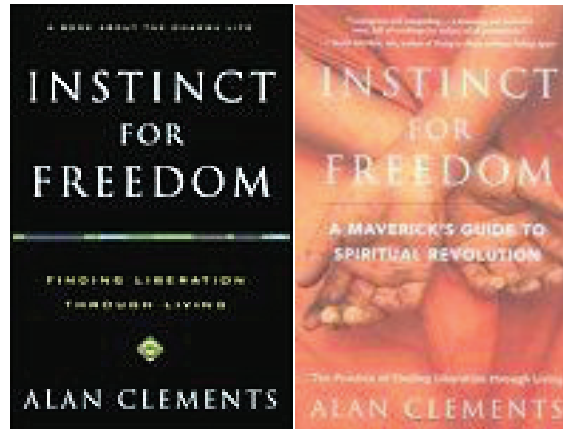


Instinct *for* Freedom

A Book About Everyday Revolution —
Finding Liberation Through Living

by Alan Clements



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FREEDOM IS ITS OWN REWARD

When I was last in Burma in 1996 I got a deep look at unmediated freedom — a powerful freedom expressed in the immediacy of the moment. I had been invited by Aung San Suu Kyi to her home in Rangoon to celebrate her country's Independence Day. The event had special significance. Although Burma had gained its freedom from Britain in 1947, in a strange and tragic twist of fate, for the previous four decades the population has been brutally oppressed by Burma's own army.

So, in an act of defiance to the military dictators ruling the country, Aung San Suu Kyi and other elected leaders of the democracy movement, called for a celebration of their "inherent freedom" at her home. To counter this, the regime's generals threatened long prison terms for anyone attending. But in the spirit of revolution the three hundred or so people who came out that day showed up more emboldened than ever. The more they were threatened, the more their determination grew. As Martin Luther King, "Only when it's dark out do you see the stars."

As the festivities were about to begin, several thousand more people gathered on University Avenue — the road just outside Aung San Suu Kyi's compound. Large loud speakers were hooked up to broadcast the celebration to everyone on the street. Tensions increased as policemen walked among the crowds of activists, filming everyone in attendance. Everyone present faced the harsh reality that when they went home that day they would be arrested and have their homes confiscated.

I stood looking out over the crowd, thinking about what it meant to really stand up for what you believe in. Here I understood more clearly Aung San Suu Kyi words: "Within a system which denies the existence of basic human rights, fear tends to be the order of the day. Fear of imprisonment, fear of torture, fear of death; fear of losing friends, family, property or means of livelihood; fear of poverty, fear of isolation, fear of failure. The most insidious form of fear is that which masquerades as common sense or even wisdom, condemning as

foolish, reckless, insignificant, or futile the small, daily acts of courage which help to preserve a person's self-respect and inherent human dignity.”

It's the little moments, the details of life, the immediacy of freedom's function — to be free right now — that excite me the most. Freedom is its own reward. By occupying freedom it grows, organically. Every second is a creative choice to exercise freedom — our greatest beauty. What we do with that freedom will change, but the more we release the energy of freedom from the constraint of conditions, the more liberated we become. Imagine being a pianist or a potter and losing our hands? Imagine then getting them back? Imagine the gratitude we would feel for the freedom that our hands provide us? The idea is to have our hands and hearts on life all the time — aware that we can lose that privilege at any time — playing and shaping the rhythms and forms that most touch us.

By mid-afternoon the Independence Day celebration was in full swing. There were theatrical presentations from each of the different ethnic groups of Burma's fourteen states. The music, dance, and joy of solidarity were all the more poignant taking place in a present moment that had no guarantee of a future. People celebrated in full knowledge that they may not see each other again after that day. The prisons were already full with activists who had done much less to provoke the authorities. And before long, as expected, hundreds of armed soldiers loyal to the dictatorship surrounded Aung San Suu Kyi's compound. Dozens of paddy wagons moved in and barricaded the street.

As the soldiers surrounded us, waiting ominously, the master of ceremonies announced a special guest. The audience went silent in anticipation. As the curtains on the makeshift stage opened the audience roared, recognizing Burma's most famous stand-up comedian, U Par Lay, and his partner, U Lu Zaw. Together they formed a theater troupe called Myo Win Mar, or “Our Own Way.” Comics in Burma are spoken-word artists in the fullest sense. They combine storytelling, dance, acting, impersonation, humor, philosophy, drama, Dharma, wit, and political satire that expresses the conscience of the nation. It becomes a form of radical activism. In Burma, a country where freedom of speech is a crime against the state, the spoken-word performer faces something like what Lenny Bruce faced in the late 1950s and early 1960s in America but immeasurably worse.

The last time U Par Lay and U Lu Zaw had performed, in 1989, they were imprisoned for six years. They were shackled in leg irons, forced to pound rocks every day, deprived of medicine and visits by family members, and kept on a near-starvation diet. Their crime: mildly satirizing the Big Brother behavior of Burma's totalitarian regime.

When the audience saw their favorite performers on stage — who they did not know had just been released from prison — they responded with electrified, deafening applause. U Par Lay took the microphone and explained that he had been waiting for this day for six years — the day when he would be free again to stand up, perform, and speak his conscience.

He said he knew that what he was about to perform would land him back in prison. After another huge round of applause, with a defiant smile U Par Lay said, “So be it! It's about our freedom!”

I tried to imagine the implications of his actions. I visualized him in prison chained in leg irons, along with the hundreds of other political prisoners, standing under a sweltering sun, hungry and emaciated, swinging a heavy sledge hammer over his head and then down, against rock. And to think that he's smiling inside? He so evidently sustained himself through his love of freedom — his commitment to human rights, his dedication to liberation through living. He must have, somehow, always remembered that his freedom is inseparable from everyone else's.

As I listened and watched U Par Lay, I felt the courage of the crowd around me. They too were risking it all for freedom. I began to breathe more deeply. I began to laugh more fully. I occupied my body and my muscles and my skin in a more natural, liberated way. I was no longer an outsider looking in. I wasn't a practitioner of any religion or meditation seeking freedom. I was a human being. I was in the flow of a timeless freedom, unbound by fear, unbound by location, unbound by nationality, creed, and religion. As U Par Lay declared his freedom by being true to himself, I too became free in my own unique form of activism. My

interrelated presence was all that I ever had. A love of mutual being was my only message.

As I occupied more of my own heart and less of my fear, I automatically felt greater care for others. People got up and started to dance. They had no rhythm to follow other than their own love of freedom. U Par Lay was telling us through his example, “Don’t wait to be.” He was saying, “Open the window and look at the stars. Don’t let dictators tell you what liberation looks like, or what the sacred should feel like.” U Par Lay was being himself, and at the same time inextricably connected to the larger picture — his country’s struggle for freedom, his country’s uprising for human rights, the freedom to say and be who you want to be, right now.

It is frighteningly easy to empower compromise. It is so easy to postpone freedom until circumstances improve. It is so easy to seek the idea rather than empower the little, daily acts of manifesting dreams. In the bigger picture it would be easy to dismiss U Par Lay’s actions as having no real value. It would be easy to forget the millions of other people around the world who risk so much every day of their lives for the right to a dignified existence. How many U Par Lays are there out there in the making?

Vaclav Havel, who spent years in prison for his activism in helping to bring freedom to his country, once said, “Hope, in the deep and meaningful sense, is not the same as joy that things are going well, or willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but, rather, an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed.” Freedom is about the elevation of this human goodness. This beauty will save the world, if we are patient and persevering. “People who are used to seeing society only from above tend to be impatient,” Havel went on to say. “They want to see immediate results. Anything that does not produce immediate results seems foolish. They don’t have a lot of sympathy for acts which can only be evaluated years after they take place, which are motivated by moral factors, and therefore run the risk of never accomplishing anything.”

Mother Teresa spoke to the heart of World Dharma when she said, “We cannot do great things in life; we can only do small things with great love.” Saving the world will come from hundreds of millions of people performing the tiniest acts throughout the day with the “great love” Mother Teresa speaks of. That great love is born from a love of freedom, our own and others. As Nelson Mandela states, “For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.”

Once we embrace the reality that our freedom cannot be separated, our devotion to it begins. So U Par Lay and U Lu Zaw demonstrated back on January 4, 1996. They performed beautifully. It was a very mild satirical commentary, highlighting a few of the fatal flaws of an unjust, misguided system that out of greed and fear oppresses the human spirit. The audience within Aung San Suu Kyi’s compound cried and laughed. And sure enough, a few days later U Par Lay and U Lu Zaw were rearrested, sentenced without a trial, once again, to six years of rock pounding. A two-hour gig to celebrate unbound freedom cost them six years.

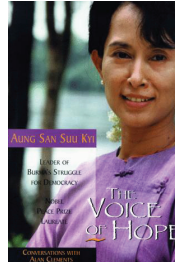
The regime in Burma is profoundly ugly, corrupt at every level, but the effort to speak to that ugliness, to declare it wrong, is a beautiful act of conscience. That’s ubuntu. That’s bhavana. That’s World Dharma. That’s liberation through living.

Sometimes when I watch children playing I imagine hearing them say in their innocence, “Please make the world a beautiful place. We want to grow up safe and free.” The challenge is before us, always present — a living universe — waiting for us each to creatively occupy it — wisely, openly, curiously, free. This is the Dharma: a daring declaration of our devotion to liberation by exploring consciousness and the relationship of the human to both world and cosmos.

Am I optimistic? Let Nelson Mandela answer that question. “I am fundamentally an optimist. Whether that comes from nature or nurture, I cannot say. Part of being optimistic is keeping one’s head pointed toward the sun, one’s feet moving forward. There were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lay defeat and death.”

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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).