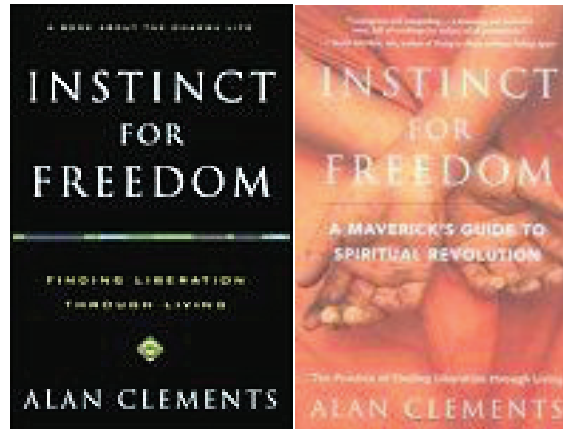


Instinct *for* Freedom

A Book About Everyday Revolution —
Finding Liberation Through Living

by Alan Clements



THE SUN MAGAZINE OCTOBER 2005
THE SERIOUS COMEDY OF ALAN CLEMENTS
PROVIDES ACTIVIST ENTERTAINMENT

by Gershon Siegel

After seeing genocide up close and personal, you'd think the former Buddhist monk, author and activist Alan Clements would have lost whatever sense of humor he might have retained after all those years of serious 20-hours-a-day, sitt'n-on-his-ass meditation. "After the first five years of watching my breath," quips Alan, "the insight that came was mind-blowing: 'Hey dude, you're breathing.'"

"I was so thrilled by the revelation, I signed up for the advanced training. A second five years went by of breath watching, and then it dawned on me: 'Holy shit, I'm alive.'"

"So compelled was I by the realization, I told my teacher that I wanted to go for gold — I wanted Nirvana, enlightenment itself. This took 10 more years of solid breath watching. Then I GOT IT! When you realize that you are alive, you then get up off your ass and do something remarkable with what a full breath affords you. You live as if there's no tomorrow! Ironically, it took me 20 years of intensive meditation to get what some 20-years-olds get when they quit college."

He may not be kidding, but he must have retained something of a funny bone as his unscripted show, *Spiritually Incorrect*, has been hailed as "a hilarious and provocative deconstruction of contemporary spiritual cows and geo-political issues." He's also been called a cross between "Lenny Bruce, Noam Chomsky and a hyper-spiritual Terrence McKenna."

On the phone Alan is witty, refreshingly self-reflective and unexpectedly vulnerable. When asked how he describes his own show, he says, "I'd call it theatrical acid jazz for the irreverent, artsy, activist crowd ... folks who want access to their idiot savant and then play together in the quantum force field where authenticity meets magic and mystery." New Mexico audiences attending his October 15 weekend performances will get to judge for themselves, but if Alan's frequently standing-room-only-shows are any indication, expect to have a roaring good laugh-filled 90 minutes.

In previous incarnations Alan has been a painter, war correspondent, author, lecturer and teacher of meditation retreats. Now with over 100 performances under his belt, Alan is a veteran one-man showman, having presented his "evening of liberating comedy, satire and existential entertainment" in front of audiences around the globe.

Although Spiritually Incorrect expresses yet another facet of Alan's vast creativity, he's pushing another agenda besides attempting to crack the coma of spiritual and political indoctrination that he sees as one of humanity's major stumbling blocks. Having become the first American ordained in Burma as a Buddhist monk back in the late '70s, Alan considers the country (renamed Myanmar by the repressive military regime) his spiritual home and uses his improvisational monologue as a benefit to raise awareness of Aung San Suu Kyi, Burma's imprisoned Nobel Peace laureate and leader of her country's nonviolent struggle for freedom against dictatorship.

In 1995, Aung San Suu Kyi, known as "Burma's Gandhi," was released after six years of solitary detention. At that time Alan was commissioned by a French publisher to attempt to reenter Burma underground and, if successful, invite Aung San Suu Kyi to share her views on nonviolent revolution with the world. For six months their secretive interviews were taped and then smuggled out of the country. Their conversations resulted in the publication of the internationally acclaimed book *The Voice of Hope*.

It was at that time in Burma that Alan was "reborn" as a "comedic subversive." On January 4, 1996, he was invited, along with 400 other guests, to Aung San Suu Kyi's lakeside compound in Rangoon for an afternoon of speeches and entertainment to celebrate freedom in the context, as it were, of a totalitarian nightmare. In Burma — a country with no human rights — gatherings of five or more are a crime against the state and punished with imprisonment and/or confiscation of home and property.

Midway through the day's activities, armed soldiers arrived on the scene and surrounded Aung San Suu Kyi's compound. The likelihood of arrest and imprisonment was on the minds of everyone inside.

Then a bit of a miracle occurred. The last person to come on "stage" for the evening's festivities was U Par Lay, considered to be Burma's preeminent spoken-word comedian. Imprisoned for the previous six years for mildly satirizing the dictatorship, U Par Lay had been released just two days before this performance.

"When he took the microphone," Alan recalls, "he announced that he had just spent the last six years in prison under hard labor, pounding rocks in leg irons, and that he'd been waiting all this time to perform again." U Par Lay then stated that he knew his performance would likely land him back in prison but he concluded, "So be it! Freedom is more important than fear."

"For the next two hours," continues Alan, "he rocked — stirring the audience to both laugh and cry in a breathtaking performance — deconstructing propaganda and indoctrination, while satirizing totalitarian psychology — all done through improv, theatrical storytelling and blazing comedy." His prediction was

accurate. A week later U Par Lay was arrested and, without trial, sentenced to six more years of imprisonment, under hard labor in leg-irons, pounding rocks 18 hours a day.

“His fearless moral courage blew my mind,” Alan says, “as did the 400 others defying Burma’s equivalent of Bush’s fantasy Patriot III Act: thou shalt not think for oneself unless such thoughts are first cleared through the ministry of Karl Rove, Me and God.” Alan now credits U Par Lay’s courage on that January night with turning him into what some have called “a Michael Moore meets Krishnamurti” and “the most spiritually astute humorist in America today.”

“Comedians in Burma today, living under dictatorship, are not your basic jokesters,” Alan elucidates. “They are spiritual subversives, political provocateurs, confrontational storytellers, underground philosophers, existential psychotherapists and radical rebels who satirize the stupidity of governments ordained by God and all other Orwellian lies. They are activists who serve society by igniting conscience. As such, they are liberators — spoken-word renegades who use the power of the human voice to obliterate fear, interrupt compromise and inspire a new love of freedom.”

U Par Lay’s courage and example that night dramatically shifted the course of Alan’s life. He divulges, “My experiences in Burma with Aung San Suu Kyi and experiencing nonviolent revolution on a day-to-day basis with people who risked everything to speak their conscience radically altered my self-identity, my commitments and ultimately my understanding of freedom.

“After returning to North America in 1997, I wanted more: a new edge of art, a more open, provocative expression of my heart. One day in a fit of outrage — this was around the time Bush was beginning his Christian jihadist invasion of Iraq — I went down to my favorite theater here in Vancouver where I live and asked the owner if could just hang out on the stage.

“Standing there alone in the semidarkness on this empty stage, I remembered Aung San Suu Kyi and U Par Lay and said to myself, ‘U Par Lay risked it all to speak his conscience. Rosa Parkes took a great risk to sit at the front of the bus. Galileo took a great risk to say Earth was round. What risk am I willing to take to be true — radically true — to my deepest, most honest expression of conscience?’ It was there, on that empty stage, I imagined, ‘If I was wired to the world, and had but 90 minutes left to live, what would I want to say to my fellow humans?’”

When Alan first had the courage to walk onto a stage two years later in late 2001 and offer up exactly that, Spiritually Incorrect was born. The show, like great jazz, is unscripted, yet arises out of his “love of intuitive processes,” or what he calls “ontological theme streams.” It has been described as “raw,” “edgy,” “hilarious,” “existentially cathartic,” “enthraling and hallucinogenic.”

At one point in our conversation Alan quotes the Sufi mystic Rumi: “Forget safety. Live where you fear to live. Destroy your reputation. Be notorious.” And in following the poet’s advice, Alan confronts his own fear and spontaneously performs Spiritually Incorrect anew in front of a live audience without a memorized script.

Alan has boldly followed Rumi’s advice in his written as well as spoken word. Besides The Voice of Hope, his 1996 collaboration with Aung San Suu Kyi, Alan authored in 2002 Instinct for Freedom: A Maverick’s Guide to Spiritual Revolution, to be released in paperback in April 2006. In this book Alan disregards the religious doctrine he learned during all those years as a monk and urges a more intuitive approach to spirituality. The Western mystic Andrew Harvey has said about Instinct, “This superbly written, profound and moving work addresses head-on the central question of our time — how to put meditation into action and so transform the real conditions of the real world.”

In his introduction to *Instinct*, Alan writes, “If we’re lucky, every now and again, we have a decisive encounter — an event that changes the course of our lives, forever. With logic and comfort thrown to the wind, we set out on a new, more invigorated trajectory, unleashing our passion and vision upon the world. Such moments are glorious and gorgeous, mysterious and tormenting.”

Such “decisive encounters” in Alan’s own life seem to happen with more regularity than “every now and again.” As a matter of fact, Alan has been changing the course of his life, invigorating his trajectory and unleashing his passion and vision upon the world for the last 30 years or so. His encounter with Buddhism in 1973 eventually caused him to walk away from a full scholarship in pre-law at the University of Virginia and propelled him to Burma in March of 1977 to take up Buddhism in earnest. Two years later he went back to Burma on a “pilgrim’s visa,” where he did a near 10-year stint primarily as a monk, meditating the vast majority of those years, until he was deported at the mysterious whim of the regime.

Leaving his monk robes behind, he began lecturing and leading hundreds of insight meditation retreats in the United States, Canada and Australia. He was having a “nice” life, lecturing on Buddhism’s “Four Noble Truths” and conducting meditation retreats to kindhearted people in nice places around the world. He became a well-recognized, highly respected teacher of insight meditation, co-leading retreats with other well-known Western Buddhist teachers, Jack Kornfield, Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg.

His new guru status didn’t stop him from attending to the plight that Burma still suffered under the dictatorship, however. In 1990, in the first of what was to be two instances, Alan smuggled himself back into the country to meet with underground contacts in Rangoon and then later with rebel factions living in the hills in the most primitive conditions imaginable, near the Thai border. Thus began his career as journalist and human-rights activist, reporting widely upon his return to the United States on the regime’s cruel oppression. Cruel it is, and if you’d like more details on these criminals read *Burma: The Next Killing Fields*, Alan’s first book, with an introduction by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Not content to report on just one instance of genocide, Alan, at the behest of a senior officer working at the United Nations in Sarajevo, visited the former Yugoslavia in 1993. There he spent the final year of their war covering the conflict that brought the term ethnic cleansing into living rooms of people around the world.

In early 1996, driving back to Sarajevo from Srebrenica, the town where 7,000 Bosnian Muslims had been systematically executed over a 48-hour period, Alan and a friend came upon a mass grave being unearthed by workmen. In the middle of this pit of putrefying human flesh, he noticed an exposed hand with what looked like a wedding ring on one of the fingers protruding from the ground. Falling to his knees in what he describes as “existential anguish,” he realized at that moment that no matter what he knew or how free he assumed himself to be, his understanding of life, love and human consciousness was limited indeed.

He thought to himself, How easy it is to love those who love you. As Jesus said, “Even the tax collectors can do as such.” But to love your enemy? Is it humanly possible? “At that point,” he shares, “my staggeringly unquestioned, overestimation of my own spiritual depth cracked wide open. My so-called enlightenment broke in two.”

In a 2003 article for *Mandala* magazine Alan recalls, “Standing before that mass grave made the notion of spiritual transcendence seem preposterous and inhuman. The Dharma — finding liberation through living — was a means to embody our humanness, not to nullify it. It was here that a major shift in my spiritual understanding occurred: entering my humanness, with a respect for the indivisibility of freedom, was infinitely

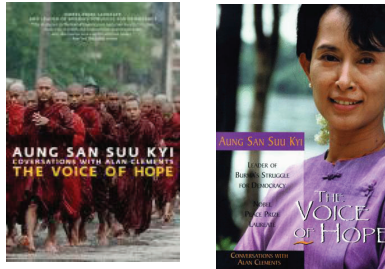
more important than pursuing the projected perfection of transcending duality and coming to the so-called end of my own personal suffering. Yet it had been these latter goals that had been principally driving me for the previous 25 years of spiritual life.”

With this in mind, Alan took to the streets, so to speak, to share his message of liberation. When I ask Alan what he hopes his audience will come away with after his shows here in New Mexico, he laughs and says, “To make the world a better place, a sacred place for our children’s children’s children to play in — that’s all.”

To excerpt “Instinct for Freedom” interview the author, or 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).