The Voice of Hope

by Alan Clements

Conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi,
Burma's (imprisoned) Nobel Peace laureate,

An Excerpt from The Voice Of Hope

Aung San Suu Kyi
Burma's Gandhi

Burmese democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, was the recipient of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize and the first person to win it while under detention. Clearly one of the world's most exceptional women, she remains an enigma due to her forced isolation. Under the dark shadow of Burma's omnipresent military junta, author and former Buddhist monk, Alan Clements, spent seven months conversing with her, knowing that each interview could be the last. Aung San Suu Kyi was under constant threat of rearrest, and Clements could have been deported at any time. Since completing The Voice of Hope, he has been permanently banned from Burma and Aung San Suu Kyi has been re-arrested.

Behind a gate guarded by the junta's feared military intelligence who control her movements and haul her closest supporters off to prison — Aung San Suu Kyi, lives in a large run-down home in Burma's capital, Rangoon. It is here that she was kept isolated under house arrest for six years (1989 to 1995) (and for 10 of the last 12 years). For much of that time, she was allowed zero contact with her English husband, Dr. Michael Aris, a Tibetologist at Oxford University, and their two young sons, Alexander and Kim, who have grown up without her. Since then, the authorities have insured that her contact with her family has been sporadic at best. Aris, in fact, has been refused a visa to Burma since 1995. (He passed away in 2003 from cancer and without being allowed a visa by the authorities to see his wife again).

Burma's military junta, which was formerly known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), is undoubtably the world's most violent military dictatorship. In an attempt to improve its image the generals changed its name to the less threatening sounding State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

The SPDC has been condemned the world over for its unrelenting brutality and widespread human rights violations against an increasingly impoverished nation. First President Clinton and then President Bush imposed economic sanctions on Burma, which Aung San Suu Kyi and her political party supports; she has also called for a boycott on tourism to her country. Meanwhile, the SPDC continues to successfully court foreign corporations and uses Burma's lucrative drug trade to keep the crumbling economy afloat.

In September 2007, likened to China's Tiananmen Square, the SPDC brutally crushed the Buddhist-monk led peaceful protests in Burma, demonstrating once again that the regime has no intention of turning over power peacefully. But Aung San Suu Kyi — described by Vaclav Havel as "one of the outstanding examples of the power of the powerless" — remains committed to non-violence and continues to lead one of the most courageous and inspiring spiritual revolutions for democratic freedom the world has ever seen.

Among the hundreds of world leaders condemning the regime's brutality and expressing their support for Burma's nonviolent revolution, the Dalai Lama of Tibet issued his own statement stating: "I extend my support and solidarity with the recent peaceful movement for democracy in Burma. I fully support their call for freedom and democracy and take this opportunity to appeal to freedom-loving people all over the world to

support such non-violent movements.

Moreover, I wish to convey my sincere appreciation and admiration to the large number of fellow Buddhists monks for advocating democracy and freedom in Burma.

As a Buddhist monk, I am appealing to the members of the military regime who believe in Buddhism to act in accordance with the sacred dharma in the spirit of compassion and non-violence. I pray for the success of this peaceful movement and the early release of fellow Nobel Peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi."

Following is an excerpt from The Voice of Hope.

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Alan Clements: How effective is non-violence with a regime that seems devoid of any sense of moral conscience?

Aung San Suu Kyi: I do not believe in an armed struggle because it will perpetuate the tradition that he who is best at wielding arms, wields power. That will not help democracy.

Non-violence means positive action. You have to work for whatever you want. You don't just sit there doing nothing and hope to get what you want. It just means that the methods you use are not violent ones. Some people think that non-violence is passiveness. It's not so. I know it is the slower way, and I understand why a lot of people feel that it will not work. But I cannot encourage that kind of attitude. Because if I do, we will be perpetuating a cycle of violence that will never come to an end.

Alan Clements: You once said, "Fear is a habit; I'm not afraid." But is that true, are you not afraid?

Aung San Suu Kyi: I am afraid. I'm afraid of doing the wrong thing that might bring harm to others. But of course, this is something I've had to learn to cope with. I do worry for them though.

Alan Clements: In fact, when people associate your name with bravery and fearlessness, you always say that your NLD colleagues have suffered more and been much more courageous than you...

Aung San Suu Kyi: When I was a child I was afraid of the dark, whereas my brothers were not. I was really the cowardly one in the family. This is probably why I find it strange when people think I'm so brave. Some of the things I do that others consider brave just seem normal to me.

Alan Clements: Like walking into a line of armed soldiers ready to shoot you, as you did?

Aung San Suu Kyi: I don't know if I think of that as very courageous. There must be thousands of soldiers who do that kind of thing every day. Because unfortunately, there are battles going on all the time in this world.

Alan Clements: How do you respond to SLORC's personal criticisms of you?

Aung San Suu Kyi: Their attacks are so crude that they win my sympathy rather than anything else. At one time I thought they were actually rather funny. Before I was placed under house arrest, we found that every time one of them attacked me viciously, we gained more support. We used to jokingly say to each other, "We have to present them with special certificates of honor, for helping us with our campaign for democracy." Later, I realized this was not a good idea. It was rather serious, not because it was an attack on me, but because it was creating a greater gap between us and them — between those who wanted democracy and those who wanted to stand by the authorities. So I am against this form of propaganda warfare.
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Alan Clements: What does it feel like to be under such scrutiny all the time? The pressure from unseen eyes, a tapped telephone, the Military Intelligence (MI) men everywhere, and the ever present threat of re-arrest?

Aung San Suu Kyi: I"m not aware of the pressure all the time. But sometimes, of course, I am. For example, somebody from America, whom I had not met for years, rang up. He started talking about his brother's recent meetings with some people in the government, and I said, "Do you realize that my telephone is tapped. Do you intend that everything you say be heard by the MI?" He hung up pretty quickly after that. On such occasions, I am aware of my unusual circumstances.

Alan Clements: Soon after Nelson Mandela was released from imprisonment, the international media began labeling you "the world's most famous political prisoner." What are you comments on this?

Aung San Suu Kyi: I'm not one who thinks that labels are that important. Recently somebody asked if I felt that I had less moral authority now that I was free. I found it a very strange question. If your only influence depends on you being a prisoner, then you have not much to speak of.

Alan Clements: You were cut off from life in a fundamental way during your detention. Cut off from your family, your husband, your children. Cut off from your freedom of movement, of expression...

Aung San Suu Kyi: I never felt cut off from life. I listened to the radio many times a day, I read a lot, I felt in touch with what was going on in the world. But I was, of course, very happy to meet my friends again.

I missed my family, particularly my sons. I missed not having the chance to look after them — be with them. With my sons, I was always running around with them playing together. Having long discussions with them. Sometimes I would argue with them — tremendously passionate arguments, because my sons can be quite argumentative, and I am argumentative, too. My elder son, being more mature, tends to discuss philosophical issues more, whereas with my younger son, we don't talk about that sort of thing much — at least not yet. He's very musical...

But, no, I did not feel cut off from life. Basically, I felt that being under house arrest was just part of my job — I was doing my work.

Alan Clements: You have been at the physical mercy of the authorities ever since you entered your people's struggle for democracy. Has SLORC ever captured you internally — emotionally or mentally?

Aung San Suu Kyi: No, and I think this is because I have never learned to hate them. If I had, I would have been at their mercy. In George Eliot's book, Middlemarch, there is a character who's afraid he might no longer be able to love his wife who's been a disappointment to him. When I first read that I found it rather puzzling. My attitude was — shouldn't he have been more afraid that she might have stopped loving him? But now I understand why he felt like that. If he had stopped loving his wife, he would have been entirely defeated. His whole life would have been a disappointment. I've always felt that if I really started hating my captors, hating SLORC and the army, I would have defeated myself.

People have asked me why I was not frightened of SLORC after all those years of house arrest. Was I not aware that they could do whatever they wanted to me? I was fully aware of that. I think it was because I did not hate them and you cannot really be frightened of people you do not hate. Hate and fear go hand-in-hand.

Alan Clements: Is torture still used in this country's prisons?

Aung San Suu Kyi: Yes, torture goes on in all the prisons of Burma, and I have evidence of this. But it is more important to under stand the mentality of torturers that just to concentrate on what kind of torture goes on, if

you want to improve the situation.

Alan Clements: If your struggle for democracy succeeds, will members of SLORC face criminal charges?

Aung San Suu Kyi: I will never make any personal guarantees. It is only for our party, the National League of Democracy, a group that represents the people, to speak. But I do believe that truth and reconciliation go together. Once the truth has been admitted, forgiveness is far more possible. Denying the truth will not bring about forgiveness, neither will it dissipate the anger in those who have suffered.

Alan Clements: Many people want to describe you in heroic terms, you've even been called 'Burma's Saint Joan...'

Aung San Suu Kyi: Good heavens, I hope not.

Alan Clements: Fellow Buddhists have referred to you as striving for the attainment of Buddhahood — the perfection of wisdom, compassion and love, with the intention of assisting others to attain freedom.

Aung San Suu Kyi: Oh, for goodness sake, I'm nowhere near such a state. And I'm amazed that people think I could be anything like that. I am one of those people who strive for self improvement. I do try to be good (laughs). This is the way my mother brought me up. She emphasized the goodness of good, so to speak. I'm not saying I succeed all the time but I do try. I have a terrible temper. Although I don't get as angry now as I used to. Meditation helped a lot. But when I think somebody has been hypocritical or unjust, I still get very angry. I don't mind ignorance; I don't mind sincere mistakes; but what makes me really angry is hypocrisy. So, I have to develop awareness that I have got to control this anger. And that helps.

Alan Clements: Do you ever step back from the immediacy of the struggle and contemplate your role in the bigger picture of existence?

Aung San Suu Kyi: Yes, in fact, it still surprises me that I'm supposed to be an important person. I don't see things that way at all. I don't feel any different now that I'm in politics compared to what I felt before. Of course, I've got more responsibilities to discharge. But I had many responsibilities as a wife and mother, too. Things may appear big and important at times, but I realize they are small when I consider that we are all subject to the law of impermanence. To put it in more blunt terms, I do contemplate my death. Which means to me an acceptance of the principle of change. And by reflecting upon your own death some of the problems which seem significant to you just shrivel into nothingness.

Few people face the fact that they are going to die one day. If you contemplate your own death, in a sense it means that you accept how unimportant you are. It's a way of stepping back from the present, from the immediate concerns of the world in which you're engaged, realizing you are within the whole scheme of things. And yet, you are essential in your place, even if you may not be of great importance. Everybody is essential. But it is a matter of having a balanced view of your place in the world. Having enough respect for yourself to understand that you too have a role to play and at the same time, having enough humility to accept that your role isn't as important as you or some people may think.

Alan Clements: It's a matter of debate, but politics and religion are usually segregated issues. In Burma today, the large portion of monks and nuns see spiritual freedom and socio-political freedom as separate areas. But in truth, dhamma and politics are rooted in the same issue—freedom.

Aung San Suu Kyi: Indeed, but this is not unique to Burma. Everywhere you'll find this drive to separate the

secular from the spiritual. In other Buddhist countries you'll find the same thing—in Thailand, Sri Lanka, in Mahayana Buddhist countries, in Christian countries, almost everywhere in the world. I think some people find it embarrassing and impractical to think of the spiritual and political life as one. I do not see them as separate. In democracies there is always a drive to separate the spiritual from the secular, but it is not actually required to separate them. Whereas in many dictatorships, you'll find that there is an official policy to keep politics and religion apart, in case I suppose, it is used to upset the status quo.

Alan Clements: The Burmese monk U Wisara, who died years ago while in prison, after 143 days of a hunger strike, was an outstanding example of politically motivated non-violent protest. Indeed, Burma has a long history of monks and nuns being actively engaged in political areas when it concerns the welfare of the people. However, I wonder about today. With the crisis at such a critical moment, do you think that the Sangha—the order of monks and nuns—can play a greater role in supporting the democracy movement? After all, it's their freedom too.

Aung San Suu Kyi: Well, there are a lot of monks and nuns who have played a very courageous role in our movement for democracy. Of course, I would like to see everybody taking a much more significant role in the movement, not just monks and nuns. After all, there is nothing in democracy that any Buddhist could object to. I think that monks and nuns, like everybody else, have a duty to promote what is good and desirable. And I do think they could be more effective. In fact, they should help as far as they can. I do believe in "engaged Buddhism," to use a modern term.

Alan Clements: The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has said, "In the grain of rice see the sun." Do you see yourself as just a seed-sower of democracy?
Aung San Suu Kyi: I once read a book by Rebecca West. She was talking about musicians and artists as a "procession of saints always progressing toward an impossible goal." I see my life like that — as part of a procession, a dynamic process, doing all that we can to move toward more good and justice; a process that is not isolated from what has happened before or what will come after. And I do whatever I have to do along the path, whether it's sowing seeds or reaping the harvest or (laughing) tending the plants half-grown.

Alan Clements: Perhaps many people who read your words will want to know how they can assist you and your people to achieve democracy. What can someone do to help?

Aung San Suu Kyi: It's like apartheid in South Africa. If only a few people in the world had refused to buy products from South Africa, it would not have had an effect. But there were many, many people, who refused to buy anything from South Africa. In fact, I never bought anything from South Africa because there was apartheid. I was one of those who felt that we morally could not support what the South African government was doing.

There is much that those who wish to help Burma achieve democracy can do, such as refusing to support those businesses that are helping prop up an unjust system in Burma.

Alan Clements: So anybody in the world who has a regard for freedom...

Aung San Suu Kyi: Can do his bit. Everybody can do his bit if he is really interested. Everybody in Burma. Everybody in the world outside Burma.

Alan Clements: I'd like to read the final few lines from your essay, Towards a True Refuge: "...'the darkness had always been there but the light was new.' Because it is new it has to be tended with care and diligence. Even the smallest light cannot be extinguished by all the darkness in the world because darkness is merely

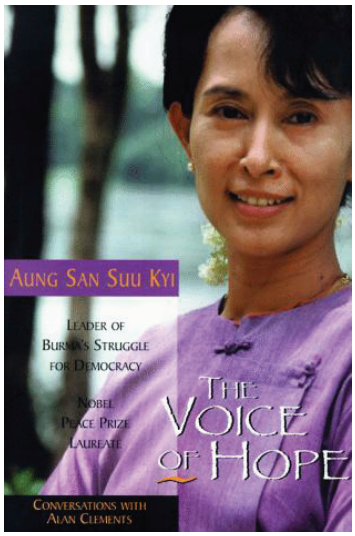
the absence of light. But a small light cannot dispel acres of encircling gloom. It needs to grow stronger, and people need to accustom their eyes to the light to see it as benediction rather than pain. We are so much in need of a brighter world which will offer adequate refuge to all its inhabitants." What does the light refer to?

Aung San Suu Kyi: Light means that you see a lot of things that you don't want to see, as well as things that you want to see. If there's light, obviously you see everything, so you have to face a lot of things that are both undesirable and desirable. You have to learn to live and cope with the light, with seeing rather than not seeing. A lot of people who commit injustices don't see what they don't want to see. They're blind to the injustice of their own actions. They only see what justifies them in doing what they have done, refusing to see what reflects badly on them. It's the story of SLORC…not daring to face the complete picture, that people are fed up with the situation, they are tired of poverty, corruption, aimlessness, and stupidity. But the authorities don't want to see the truth.

Alan Clements: On the chance that you are re-arrested and held incommunicado, may I invite you to speak to those in the world who wish to support you and your people's aspirations for democracy and freedom.

Aung San Suu Kyi: It's very simple. You must not forget that the people of Burma want democracy. Whatever the authorities may say, it is a fact that the people want democracy and they do not want an authoritarian regime that deprives them of their basic human rights. The world should do everything possible to bring about the kind of political system that the majority of the people of Burma want and for which so many people have sacrificed themselves.

Burma should be helped at a time when help is needed. And one day we hope to be ourselves in a position to help others in need



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