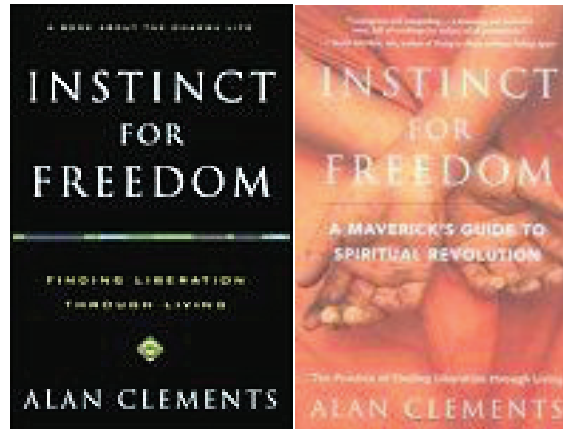


Instinct *for* Freedom

A Book About Everyday Revolution — Finding Liberation Through Living

by Alan Clements



INTRODUCTION

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. They contort us, bend us — squeeze out every vestige of pretense, compromise, and inauthenticity. Some call this magic. Others call it synchronicity. Some may even call it madness. It has all those elements, and more. I call these moments, taken together, the Dharma life — a response to our instinct for freedom, the natural urge of the heart to know itself and seek its liberation from all obstacles, real or imagined. This revolution of the soul demands that you no longer deny your true calling. It demands that you find your higher love, which then helps you reach beyond whatever is holding you back.

But this awakening requires something of us. We must pay a price: we must fall in love. To take liberation as our life's purpose is the greatest of challenges. It means making the terrible beautiful and kissing each heartbreak as divinity itself. Mother Teresa encourages us: "For love to be real, it must cost. It must hurt. It must empty us of Self."

One of my earliest encounters with this form of love happened during my first journey into the war-torn jungles of northern Burma. It was a moment that touched my heart, inspiring me to seek a new, higher understanding of freedom — unconfined by dogma, superstition, or religion.

One evening I was speaking with a dignified twenty-nine-year old Burmese woman, a university graduate who had fled her home after the pro-democracy uprisings of 1988. As we sat under the night sky, with a candle burning between us, we discussed the principle of nonviolence: How can it be effective against a totalitarian regime that tortures and kills unarmed civilians? At what point is self-defense necessary, if only to survive?

In the near distance we could hear soft guitar music and the voices of students singing love songs, which they did every night. Groups of students would gather and walk with guitars, stopping at the huts of

resting fellow students. As we listened to the music, I spontaneously asked my companion if she'd ever been in love. She paused for some time and regarded me evenly. Her dark brown eyes twinkled in the firelight. "Yes, I have been in love," she replied. "Two and a half years ago my fiancé and I were to have been married. We loved each other deeply. We'd known each other from childhood. But the demonstrations in 1988 began only two weeks before our wedding. We so desperately wanted freedom and democracy. The time had come when we thought it would be possible to come out from under the boot of military oppression that had trampled us since we were children.

"First we went out and marched. The next day my sister and brothers came out with us. The following day my mother and father came out, then my aunts and uncles, until my whole family was in the streets. Suddenly, from nowhere, the soldiers appeared. They grouped together in three long rows, keeping their automatic weapons and bayonets aimed at us.

"We in turn, many thousands of us, knelt down in front of the soldiers. We sang to them, 'We love you; you are our brothers. All we want is freedom. You are the people's army; come to our side. All we want is democracy.'

"But they had orders to fire, and they did. Many students, some friends, and some of my family members were shot dead on the spot. We had no idea that our own people would kill us. I could scarcely believe it was happening. I was terrified. There was blood and screaming everywhere. The cracking of gunfire echoed as everyone panicked and ran for cover. People began falling down — a young friend of mine died in my arms. I looked for my family. They were gone. My fiancé and I began to run.

"We went on running for the next two weeks, deeper and deeper into the jungle. I was still with my fiancé, along with a dozen other students, and we miraculously managed to evade the soldiers. Sometimes we had to bury ourselves under leaves, cling to the banks of rivers, or stand rigidly behind trees as soldiers passed by.

"We felt like animals being hunted, sleeping sporadically on the forest floor. It was cold and unbearably painful. We were constantly bitten by ants and mosquitoes. Yet we managed to stay alive.

"After two weeks of running, nearing exhaustion, we all contracted malaria. We were extremely weak, feverish, and nauseated. That night the soldiers ambushed us. It was to have been the day of our marriage — instead, my fiancé and I were separated during the firefight.

"I have never seen or heard from him since that night. I don't know if he's alive or not. I dare not contact his family or my family, because it would put them in great danger if the regime found out."

We sat without stirring. The candle flickered in a momentary breeze and time seemed suspended. "I still think about him," she said. "I do miss him sometimes. But being out here in the jungle for these past few years, living under the tyranny, my values have changed. I'm in love with freedom. And even if I'm caught and tortured to death, if it will help restore freedom in my country, and freedom in the world, I will die in love.

"Yes, I have been in love," she said softly. "And I remain in love."

We stared at each other for a long few minutes. She broke the silence saying, "Freedom is a choice. Isn't it? As is love."

Coming to terms with our true function as humans requires a dedication to fulfilling a dream. Inevitably, this takes us from ordinary comforts and private concerns and thrusts us down a wild existential highway few dare to travel willingly. Not only will the Dharma life — the way of freedom — break our contracts with conditionality, exposing how we grasp and brace and hold back, it will confront the entire apparatus of avoidance — every fear, every complicity, every nuance of self-deception. Breaking free from the gravitational force of a fear-driven presence, we re-inspire our courage again and again, until we truly understand that our dignity is our greatest worth and that our instinctual intelligence is the natural wisdom that will guide us in finding liberation through living.

What I'm talking about should not be confused with transcendence, or an attempt to escape one's self or the world. This way of being has nothing to do with life-denying attitudes. Nor am I proposing a return to

a “primordial beingness” as the only true means by which to overcome human suffering. This freedom is not fear-driven but life-giving — it includes the flesh, the ordinary self, the sacred and mundane as one. It’s about making life our art.

The Dharma life is born out of realizing our essential interrelatedness: we cannot live without each other. This means feeling more than just one’s own self-interest, or the interests of one’s family. Defining ourselves as tribes and nations is in large part why we are teetering on self-extinction. We must really understand our inherent inseparableness. The more we do, the more we’ll feel the joys and the sorrows of others as our own.

Seeking one’s own liberation alone is outdated thinking. In the opening scene of the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* the hero makes this point beautifully. He is asked by the woman who secretly loves him why he left the solitude of the monastery and reentered the world. In a slow, measured tone he says, “My enlightenment did not have any bliss associated with it. It felt something more like despair, but greater. It was such an immense sorrow that I could not take it. I could not go on. It was saying . . . return to reality.”

Embracing the Dharma life and responding to our instinct for freedom illuminates reality, not just our opinion of it. As falseness is revealed, we must continuously realign ourselves to the truth. Being guided by intuitive intelligence, which often defies adequate explanation, usually means entering the jaws of raw, tumultuous existence.

The Dharma life is a daily reawakening to explore and map the Mystery. Turning our lives into an epic adventure, we blaze our own trails, even if it means defying social mores or breaking taboos that attempt to suppress and control our impulses.

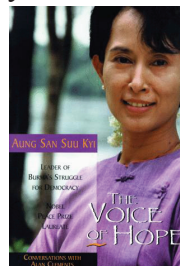
This revolution will not be won or lost in a meditation retreat, a city street, a living room, or a monastery alone. It will happen on the front lines of the human heart — that stormy region where good and evil, genius and madness, peace and war, battle for dominion over conscience, freedom, and love. When compromise, doubt, or hesitation no longer hold appeal, it is my belief that you will inevitably encounter a glimpse of the holy unexpected. You will begin listening to your instinct for freedom — what you really love — and leave the rest behind.

Here is how it happened for me.

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