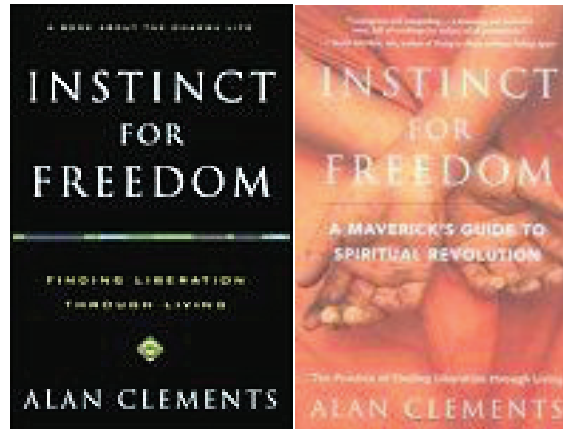


Instinct *for* Freedom

A Book About Everyday Revolution —
Finding Liberation Through Living

by Alan Clements



[1st ten pages of the book]

PART ONE

The Struggle for Freedom

SEEKING THE SOURCE OF SUFFERING

In 1970, when I embarked on this journey, I assumed that genuine spiritual development was only cultivated through years of vigorous training under the guidance of a qualified Dharma teacher. Nine years later, at age twenty-nine, this belief took me to an isolated monastery in Rangoon, Burma, where I practiced silent meditation up to twenty hours a day for the good part of a decade.

This first phase of my Dharma life — my decision to leave the world and enter intensive meditation — was neither predictable nor easy. On the contrary, it was mysterious and troubling! It came on slowly, as a whisper of discontent, and crested into an existential crisis. At the time I was in my second year at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville, where I studied pre-law and art history. Somehow I felt a deep dissatisfaction. I was restless and weary, struggling to make sense of my life. Outside I saw a planet in flames — consumed with war, vengeance, and suffering. The truth was I hated school and hated the American government for waging a senseless war in Vietnam. I felt that my education was just a euphemism for indoctrination — programming me to find satisfaction somewhere within the machinery of mediocrity and domination. Besides feeling manipulated, I also feared that if I continued to pursue my studies with the intention of becoming a lawyer I'd find myself somewhere down the road, successful and forgetful, and somehow call it happiness. Almost everywhere I looked people seemed automated — living comfortable, predictable lives, held together by propaganda and lies. When I turned my attention back on myself I felt the torment of my own self-deceit. But the problem was, I didn't know how to untangle myself from the web of complicity.

As my anguish peaked, I resolved to get to the bottom of it. Actually, my life started to take on a strange, organic momentum of its own. My torment had an entelechy — a driving intuitive wisdom that seemed much larger than logic. One afternoon, I said, “Enough!” I drove to my favorite spot an hour away — a lookout high in the Blue Ridge Mountains. I parked and trekked through the snow to an isolated ledge with a majestic view of the Shenandoah Valley. I sat down in the freezing December night and entered the jagged, confused claustrophobia that had been confining me for the previous year. I had to know what my life was about — my passion and my purpose — and whether I had the courage to live it.

I remember that night so well. I trembled, cried, and quaked. Eventually, I could take no more. Standing up, I screamed at whomever and whatever this sick god was who was driving the show — “Why so much madness, horror, and pain?” The anguish cut through my heart like a knife. It scared me that I understood that resolution wasn’t simply an issue of changing environments, settling somewhere on a piece of beautiful land, being more creative, having more money, or finding another relationship. Nor did it feel like a psychological question. It frightened me even more to feel that I had played out what the world had to offer, and any resolution had to come from within. The fire to resolve the crisis burned deep in my core. This was my first dark night of the soul.

I stayed on the mountain throughout the night — talking to myself, pacing back and forth on the ledge, smoking cigarettes, and becoming clearer and more confident by the hour. I didn’t have answers to the big questions but things became unmistakably transparent — my life was a lie and I had to make a change, fast.

At sunrise I drove back to Charlottesville, packed my belongings, went to the dean of the college, relinquished my scholarship, and withdrew from school. By that afternoon I was cruising home, stoned and in bliss, en route to my girlfriend’s apartment in Virginia Beach.

Soon after, I began pursuing my true passion — art. Painting had been something I had done since childhood and now without the pressures of school looming over my head I was free to create, to plumb the depths of my interior. I was primarily drawn to abstract and surrealist art, where I found ample room for life reflection. The images became my metaphorical fantasy world, a place I would go to soothe my soul. My paintings symbolized an uncensored, spontaneous life — a life I wanted to live but to which I had no real access.

Progressively, I went further out in my art. I began regularly painting under the influence of hallucinogens. This became my existential therapy, my Dharma — a vehicle to explore consciousness. By consecrating the substances, I used them to probe the more hidden, complex areas of my being — those contradictions and peculiarities that lurk beneath the skin of everyone, as well as the personas that protect them. But no matter how deeply I would go, I couldn’t shake a troubling sadness. My urgency was amplified by an aching inner emptiness and a haunting perception of mortality. No person or thing could assuage my anguish and awareness of death.

A TURNING AWAY FROM THE WORLD

By 1974, three years after I left university, I descended into my second dark night of the soul. I was sitting in front of a painting I had just completed. I called it “mechanical man — a self-portrait.” It was a group of four robotic-looking figures. Their faces were without features. They were entangled together and dependent on each other, unable to stand alone. They were framed within a box-shaped world — a cubed myopia imprisoned by perception. My mind felt like that cubed myopia — a prisoner of itself. Entranced in a societal hypnosis, I felt mechanical. Everything felt out of my control and I desperately desired a freedom from the known — my box-shaped world.

In a moment of epiphany I realized the obvious — I needed assistance. I couldn’t do this on my own! I wanted a guide, a wise friend — someone who understood the nature of the mind and who could help me to understand the mystery world behind my eyes. But whom could I turn to?

Miraculously, days later, while washing my clothes in a Laundromat in West Palm Beach, Florida —

the city where I had moved to be near a warm ocean as I pursued painting full time — I was scanning the bulletin board when I noticed a flyer. It was an advertisement for the Naropa Institute — the first university in America devoted to the study of consciousness, started by the Tibetan Buddhist Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, in Boulder, Colorado. It was the subtitle that grabbed me. It said something like, “Explore your mind. . . . Discover the Dharma. . . . Be Free.”

My girlfriend Catherine and I picked up and drove to Boulder. After a provocative summer at Naropa, having learned the basics in Buddhist meditation, we decided to go overland to India as the next phase of our spiritual journey. But it was only upon arriving in Burma — an ancient South Asian Buddhist culture, with its five -thousand or so monasteries scattered throughout a land the size of Texas — that I felt I had found what I was looking for. The elegance of the people, their generosity and grace, and their extraordinary devotion to the teachings of the Buddha, touched me like nothing else I had ever known. I had absolutely no desire to leave. It became important to me to study with the elders of the Theravada Buddhist tradition, the banner-holders of traditional Buddhism and insight or vipassana meditation. At the time only seven-day visas were available for foreign visitors. It wasn't until much later that I discovered the country was also a totalitarian terror state ruled by General Ne Win — an eccentric, xenophobic, and ruthless dictator.

After nearly two years in Asia — kicking around Buddhist monasteries, tropical beaches and meditation centers, exhausted and broke — I returned to America looking for some direction on what to do. Deciding that I wanted to pursue my life as an artist, I moved to Los Angeles. The contrast to silent monasteries and the simplicity of Asia was overwhelming. Within weeks my ambitions crumbled into the simple struggle for survival. I tried to stabilize by painting more. But nothing worked.

Early in 1978 I hit rock bottom. One evening, mid-way through a painting, something snapped. I broke my paint brush in half. Threw my paints out. Cut up my canvases. The whole art thing felt masturbatory. I threw out my Dharma books. They were useless. You couldn't find freedom in a word any more than you could lick ink to liberate yourself. I went out on the balcony of my home in the Hollywood Hills and looked out over a sea of illuminated city blocks, contemplating my next move. I flashed back on my last LSD trip, just months before on an island off the coast of southern Thailand. The experience had implanted itself in the marrow of my soul. I thought if I relived it I might find the key to what I was looking for. I needed to find a reason to be, fast. At the time the experience in Thailand left me feeling that all I wanted to do for the rest of my life was be in silence and meditate, to vanquish the core suffering that was embedded in my chest. So why was I in LA?

My acid trip had one theme: hell, literally and metaphorically. It was a twelve-hour descent into anguish. I remember coming away from it thinking how radically right the Buddha was in seeing how the very structure of consciousness was flawed. Everything was conditioned and interdependent. Every perception was in flux. Everything was in time. Our faces. Our hearts. Nothing lasts. Life was a sand castle constantly eroded by limitless time. We were dream creatures on a canvas of photons, solidified by deluded minds. Happiness was a bargain with ignorance, sealed with denial.

I heard the Buddha speak to me that day: “Long have you suffered in this samsara — life after life. During this endless cycle of rebirth and death you have cried more tears than the waters in the four great oceans. Have you not suffered long enough to turn away from existence? What more do you need to see? What other form of pleasure do you need, before you seek the wisdom of transcendent escape?”

It would be this one dogma that drove me into the monastery: understanding that the source of suffering — namely greed, anger, and delusion — is inside oneself, and understanding that by removing these conditions, suffering ceases. Why seek refuge in anything external? As the Buddha said, “By oneself alone is one defiled, by oneself alone is one purified. Seek your own salvation with diligence.”

I remember the epiphany I had on that balcony in LA that night. It would be the awakening that would send me half way around the world to save my soul. I felt that I had come to the end of seeking. I was done with books. Done with open-ended travel. Done with yet another aimless conversation. I was done with psychedelics. I was done with feeling self-pity. I was done pretending that I would find happiness in the outer world. Freedom had to come from within. I wanted to know the same silence that all saints throughout history

had spoken about as the essence of the human experience. Sitting still in meditation, closing my eyes, and going inward with a sustained self-awareness was the only logical thing left to do. I wanted enlightenment. I wanted perfect peace, a perfect realization, a perfect transcendence of my suffering self and this burning world.

FORM IS USEFUL BUT AWARENESS LIBERATES

I chose to be ordained as a monk by Mahasi Sayadaw, an elderly Burmese Buddhist meditation master, who was then visiting New York City. I had met him briefly during my first trip to Burma two years prior. The day after my ordination I flew to Burma, along with Mahasi Sayadaw and several other monks.

When I arrived in Rangoon I had no idea what was in store for me. I had been given a “monastic visa” and, as it turned out, was the first American allowed to actually live in a Burmese monastery since the military coup d’état in 1962. Except for short visits, mostly limited to twenty-four hours, few Westerners, other than diplomats, had spent any extended time in Burma. This was uncharted territory. It was a great leap of faith. I was a kid maverick in many ways, a brash renegade artist with a rebellious nature, conditioned by psychoactive substances, rock ‘n’ roll, existential art, and a love of sex and freedom.

I plunged into an alien world. I shaved my head, renounced food after noon, became celibate, and lived with teachers I didn’t know, with little support from friends or family. After an initial period of intense struggle, living as a monk began to sparkle with beauty. I found myself in a world where people spoke to the matters of my heart. They provided a setting where meditation could be practiced on a full-time, open-ended basis. They provided everything necessary — shelter, food, medicine, robes — all given with love and kindness. The Dharma teachings were shared in the same way, openly and freely. I had finally found an environment that met my own intense questioning with guides who challenged me to my depths.

The first teacher was Mahasi Sayadaw. He was a magnificent man who inspired a fascination in me to explore human consciousness as fully as possible. He also taught me about dignity and the courage it takes to sustain freedom. Sayadaw U Javana was my first meditation instructor in Burma, and he grounded me in the basics of how to objectively observe the mind. Sayadaw U Sujata, who embodied great warmth and humor coupled with the outrageous, supported me in not being so frightened of myself. Sayadaw U Pandita was to become my spiritual father, brother, mentor, and best friend. I had never known such a provocative and stimulating relationship. He brought out the best I had, and he enjoyed chiseling away at the rest.

These Dharma guides, or “spiritual friends,” as they are traditionally called, expressed extremely refined human values. In my relationship with Sayadaw U Pandita, I faced for the first time in my life the issues of honor and surrender. He demanded complete honesty and surrender to reality, not my opinion of it. He initiated me in how to conscientiously interrelate to others and myself. He also opened me to the expansiveness of what intensive awareness meditation practice could offer. He was a great spiritual friend.

As time went on, and as I became more fluent in meditation, a wonderful sense of nurturance grew in me. I had never felt more content in my life. At times, I literally wept with joy at having found my tribe, my family, my purpose. I felt blessed, as though I were riding a sacred vehicle into the great unknown. My experience seemed timeless. It was from this profound and complex period of my life that I learned what spiritual practice can truly mean. The second section of this book is devoted to an “inside look” at the actual process of how intensive insight meditation transforms consciousness.

Yet, all things change. After years of training and living in the monastery my circumstances shifted drastically. Although I had done nothing to provoke them, in 1983, I was forced to leave the monastery because the Burmese government was unwilling to renew my visa. After two days of agonizing reflection, I decided to disrobe as a monk. A few hours later, wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and sandals, with just a few dollars in my pocket, I flew to Bangkok, took a train south, and eventually arrived at an isolated bungalow on an island in the South China Sea.

Not long after I arrived on the island, I was invited to teach a ten-day meditation retreat by the Thai

abbot of a local monastery. At the end of it I received a donation that was just enough to buy a one-way ticket to Los Angeles. Days later I reluctantly returned to the West.

The re-entry was maddening. It was a confrontation with everything I hoped to avoid, namely my life. No amount of spiritual training could have prepared me. Immediately, I felt the aloneness, the separation, the frivolity of society. The onslaught on my senses was overwhelming, the technological hum, deafening. It was all moving so fast and felt so harsh.

The monastery held a deep sense of protection, quiet, and simplicity. I never faced a choice of what to wear; it was always the same robes, the same color. There were no telephones to answer, no flights, no driving, no parties, no cooking, no sex, no movies. It was always the same schedule, day after day: meditating, studying, and discussing the Dharma, year after year. Almost everyone shared a refined alliance of purpose. It was my intimate spiritual family, a close-knit community of radical seekers.

In America's altered reality, the distance and struggle in most peoples' eyes saddened me. Everyone seemed preoccupied with money, security, and diversion. Life felt consuming. I too began to feel these pulls. Few people seemed to have much time for their hearts' higher calling, or even for themselves. I had no idea how sensitive I had become as a monk.

So I concentrated on connecting with friends, and I also began to lead meditation retreats. This gave me great joy and eased the transition tremendously. I loved being around spiritual explorers, people genuinely striving to know themselves more fully. In fact, in some ways this period was a continuation of my time in the monastery — but without the safety of the monastic form. I was just another human in the great sea of life. It was as if I were stripped of all protection. I felt naked. There was just my human consciousness manifesting right in front of me.

In coming back, I felt I was cast into a situation where I was my own guide. I would now have to provide all the encouragement and kindness my teachers used to supply. I kept hearing Sayadaw U Pandita's final words to me the day I disrobed: "Trust that the seeds of purification are within you. Nurture them and you will awaken. The form is useful, but it is awareness that liberates."

Entering the next phase of my journey, I began realizing that life experience was my greatest teacher, and therefore the highest vehicle for spiritual awakening. This led to an understanding that the Dharma — finding liberation through living — was not a doctrine to memorize and subsequently practice. Rather it was a metaphor for freedom itself, a "Dharma intelligence" that functioned to release inhibition and fear while opening the heart to wisdom and compassion.

THE EYES OF THE ENEMY

Transforming my own understanding of the Dharma from doctrine into metaphor was long and complex. Although the process began soon after I disrobed in 1983 it was not until 1990 that it really evolved. I remember having just finished leading a meditation retreat in Australia and picking up a copy of Time magazine with the cover story "Bullets in Alms Bowls." The military regime in Burma had raided hundreds of monasteries in Rangoon and Mandalay, arresting many monks and killing others, based on the maniacal fantasy that the Sangha — the Buddhist clergy — was attempting to overthrow the dictatorship. Since Burma was my spiritual home — I responded, I think, as any loyal son or daughter would to their own family. The monks and nuns were my Dharma parents; they nurtured me in ways I had never known before. With Burma's future in jeopardy, I shuddered at the possibility that the Buddha's teachings would be silenced. My fears were not far-fetched. The Buddhist cultures once found in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India had been decimated by Mogul invaders. Buddhism in Vietnam and Laos had been devastated by Chinese-backed Communism. In Cambodia, Buddhism had been almost completely destroyed during Pol Pot's reign of terror. And in Tibet the Chinese had been annihilating Buddhist culture since their invasion in 1949. Who could say how long Burma would last?

I immediately decided that I would return to Burma in an attempt to support my spiritual family in one of its darkest hours. A few days later, when I got to Bangkok, I learned that the military authorities had closed

Burma — sealing the population in and closing foreigners and journalists out — turning this ancient, mystical country into a totalitarian nightmare, what the BBC would call a “land of forty million hostages.”

Through underground contacts, I clandestinely entered the country. Nothing could have prepared me for what I saw. When I first arrived in the jungle to join the resistance it all appeared to be quite simple. Like many unsuspecting noncombatants, I was immediately taken in by the vast hillsides of shimmering golden poppies. The steep mountain peaks shrouded in mist beckoned thoughts of romance and beauty. Clear jungle streams cascaded into large waterfalls and on into deep pools. It was not long, however, before I would see this land without the pleasant tourist’s gaze. The regime was liquidating Burma’s rural population. Within days of landing in the jungle I saw thousands of terrorized refugees fleeing from Burmese government soldiers. Boy cannibals in camouflage trained as head hunters — maddened on hate propaganda and saturated with cheap alcohol and drugs — ravaged the countryside with orders from the dictators in Rangoon to exterminate en masse. Burma had become blood-soaked; it was being mercilessly torn apart.

Villages were smoldering, mortared into charred ruins. And among the ruins, massacres — My Lai style. Severed heads, still blindfolded. Even the dogs had been killed, blackened to a crisp like pigs at a luau. Everywhere I went I saw wailing mothers running, exhausted and starving, clutching their children. Some of the children were dead, mangled unrecognizable by land mines disguised as toys. I heard tales of brutal gang rapes by soldiers that went on for days and months.

At one point, I was with my Burmese guides, hunkered down on a ridge line deep in the jungle. Suddenly, over the camp radio, the movements of troops loyal to the dictatorship were intercepted. “North 100 meters,” the student with the headset yelled out. His words were like razors, severing me from the insulation of tomorrow. We lowered ourselves deeper into the earthen trenches. AK-47s were unlocked and ready to fire. An hour passed.

“Shit,” Maung Win blurted out under his breath. “We can’t just sit here and wait . . . we’ve got to find them.” He nodded to the others to get ready to move. He turned to me and asked solemnly, “Coming or staying?”

His eyes were unblinking. Mine were frozen.

Maung Win and I weren’t strangers. In fact, we were old friends. We’d been Buddhist monks together in Rangoon, back in 1981. My few weeks in the jungle with him had been deeply unsettling. Simply put, I thought Maung Win was an affront to all that I considered spiritually correct.

Calculated savagery was nothing I had ever known. Initially I resisted, trying to mask the pain by rekindling spiritual beliefs. But even compassion felt like a glib cliché — a dogmatic shield that had nothing to do with my true feelings. Everything I thought and said reeked of rhetoric. As time in the jungle expanded my reality, I was to learn that there comes a time when spiritual aspirations and pacifist ideals cease to have meaning. One is willing to kill for freedom.

Just the day before we had been snaking through the jungle together. My arrogant judgments must have been apparent. I was disdainful of Maung Win for taking up weapons to fight the regime. After all, Aung San Suu Kyi — the leader of Burma’s struggle for freedom — was advocating nonviolence as the best means of political change.

Suddenly Maung Win turned around and began shouting in my face like an irate sergeant. With each tirade he pushed me backwards. “I’m sick of your judgment. We live under dictatorship. Do you know what that means? Haven’t you seen enough?”

“Imagine not having your passport stuffed in your pocket. You can leave anytime, and go sit in a retreat — as if you know what freedom means. You’re an idealist.”

I stood unmoving and speechless, not knowing what to think. Where did I stand?

“Listen” he said, cutting me off from reflection. “I couldn’t justify sitting in meditation while my brothers and sisters were being killed. Our teachers taught us to love even those who hate us. But try to love with a gun pointed at your head.

“After they tortured my brother, I disrobed and joined the resistance. My heart is with my people, not

with my enlightenment.”

“There are other ways than weapons and war,” I said, with a small shred of defiance.

Maung Win became outraged. He thrust his AK-47 in my chest and pushed me backwards, shouting, “What if it was your girlfriend who was raped? What would you do? Sit back and be mindful? Become a dead Buddhist?”

He turned around and walked away.

I followed in silence. Inside I felt like broken glass.

Back at the camp, Maung Win made my decision for me and asked me to stay behind and look after a member of the group who had just become ill with malaria. He and the four others jumped from the trench and went out to find the enemy soldiers before they found us.

That night Maung Win was killed in a firefight. The other students returned to camp with a captured soldier. They believed he was the one who had actually shot Maung Win. While the others slept, I was put on guard duty, asked to keep an eye on the enemy soldier.

We sat upright staring at each other. His hands were tied. A small fire separated us. I had a pistol pointed at him, with instructions to “shoot if he stands up or yells.” The gun was warm and damp from the sweat of my hand. I felt splintered with rage and disoriented with a terrible sorrow. My mind oscillated between two thoughts: “How easy it would be to shoot this guy” and “Am I prepared to die?” Both thoughts were repulsive.

I looked down the barrel of the gun into the sad eyes of the soldier. “Can I ask you a question?” he asked. I nodded in affirmation.

“Would you tell me. . . why are you risking your life for my country?”

It was a good question. I tried to enter his mind, to find his motivation. Was it a trick? Why did he want to know? I hesitated, saying, “I’ll let you know.” He nodded his acceptance and we went back to staring at each other. As time passed I noticed that our breaths were alarmingly synchronized. This observation further eroded the distance between me and the enemy.

Was this a ploy? Had he been trained in escape? My suspicion tightened my finger on the trigger. He remained unflinchingly fixed on my eyes. They were cold and penetrating but strangely human too.

His question forced me to think the unthinkable. Why was I sitting in a free-fire zone with a pistol pointed at this soldier’s head? Was I crazy? There was something truly absurd about it all. The question took me back to the beginning — to my earliest contact with Buddhism and the reason why it had seemed to make so much sense.

To excerpt “Instinct for Freedom” interview the author, or foreign rights contact:

Alan Clements

Telephone: 1-604-251-1781

www.everydayrevolution.org

Email: contact@worldddharma.com

Additional books by Alan Clements

The Voice of Hope - Conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi,
Burma’s imprisoned Nobel peace laureate (Seven Stories, NY).

