

**Review: *The Voice of Hope: Aung San Suu Kyi Conversations with Alan Clements***

*The Voice of Hope: Aung San Suu Kyi Conversations with Alan Clements*, Seven Stories Press: New York, 2008 (New edition; first published 1997), 332 pages, ISBN 978-1-58322-845-6, UK £12.99, p/b.

**Reviewed by Dharmacharini Munisha**

This series of thirteen interviews with Burma's democratically elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK) was conducted in 1995, after the end of her first six years of house arrest at the hands of the country's military junta. It concludes with conversations with two men who, with her, are central in the National League for Democracy (NLD). First published in 1997, this new edition appeared following the anti-government protests in autumn 2007, when ASSK was in the fourth year of her third period of house arrest. As well as an updated chronology, the new edition features two additions: an interview with U Gambira of the All-Burma Monks' Alliance, organisers of the 2007 demonstrations, and a resource list for action in support of Burma. The author, Alan Clements, is an American Buddhist, formerly a monk in Burma in the 1970s and 80s.

Interview titles such as 'Working for democracy', 'Truth is a powerful weapon', 'The courage to face yourself', and 'I never learned to hate my captors' give a flavour of the book. ASSK answers questions on a great many topics including reconciliation, revolution, and forgiveness, and one gets a very strong sense of her personality and values. She was born in 1945, the daughter of Daw Khin Kyi, Burma's sole female ambassador (to India and Nepal), and General Aung San, negotiator of Burma's independence from British rule and founder of its army. Growing up in educated circles, she was encouraged in such values as duty to one's country, unselfishness, and truthfulness. Fear, such as a child's fear of the dark, was apparently frowned upon as 'namby-pamby' (p.214).

She brought up her two sons in Oxford, UK, with her late husband, the British academic Michael Aris. Returning to Burma in 1987 to care for her ailing mother, she

found herself drawn into politics and thus separated from her family. She combines a somewhat pre-war British-sounding, almost stiff-upper-lip, approach to life with values rooted not in Christianity and colonialism but the teachings of the Buddha.

The most interesting aspects of the book are her constant references to the Dharma, and her own practice as a Buddhist. One believes her insistence that she has never learned to hate her country's oppressors; she criticises their actions but never makes personal attacks. She talks constantly of *mettā* (loving-kindness) and right intention.

Relentlessly practical, ASSK cannot bear fuss and thinks that 'melodrama is very silly' (p.140). She makes things like hunger strike and departure for prison sound normal; she rejects the interviewer's psychological interpretations of her experience, and deflates his claim that she is a modern heroine. 'I suppose one seeks greatness through taming one's passions...And isn't there a saying that 'it is far more difficult to conquer yourself than to conquer the rest of the world'? (p.211) Asked what she has learned from her encounter with 'darkness' in her 'inner process of awakening', she denies having entered darkness. She says simply, 'You learn about the best and the worst in human nature' (p.213). Yes, house arrest has been a maturing experience but, she maintains, with age one matures anyway, with or without detention (p.148).

On her feelings on release from prison, she laughs: 'I felt nothing at all.' Is she out of touch with herself, or is this the face of profound equanimity? Most likely, she is a mixture: extraordinary and yet very human. She does not suffer fools gladly, and one of her colleagues describes her as a workaholic. Her sons (aged 12 and 16), visiting from Britain, were present on the day she was arrested and taken to jail. They were left with relatives to wait for their father to come from Britain to collect them. One longs to know from them whether they were 'not at all' shocked or panicked, as she claims (p.139).

ASSK laughs often, says there is a lot of fun in her everyday life (p.132), and insists she does not 'quite understand what cynicism means' (p.207). However, there is nothing starry-eyed about this woman. She believes that when democracy comes it will be very ordinary: people will use democratic freedoms to undermine democracy; and the new democracy may have to mobilise military force to defend its freedoms.

She speaks of the spiritual friendship among her closest colleagues in the NLD, and the interviews with two of these, U Tin U and U Kyi Maung, are also remarkable for the glimpse they give of two men advanced in years, highly educated, steeped in politics and Dharma, living with tremendous lightness. The first took monastic ordination at the age of 54, after 5 years in prison; the second, repeatedly imprisoned - and always expecting to be detained again - can still affirm, 'I consider myself a free man' (p.236).

If U Gambira's interview is more dramatic than the others, it is hardly surprising: he is a 29-year-old monk speaking from prison under a pseudonym and facing possible execution. As widely reported, the monks who demonstrated in 2007 carried their alms bowls upside down in refusal of alms from a regime seeking Buddhist credibility through making offerings to the monastic sangha. Through this symbolic gesture the monks deliberately broke an ancient social contract. However, U Gambira points out something else, which had not occurred to me: since most Burmese soldiers have been monks at one time or another, their taking up arms against the monks is as profoundly shocking to them as it is to the rest of Burmese society. Such an assault on the Triple Gem is evidence of the soldiers' own fear of death should they refuse. Still, he speaks always in Dharmic terms; for example, saying that the greatest good for his country lies in its leaders coming to an awareness of '*hiri* (moral shame) and *otappa* (moral remorse)' (p. 227).

There is so much in this book that is thought-provoking, but one topic stands out: what is it in Buddhism that may hinder activism? ASSK is vehement about the pitfalls of misunderstanding *karma*. She argues that the belief that all experience results from one's previous actions and must be suffered patiently means too many Burmese do nothing about their plight except make offerings at temples in hope of a better rebirth. The author invites comparison of the struggles in Vietnam, Tibet, and Burma with those led by Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Ghandi; those 'who see *anatta* as their abiding truth' have been so much less successful than those 'who have "God in their souls"' (p.152). Ever practical, ASSK denies this has anything to do with belief in God. Quite simply, Christians meet regularly in places of worship, whereas Buddhists do not (or at least, apparently, not Burmese laypeople). Thus, churches

quickly become centres of political organisation and solidarity for Christian communities, but a gathering of Burmese Buddhists is an abnormality immediately obvious to the authorities. Here we have yet another reason to heed the Buddha's advice to his followers to gather regularly in large numbers.

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How to cite this article: Munisha, Dharmacharini. 2008. 'Review: *The Voice of Hope: Aung San Suu Kyi Conversations with Alan Clements*', *Western Buddhist Review* [online], Vol. 5. Available from: [www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol5/](http://www.westernbuddhistreview.com/vol5/)