan lived in Burma for nearly a decade, gaining access in 1979 as America's first ordained Burmese Buddhist monk. In a country geographically the size of Texas, (a population of 50 million), with over 163 different ethnic groups speaking over 100 different languages and dialects, are 5,000 monasteries housing a million monks and nuns. Burma was once a country so exotic that it moved Rudyard Kipling to call it the “pearl of Asia.”

Tragically, Burma was sealed off from the world in 1962 by a violent military coup d'etat, leaving its democratically elected leaders in prison. With visas limited to a strict 24 hours, this once affluent country was taken down a road of social and economic ruin. It now wallows as the fourth poorest nation in the world, behind even that of neighboring Bangladesh. Ironically, this same military regime, with Ne Win, its ruthless dictator intact, granted Alan a rare pilgrim's visa, “one of the first in decades,” where, at a monastery in Rangoon, started by the former Prime Minister U Nu, Alan systematically trained in classical Buddhist Psychology (abhidhamma) and Insight Meditation (vipassana) under the guidance of some of the world's most respected teachers of Buddhist meditation.

His first teacher and preceptor, the late Venerable Mahasi Sayadaw, was Burma's equal to Tibet's most revered spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. After Clements was expelled from the country in the mid-1980's, based upon “the dictatorship's xenophobic hallucinations” that he worked for the CIA, “as a Buddhist monk living in celibacy, silence and solitude, no less,” he twice sneaked back into the country, producing three books: *Burma: The Next Killing Fields?*, *Burma's Revolution of the Spirit* (Aperture, NYC, NY, 1993, co-written with Leslie Kean, and a foreword by the Dalai Lama), and *The Voice of Hope: Conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi* (Seven Stories Press, NYC 1997), which has been translated into 7 languages.

He also worked as an advisor and script revisionist on the 1995 John Boorman film, *Beyond Rangoon*, and has founded two non-profit organizations: The Buddha Sasana Foundation, serving to translate ancient

Buddhist truths into contemporary Western applications that integrate the often separated realms of politics, human rights, art, service and activism; and The Burma Project, USA, dedicated to raising awareness of Burma's ongoing struggle for freedom and dignity.

In an interview conducted at his home in Vancouver, British Columbia, Alan speaks of the next level of this revolution of the spirit, something that he calls "World Dharma." A virgin term that he conceived that "combines the ancient Sanskrit word 'dharma,' meaning the nature of consciousness in relation to freedom, with the 'world.' Together World Dharma means 'liberation through living, fully, in the world.'

World Dharma also points to the indivisibility of freedom as well as to the interrelatedness of all things, so aptly brought to life by the great Indian Chief Seattle's words: "for all things share the same breath, the animals, trees, and man."

When asked how he conceived the concept World Dharma, he replied, "It came to me slowly...feeling the disease of dogma, forged from within by heartache and pain. It was primarily during my time in war zones and refugee camps, in Bosnia and Burma — places where you see broken lives based upon the madness of men deranged by concepts, fantasies rooted in nationalism, racism and religious ideology.

World Dharma is a concept to take us beyond concepts. Like that of oxygen, it's inherently free by nature, transparent, life giving, indiscriminating, available to one and all. I think it was the Dalai Lama who once spoke of our need for a new spirituality, one that was more human and common to all people. I think he also said, "the color of blood is the same for all, human suffering and human freedom transcend all distinctions." Clearly, he speaks to the core of conscience, not merely on behalf of Tibetans and or Tibetan Buddhism. Frankly, I think World Dharma could be that 'new spirituality,' bridging culture, nationality, politics, and religion, going straight to the core, freedom itself."

In support of his aim and his activism, Alan and associates have launched an Internet website, www.WorldDharma.com, to bring together seekers, artists, and activists, anyone interested in forming a non-sectarian WorldDharma community dedicated to understanding freedom by exploring the inseparable link between our inner journey and engagement with the outer world."

Clements envisions a global meeting place that will promote intelligent discourse on the role of consciousness in relation to freedom and dignity, through a host of community features. Despite the serious and complex nature of the tasks he's undertaken, Clements isn't a grim bearer of tragic news, an obsessed radical or an infomercial-oriented self-help type promoting his wares. Quite the contrary! In person he's warm and engaging, rather calm and serene with a fully functioning sense of humor and a razor-sharp wit.

Unmistakably, after a few minutes of conversation, you get a sense of his discipline and commitment to spiritual values. I couldn't help but think that it must have come, in large part, from all those years of meditative practice of "up to 20 hours a day, living on a maximum of four hours of sleep a night, eating only two meals a day, with no solid food after 12 noon, and no sex, masturbation, music, parties, telephones and cars, and of course, bills. We were not allowed to handle money or even own it." Unlike many activist-artist-seekers, he seems much less concerned with assigning blame to the oppressors than he is in promoting hope and positive action.

It's certainly an Eastern philosophical/humanist viewpoint he operates under, a clear and sincere belief that the true solution to the problems of the human race will come about through the accumulation of many small acts of individual kindness, love, and compassion.

"When Mother Theresa was asked how greatness was achieved, I think she replied, 'Only through small, daily acts done well, with love, over a lifetime.' This is a model I try to live by," he says. Clements offers a quote from Vaclav Havel, the former political prisoner who became president of the Czech Republic after the collapse of communism, a philosophical comment that also graces World Dharma's home page. "Consciousness precedes being, and not the other way around...for this reason, the salvation in this world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human modesty, and in human responsibility." It's an ideal introduction to the goals of Clements' project, World Dharma.

"Human consciousness and the great mystery of being are what most Western philosophies and Eastern

contemplative traditions attempt to investigate and define. Yet consciousness is so subtle and mysterious that prolonged reflection upon it tends to render you silent, intellectually that is. It compels you to feel your way into it, intuitively. What is this unlimited, boundless world behind our eyes, in our hearts and all around us, everywhere?

My teachers in Burma would say, “To know your mind is the most important task of your life.” They would encourage us to learn about the nature of consciousness, just as a good artist learns all he can about color, how to mix and apply them. So, too, does a dharma artist learn the colors of consciousness, how to mix and apply them. What is the color of love? Dignity? Compassion? Generosity? Truth? And Freedom, which is so transparent? What are these energies? How do they arise and how can they be evolved? And this takes courage, clearly. It was Dostoevsky who once said that “beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and the Devil are fighting there and the battlefield is the heart of man.”

Entering one’s being is, obviously, no day at the beach. Facing the truth of our imperfect, often petty, little minds, can be quite humbling. And, of course, at times even terrifying. But we must assume total leadership for our lives. As I’ve said, this requires courage. I think Aung San Suu Kyi said it best: Fearlessness may be a gift, but more precious is courage...courage that comes from not allowing fear to dictate one’s actions.’

In describing the World Dharma Web site of the future, he makes a parallel to the World Music movement, whereby bringing musicians together from different cultures and life experiences to jam and learn from each other. In the same manner, Clements feels that by providing a “World Dharma Forum” for diverse voices on one stage, so to speak, will encourage a potentially new and revolutionary level of consciousness — a new freedom born from synergy, not a stagnant one made turbid by dogma, superstition and stifling orthodoxy. We must celebrate our differences. As its been said, diversity is the lifeblood of democracy. We must do everything to transcend all forms of tribalism. This, in essence, is the meaning of World Dharma.

Asked to comment on his own definition of spiritualism, he describes it as “non-rigidity — the absence of pretense.” He also cautions, “We must be watchful of excessive focus on our own personal predicament: my problems, my issues, my personal story, or coming to terms with my so-called dysfunction first before I can actual help someone else. Nonsense. Anyone who has ever worked or even visited a refugee camp knows that one of the greatest, most effective means of supporting a traumatized person restore their sense of worth is in encouraging them to help others. From the gentle spark of seizing their own compassion, basic goodness is felt. From there the light begins to shine again, slowly of course.”

There’s a story he likes to relate of a white social worker who went to Australia to work with the Aborigines. When she asked a woman if she could help her, the woman replied, “If you’ve come to help me, please leave. But if you’re here because you see that our freedom is linked, then please stay and we can help each other.”

It’s a simple expression of a timeless, complex truth, that of mutual inter-relatedness or the indivisibility of freedom. In other words, no one is an island. As Martin Luther King said, All...are tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. In fact, understanding mutual inter-relatedness could be the single most important insight necessary for survival of our species. It’s imperative.”

Refreshingly, Clements feels that humor is a vital part of the spiritual path, citing a story related by Havel. “Apparently, after his release from prison, he was asked how he and his colleagues were able to endure so much suffering. He replied, “If one increases their seriousness in proportion to their suffering, they run the risk of solidifying into their own statues.” In Burma, during my seven months of working with Aung San Suu Kyi and her two closest colleagues, U Tin Oo and U Kyi Maung, on our book *The Voice of Hope*, I witnessed some pretty miraculous things. But nothing as awesome as their tireless ability to turn complex, negative circumstances into spiritual-political opportunities. These folks are warriors, true spiritual alchemists. And can they howl with laughter!”

With a laugh and a touch of satire Alan describes his own predicament in no uncertain terms. “I was addicted to my ego as a kid. I’m addicted to my ego now. I was born that way. My parents didn’t condition my ego-addiction any more than they were addicted to their egos. Even though I practiced meditation for the better

part of two and a half decades and continue to teach and encourage others to face their own ego-explosion within, I'm still addicted to my ego and I'll probably go out that way. What's different after all these years of spiritual development? It's all about dignity in the end, isn't it? Learning to relax pretense allows us to feel our innate integrity, the kind that comes from naturalness and not from faith or adherence to doctrines.

In other words, when you go to a party you don't need to compare yourself to others before you become yourself. Just dance!

After a seven year teaching sabbatical, Clements is now back lecturing and teaching retreats wherever he's invited. The purpose of his retreats, he says, "is to evolve Bhavana, a timeless Buddhist concept that means beautification of consciousness or intimacy with truth dignity and freedom. Bhavana is evolved through intelligent awareness and fierce self-honesty, coupled with individual endeavor motivated by compassion, for oneself and that of others."

When I asked Alan to share a closing comment to the interview, he concluded reflectively on the nature of relationships and the role of meditation. "There are over six billion of us now on earth. Understanding conscientious relationship to ourselves and others is the essence of the spiritual life. The world is the setting of our dharma dance; the planet, our monastery; events and people, our guides and teachers. The varied faces of life and our daily encounters become our vehicle for liberation. Every situation, every person we relate with can become the seed for the unconscious to become conscious, ever expanding into a greater depth of being.

In a singular and solitary sense, individual meditation practice is one avenue into the heart. In a more expansive sense, it embraces everything, every moment of our existence. Meditation is developing a simple and realistic relationship with that which is. Our awareness delivers us to the moment. Relationships are the medium for the transformation. It's all so inextricably interrelated. We are not separate from life.

Their is a saying attributed to the Buddha that goes something like this: We must try to make each person we meet our ultimate place of reverence, because without others it would be difficult to know one's own heart.

Intimate partners and our dearest friendships can be an extraordinary learning ground where we mirror each others' psyches. They show us our projections and limitations. They become the resources for us to cultivate truthfulness, patience, generosity, love, wisdom and compassion. But if we are still looking outside of ourselves for inner resolution, we remain blind. If we assume personal responsibility for ourselves, everything and everybody becomes the reflection back in support of our self transformation.

There is such a delicate balance between aloneness, personal responsibility and the surrendering to a relationship, especially an intimate partner. How we are in intimate relationships is an expression of our spiritual depth, or lack of it. For most of us, it is a fascinating area of personal discovery. Almost everyone that I come across wants to be loved, understood, to have another match their reality and have wise, heartfelt intimacy in their lives. It's such a natural pull of the heart to want to pair off, to have a companion to share your days with. Someone to share the struggles, hopes, dreams and insights of your life with. To grow with. Doesn't everyone yearn for this kind of contact? "But it's important to see that one's partner is not going to be the salvation, is not going to be the place of ultimate refuge. We have to remember that we all die. So it is to know that I can challenge my attachments by being that close to another person and yet also know that she cannot take the spear from my heart, she can only help put my hand on it. True liberation, true love must come from within. So I firmly believe we should cultivate love and freedom through our relationships and also support it through the insights gained in our meditation.

People often ask me 'what is my spiritual practice today?' For me personally it's a real balancing act in not shutting out those who suffer while I enjoy the comfort of my own life or deal with some small struggles that I encounter in comparison. Making one's life as dignified as possible, living with as much integrity and honor as one can, being content with little, striving towards greater honesty, personal responsibility—to do all this while keeping an eye on the star of liberation is the best one can hope for. In the end, what is important, to feel one's heart and to have the courage and freedom to follow it."

To excerpt “Instinct for Freedom” or “The Voice of Hope”
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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).

