

# The Mindful Life: Awakening World Dharma:

## Finding Liberation Through Living

by Anahata Giri



Impressions from a talk by Alan Clements Melbourne, Australia, March 12, 2015 “Never been done before freedom” –Alan Clements

Alan Clements is an author, activist and meditation teacher and trained with Mahasi Sayadaw and U Pandita in Burma. He is passionate about humans rights and has been a long-time supporter of Burma’s nonviolent campaign for freedom, justice, and democracy. Alan co-authored The

Voice of Hope, a collection of conversations with Burma’s Nobel Peace Laureate, Aung San Suu Kyi.

It is a personal passion of mine to bring our spiritual practice into the world, so I was looking forward to hearing the insights of someone who has fully lived a potent combination of spiritual practice and social change.

We are an intimate audience of less than 40 people, poised expectantly as Alan Clements introduces his talk as a distillation of his meditation practice since 1968, more than 40 years. He talks clearly, passionately and is naturally articulate, with fluid gestures and expressive hands.

In his twenties, he was deeply disillusioned by a U.S. culture that widely “exports violence”\*. He began to practise Buddhist Vipassana mindfulness meditation. This took him to Burma where he luckily obtained, from the totalitarian regime of Burma, a six month visa to stay in the Buddhist monastery. There he embarked on the experiment of maintaining sustained mindfulness, observing whatever is the predominate experience in each moment. Alan humorously describes the hardships of highly disciplined practice: a rigorous daily schedule of sitting and walking meditation with only four hours of sleep a night, no talking except briefly with a teacher, “terrible” food and no cushions or props for sitting.

These are perfect conditions to practise what Clements describes as a “direct confrontation with everything within yourself that you want to avoid”. There are “unrecognised primordial forces of anger, greed and delusion” within the human psyche – we just need to look around at the events of the world to see that. Clements urges us not to “demonise anything that is in your heart”. When he was asked how to work with parts of ourselves that we dislike, he suggested that we can each stand in our own beauty just as a mother would hold space for a child. Rather than seeing meditation or social change as a process of ‘overcoming’ problems, let’s receive our personal problems and social problems with an inclusive embrace. Clements described being deeply inspired by Aung San Suu Kyi’s feminine, radical inclusivity of all humans, dictator and dictated alike, based on unwavering nonviolence.

In contrast, meditation is often used to anaesthetise ourselves from both our inner demons and from the turmoil of the world. Meditation could be used to lull ourselves into superficial realms of calmness, in isolation from the rest of the world. “Context is crucial”, says Clements. If meditation is not connected to the context of the world around us, then

“compassion can be disguised narcissism”. It was during his time in the monastery that Clements discovered the brutal reality of the ruling regime in Burma. Meditation can help us wake up to our own experience of suffering and to the suffering of others. We do this by being real about our actual experience in the moment. Clements suggests that we let ourselves be really stressed out, to be affected by the world around us, and let this stress be a bridge to true compassion.

Clements describes meditation as an innately activist stance, based on a radical pledge to be utterly self-responsible for all that arises in one’s own heart. “I am willing to take responsibility for my mind. I refuse to project blame on to others.” In a world that is “convulsing with blame and projection”, can we be completely self-responsible for all that arises in our own hearts? Clements urges us: “Learn the face of your deception. Learn the face of your denial. Learn the face of your repression.” This will lead the heart into true ahimsa or nonviolence and to true freedom.

Meditation attunes us to our innate freedom – and it will also highlight the ways we incarcerate ourselves. Clement gave a poignant example of this, describing the imprisonment of U Tin Oo, former general of the Burmese Army, turned close colleague of Aung San Suu Kyi. He was held in solitary confinement under brutal conditions, an easy circumstance to fall into the role of victim and blame the dictatorship and the prison keepers for this imprisonment. But U Tin OO began giving food to the prison keepers who were also underfed. This small act came from an understanding that freedom is not something that someone else can take from us, or give to us. Freedom is who we essentially are.

Meditation, then, is the practice of freedom. As meditators, we can sometimes get lost in the techniques. Clements jokes that after five years of observing the breath his insight was: I am breathing. Meditation is the practice of freedom! Just as the ocean has one taste, salt, the Dharma has only one taste: freedom. This emphasis shifts the focus from “techniques” of meditation to “realisation”. I am already whole: meditation simply affirms this. Innate wholeness is already here, so how can we live this in the world?

After a decade of following the breath, Clements comes to another realisation: I am alive. He realises a gift of the breath, the gift of being connected with all beings and with all of life. After suffering with the challenges of such rigorous practice in the monastery, Clements started to enjoy the journey and became “calm and peaceful Alan” – until he was wracked with amoebic dysentery, malaria, hepatitis and he developed a tumour. Then “calm and peaceful Alan was gone”. Here Clements learns how much we need each other. We simply cannot live without each other. Clements was nursed around the clock by strangers. Families nearby fed him, bathed him and took him to the toilet. After he had healed from this, Clements describes a day when he was in a hurry and was called by someone. He turns impatiently to see a man beaming at him saying ‘Don’t you remember who I am? I am one of the people that cared for you when we thought you were dying.’ Clements reflects how quickly the gratitude had faded, how quickly we forget our fundamental connection with all others and, as Thich Nhat Hanh describes, our radical “interbeingness” with all beings. For U Tin Oo, in his darkest hours of solitary confinement, it was memory of his wife, of the warmth of human touch, of love that enabled him to survive. We need each other.

This essential freedom is everybody’s freedom, no-one is left behind. “The oxygen of human rights is freedom. The essence of meditation is freedom.” How then can we stand, walk, talk, act in the world based on a full expression of our innate freedom? Clements no longer sees

himself as a Buddhist. He now puts aside all “isms”, dogma and orthodoxy. He pursues a quest of “radical authenticity” to find ways to live a “never been done before freedom. “Are you with me?” he says. Clements asks this question many times throughout his talk, reaching out to us, inviting us on the journey alongside him as friends, no hierarchy here. “Never been done before freedom, never been done before freedom! Are you with me?” he repeats. I can now say here what I felt like yelling out from the audience: yes I am with you!!

Written by Anahata Giri Copyright March 12 2015

- All comments in quotation marks “ ” are direct quotes from Alan Clements

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