



West Australian Saturday 8/2/2003
Weekend Extra Page 11
Circulation: 235,686
Size: 438.99 sq.cms.



Belief&beyond

Gavin Simpson

Our uncertain fate

ALAN CLEMENTS was one of the first Westerners to train as a Buddhist monk in Burma, where he spent several years in pursuit of enlightenment.

His monastic search was interrupted by being twice ordered out of the country by the military regime.

Since finally leaving the monastic life he has travelled widely, including in Australia, teaching and conducting retreats and promoting a form of spiritual activism, putting the compassion of Buddhism into practice.

He was the first activist to witness and document the genocide of ethnic minorities by Burma's military dictatorship and produced a book titled *Burma: The Next Killing Fields?*

In 1995 he made a risky return to the country where he co-authored *The Voice of Hope*, an inspiring book of conversations with opposition leader and Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

He first came to the Rangoon monastery from a dark night of the soul, fuelled by drugs and disillusion. In the monastery he finally, after some heavy going, found refuge and a sense of joy and fulfilment. All that came to an abrupt end when he was catapulted back into everyday life by being suddenly ordered out of the country.

Determined not to return to the United States, he headed on a one-way ticket to Calcutta, equipped with a begging bowl, a sitting cloth, a shaving razor and a passport. It was a considerable shock to the system.

"Eighteen hours before I was what felt like a hair's breadth from enlightenment," he writes in his new book *Instinct for Freedom: Finding Liberation Through Living* (Hodder Headline \$29.95). "And now I was walking into a city of 11 million people, dodging rickshaws."

An encounter with a leper and a child beggar carrying a dead infant in her arms put the certainty of what he had learnt in the monastery into sudden confusion.

What was the real meaning of all this seemingly random suffering? What response did it require?

Was life really just a dream, as the sages taught, with the only salvation being to wake up again and again until the last illusion of separate identity of the self was removed?

"In Calcutta, the question really hit home: what does really matter and why?"

Clements was to come up with some interesting ideas in casting around within the core of Buddhist teaching, the Dharma, for an answer to that question.

The traditional teaching was that the external world in which such suffering occurred was not only inherently unsatisfactory but a self-generated illusion. The challenge was to come to realise this state of affairs and start seeing things as they really are — or as they aren't.

"Life as it usually appears is empty of inherent reality . . . Time, gender, nations, race, borders — the cosmos itself — do not exist, except as self-generated phantoms projected on to the sky of one's mind."

Clements says he believed the theory, accepted the fact that he "couldn't walk out of his own movie", that the best self is no-self, that even being an "authentic self" is to miss the point of it all.

To embrace the "no self" and dissolve into the bliss of union with Absolute Emptiness required a renouncing of desire.

But the question for Clements became: is desire a force that can only be controlled through renunciation, through refusal?

The conclusion he reached was that although this might suit the monastic life, it was not always the best way to tackle the realities of ordinary life.

"No matter how far you go, out or in, sooner or later you come back to earth, to the body, to desires, to fears, to your humanness."

Ultimately, he decided, he had to accept that Buddhism, despite its brilliant analysis of the power of sustained awareness, its theory of consciousness and its understanding of meditation, did not have all the answers. In fact, no system of belief or philosophy did.

"It is impossible to have absolute truths coming from the biologically dependent, myth-making mammals that we are — just a few eons up from our single-cell ancestors."

The only answer was that "we must live with cosmic ambiguity while searching for greater truths".

And to do that, he says, we do need to be constantly aware of the fact that we are living in a world where anything can happen and does. "Every second is a mysterious twist of infinite cosmic fate."

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And to cope with that you don't need a faith but a trust in "the deepest experience of being", the inward voice of the conscience. And to learn to inter-relate with others, opening our eyes to the realities of the sufferings of others and being prepared to do something about it.

Above all, there is "no indestructible realisation to seek, no final solution to existence, no goal of life and no required insight apart from the wisdom to be true to yourself and respectful of others".

THE Islamic Council of WA will hold a public lecture on common misconceptions about Islam at 7 o'clock tonight at the University of Western Australia's Alexander Theatre.

The speaker will be an Egyptian-born Canadian Islamic expert, Yahya Adel Ibrahim. One of his claims to fame is to have memorised the whole of the Quran, starting at the age of 16. He began lecturing at the major mosques in Toronto when he was 17 years old.

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