

A close-up portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi, a Burmese politician and leader of the pro-democracy movement. She is smiling slightly, looking towards the camera. She has dark hair and is wearing a purple traditional Burmese garment with decorative buttons. A white flower is visible near her ear. The background is blurred, showing vertical lines.

AUNG SAN SUU KYI

LEADER OF  
BURMA'S STRUGGLE  
FOR DEMOCRACY

NOBEL  
PEACE PRIZE  
LAUREATE

THE  
VOICE  
OF HOPE

CONVERSATIONS WITH  
ALAN CLEMENTS

the  
voice of hope





the  
voice of hope



Aung San Suu Kyi

conversations with

Alan Clements

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## CONTENTS

About the Authors	6
Introduction	9
Chapter 1: <i>"We are still prisoners in our own country"</i>	19
Chapter 2: <i>"Running away is not going to solve any problems"</i>	37
Chapter 3: <i>"Truth is a powerful weapon"</i>	51
Chapter 4: <i>"Working for democracy"</i>	67
Chapter 5: <i>"It still surprises me that people think of me as an important person"</i>	83
Chapter 6: <i>"Each country is linked to the others through the bonds of humanity"</i>	95
Chapter 7: <i>"Saints are sinners who go on trying"</i>	113
Chapter 8: <i>"I never learned to hate my captors"</i>	127
Chapter 9: <i>"Violence is not the right way"</i>	149
Chapter 10: <i>"Nobody can humiliate me but myself"</i>	163
Chapter 11: <i>"We have only ourselves to rely on"</i>	177
Chapter 12: <i>"The courage to face yourself"</i>	193
Chapter 13: <i>"To learn the power of the powerless"</i>	207
Appendix A: A Conversation with U Kyi Maung	229
Appendix B: A Conversation with U Tin U	265
Chronology	302

AUNG SAN SUU KYI is the leader of the struggle for human rights and democracy in Burma. Born in 1945 as the daughter of Burma's national hero Aung San, she was two years old when he was assassinated, just before Burma gained the independence to which he had dedicated his life. After receiving her education in Rangoon, Delhi, and at Oxford University, Aung San Suu Kyi then worked for the United Nations in New York and Bhutan. For most of the following twenty years she was occupied raising a family in England (her husband is British), before returning to Burma in 1988 to care for her dying mother. Her return coincided with the outbreak of a spontaneous revolt against twenty-six years of political repression and economic decline. Aung San Suu Kyi ("Suu" to her friends and family) quickly emerged as the most effective and articulate leader of the movement, and the party she founded went on to win a colossal electoral victory in May 1990. In July 1989 she was put under house arrest and the military junta that now rules Burma refused for six years either to free her or to transfer power to a civilian government as it had promised. Upon her release in July 1995 she immediately resumed the struggle for political freedom in her country.

Aung San Suu Kyi is an honorary fellow of St. Hugh's College, Oxford. In 1990 she was awarded the Thorolf Rafto Prize for Human Rights in Norway and the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament. In 1991 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In its citation, the Norwegian Nobel Committee stated that in awarding the Prize to Aung San Suu Kyi, it wished to "honour this woman for her unflagging efforts and to show its support for the many people throughout the world who are striving to attain democracy, human rights and ethnic conciliation by peaceful means."

Aung San Suu Kyi is the author of several books, including *Freedom from Fear*, which was edited by her husband, Dr. Michael Aris; *Letters from Burma*; and *The Voice of Hope*.

ALAN CLEMENTS is a journalist, a writer and a worldwide lecturer on Buddhist psychology, human rights and spiritual-social activism. He is the founder and co-director of the Burma Project USA, a human rights organization based in Mill Valley, California. He is the author of *Burma: The Next Killing Fields?* (1991) and co-author of the photographic book, *Burma's Struggle for Democratic Freedom and Dignity* (1994). He lived in Burma for nearly eight years, five of which were spent living as a Buddhist monk in Rangoon. He has returned numerous times to witness and document human rights abuses in that country. In addition, he was an advisor and script revisionist for *Beyond Rangoon* (1995), a feature film depicting Burma's struggle for democracy. Clements has been interviewed for ABC (*Nightline*), CBS (*Evening News*), *Newsweek*, *Time* and scores of other media throughout the world.





## INTRODUCTION

This book claims nothing more than its basic intention: to set down an exceptional series of conversations with a unique woman, currently, the world's most famous political dissident, Aung San Suu Kyi—recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize and numerous other prestigious international awards for her courageous leadership in a non-violent struggle to bring justice, freedom and democracy to the people of Burma. Aung San Suu Kyi is, in the words of Václav Havel, one of the most outstanding examples of the power of the powerless.

Aung San Suu Kyi tells her own story in conversations compiled over the course of nine months—from October 1995 to June 1996—at her home in Rangoon. A rare glimpse into this extraordinary woman's values and philosophy is thus provided through her own words. She explains why she has chosen to risk everything in order to join, and ultimately lead, the struggle waged by the Burmese people, "large numbers of men and women who daily risk their lives for the sake of principles and rights that will guarantee...a...dignified existence." This book is a journey into the soul of that struggle set in the volatile context of present-day Burma, a South-East Asian nation of 45 million people, many of whom, at this very moment, may be risking their lives to win the right to choose their destiny.

I should like to mention why the book is arranged as it is—a series of conversations transcribed in their integrity just as they actually took place. Originally my plan was to conduct them following a strict chronological and thematic order. However, once in Burma, I had to abandon this outline. I had no idea how uncertain the situation was to become, despite Aung San Suu Kyi's release. It should be understood that she faced and continues to face the possibility of rearrest at any moment. In addition, I risked being deported from the country at any time. (Actually I have now been blacklisted from Burma permanently, as I was informed when I

recently applied for a visa at the Paris embassy.) Each of our conversations took place with the full knowledge that it might be the last. With that in mind I chose to cover a range of topics in each session rather than concentrate on any single topic. So what you read is what occurred. Only slight editorial modifications, approved by Aung San Suu Kyi herself, have been made to the transcript of our interviews.

The story of how this book came into being is complex and warrants some explanation, which may also help towards an understanding of how the crisis in Burma has developed.

My involvement with Burma goes back to 1977 when I first arrived on a visa which allowed me a maximum stay of just seven days to explore the possibility of receiving ordination as a Buddhist monk and residing in a monastery to practice the dhamma—the teachings of the Buddha. All that I knew of Burma was that it preserved an ancient Buddhist culture, with approximately 1,000,000 monks and nuns living within the 5,000 or so monasteries scattered throughout the country. I was surprised to discover that the country was also a totalitarian “terror state” ruled by General Ne Win—a xenophobic, eccentric and ruthless dictator.

In March 1962, after seizing power in a military coup, General Ne Win's new Revolutionary Council had suspended the constitution and immediately sealed off the country from all outside scrutiny. Promoting an isolationist policy which he called the Burmese Way to Socialism, he expelled foreign journalists, nationalized most industrial and economic institutions, throttled the press, and established a police state based on fear, repression and torture.

At the expiration of my visa I left Burma determined to return to fulfill my wish of practicing Buddhism under the guidance of monks in this 2,500-year-old tradition. In 1979 I was granted a long-term “monastic” visa and so was allowed to become a monk. I resided in a monastery in Rangoon for the best part of the next eight years. Over these years I could feel the national tension mounting. Individuals who came to the monastery frequently spoke of their hopelessness and desperation, the corruption and deprivations they were suffering. Twice during this period certain

bank notes were withdrawn, rendering worthless nearly 70 percent of the currency. With the monasteries dependent on the people's support, we felt the impact of these devaluations directly—our food supplies were drastically reduced. Shortly afterwards I was refused an extension of my visa, so I left the monastery and returned to the United States.

In March 1988, small groups of Burmese students took to the streets of Rangoon demanding radical political change. To defy Ne Win's dictatorship was unprecedented, and the results of this courageous confrontation were predictable. In one incident alone forty-one wounded students suffocated to death in a police van. These cruelties served only to invigorate the determination and commitment of the students' movement, which progressively gained momentum.

At the end of March, Aung San Suu Kyi, who was residing in Oxford with her husband Dr. Michael Aris, a British scholar, and their sons Alexander and Kim, received a fateful telephone call telling her that her mother had suffered a severe stroke. Within days Aung San Suu Kyi, who had made regular visits home to Burma during her twenty-three-year residence abroad, was back again in Rangoon at the bedside of her dying mother. Aung San Suu Kyi was the daughter of Burma's most famous and revered leader, Aung San, who had led his country to national independence in 1947 after nearly 150 years of colonial domination.

On 23 July 1988, to the astonishment and jubilation of the entire nation, Ne Win, in a televised address, announced his resignation from his party, the BSPP (Burma Socialist Program Party) and called for a referendum on Burma's political future. After almost three decades of his iron-fisted rule the people were electrified by his unimaginable decision. But hopes of a quick transfer of power from a dictatorship to an authentic democracy were thwarted, as Ne Win's party members immediately opposed his request. Outraged, and in a magnificent display of defiance, millions of citizens marched peacefully in every city and town throughout the country, calling for an interim civilian government, a democratic multi-party system with free and fair elections and a restoration of basic civil liberties. As these demonstrations gathered momentum, military

commanders loyal to Ne Win responded by sending out thousands of crack infantry troops with orders to kill.

"Many thousands of us knelt down in front of the soldiers," a female student demonstrator later reported. "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.'" The results of what became known as "The Massacre of 8-8-88" were tragic, surpassing even the carnage a year later in China's Tienanmen Square. During the bloodbath, several thousand unarmed demonstrators were killed and hundreds more injured. In the aftermath thousands more were imprisoned.

But from this suffocating darkness came a glimmer of hope, as a new leader emerged. On 26 August 1988 Aung San Suu Kyi announced her decision to enter the struggle for democracy at a rally attended by an estimated 500,000 people, who had gathered on the grounds near the Shwedagon Pagoda in Rangoon. "This great struggle has arisen from the intense and deep desire of the people for a fully democratic parliamentary system," she explained. "I could not, as my father's daughter, remain indifferent to all that was going on."

The movement began to gather enormous support. In her inspired campaign, Aung San Suu Kyi advanced in the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, employing tactics of non-violence and civil disobedience in pursuit of democracy. Her essential message of self-responsibility, rooted in Buddhism, developed into a high-minded political ideology that she calls Burma's "revolution of the spirit."

On 18 September 1988, as democratic changes seemed imminent, the "retired" dictator Ne Win manipulated the army from behind the scenes to take over the country in a staged coup. He turned over the rule of Burma to a twenty-one-member group of military commanders known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). SLORC reinstated martial law: gatherings of more than four people were punishable by imprisonment; a night curfew was imposed and military tribunals replaced the civil courts. Fanning the flames of dissent in a nation already embittered by the August massacres, many thousands were arrested by the SLORC.

The SLORC held out a hope to appease the outrage by announcing "free and fair multi-party elections" in the spring of 1990. Within three months, over 200 parties had registered with the SLORC election committee. By far the strongest and most popular of these was the National League for Democracy (NLD), co-founded by Aung San Suu Kyi and several of her closest colleagues.

Observers and democratic leaders soon realized that the SLORC olive branch was simply a feint, as the military viciously harassed supporters of democratic parties. In 1989 and 1990 the *New York Times* reported that over 500,000 Burmese citizens were being forcibly herded from major urban centers into disease-ridden "satellite towns." The areas evacuated by the SLORC were known to be strongholds of the democracy movement and home to supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Meanwhile on 20 July 1989 Aung San Suu Kyi was put under house arrest and other party leaders were incarcerated.

On 27 May 1990 elections were held and Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party won a landslide victory, taking 392 of the 485 seats contested—more than 80 percent of the constituencies. Instead of transferring power to the elected representatives as promised, SLORC instigated a nationwide crackdown, imprisoning many elected MPs. Some fled the country into exile, others were silenced in different ways.

From those turbulent days onward many events have taken place within Burma, far too many to recount here. One fact stands out. Despite her release on 11 July 1995, following six years under arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi told me quite frankly in our first conversation four months after her release: "Nothing has changed since my release.... Let the world know that we are still prisoners within our own country."

This is the setting of our story, within the oppressive and maniacal atmosphere of the SLORC's Burma, a totalitarian prison, a nation held hostage; and from within that prison comes the voice of defiance and hope, waiting to be heard.

I entered Burma in October 1995 never having met or spoken to Aung San Suu Kyi. Yet she was not unknown to me. During the preceding seven years I had written a book about the crisis in her

country, entitled *Burma: The Next Killing Fields?*<sup>\*</sup>; and I had compiled and co-authored a second one, a photographic documentation titled *Burma's Revolution of the Spirit*.<sup>\*\*</sup> I had also served as an advisor and script re-writer for *Beyond Rangoon*, a feature film directed by John Boorman that depicts Burma's struggle. Furthermore, I had watched many hours of videotapes smuggled out of Burma. I read many of Aung San Suu Kyi's speeches and asked questions about her of anyone I could meet who either knew her or had met her. I lectured extensively on Burma's democracy movement, especially on how it interrelates with Buddhism. And from everything I had learned, I was fascinated by Aung San Suu Kyi, as were so many others. She offered me, as she does to all, a great vision that places self-respect, human dignity, compassion and love above material and economic considerations.

I knew nothing about her of a personal nature, and apart from some brief, basic historical facts pertaining to her past which are recorded in this book, both in her words and mine, Aung San Suu Kyi's private life remains locked away from the glare of public scrutiny. Placed under house arrest, separated from her family for years at a time, she kept silent, and so grew into a living legend. Finally released and, once again, speaking defiantly and acting boldly to unlock the prison doors of SLORC's totalitarianism, she will not be stopped.

This is the Aung San Suu Kyi that I came to know—a dynamic woman with an unshakable conviction, inseparable from her principles and sustained by a sense of justice and duty. She abhors hypocrisy, while admitting to her own shortcomings. Her compassion is tangible. The one quality that I feel best defines her is sincerity. At the core of that quality lies the conviction in self-improvement. Aung San Suu Kyi is a seeker—a soul pilgrim—one who makes her life a vehicle for an awakening to deeper and greater truths. She wears her spirituality quietly, unpretentiously, and with subtlety. But this casualness makes it all the more delightful. She laughs easily and freely.

Aung San Suu Kyi is like fine porcelain, a beauty whose features are as classical as a Japanese haiku; nothing is out of place, neither the flowers in her hair, nor the perfectly pressed traditional

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<sup>\*</sup> *Burma: The Next Killing Fields?* by Alan Clements, Foreword by the Dalai Lama. Odonian Press: Tucson, Arizona, 1992.

<sup>\*\*</sup> *Burma's Revolution of the Spirit* by Alan Clements and Leslie Kean. Aperture: New York, 1994.

Burmese dress she wears with such elegance. Her voice is harmonious and sweet, tonally punctuated with the skill of a musician. Her words are simple, so simple at times as to take you by surprise, yet spoken without equivocation. She is straight and direct.

Does she have faults? She would be the first to admit to having some. Was I satisfied with my conversations with her? Ultimately, I wanted more than she was willing to give. Aung San Suu Kyi is a fiercely private woman, secret about her personal life and any aspect of her inner world that she deems private. I found her to be like a sealed vault in some areas and an open universe in others. Slowly, I came to realize that my desire for more was of my making, not hers. As she stated in our first conversation, "Please ask what you want to, but I hope that you'll expect me to answer in the way I would like to answer." Aung San Suu Kyi is her own person in every sense and it was this aspect of our time together that I most appreciated: a woman enjoying her sovereignty and happiness while fighting for the independence of others.

This book concludes with two conversations with Aung San Suu Kyi's main colleagues, U Tin U and U Kyi Maung. Both share a commanding role in the National League for Democracy (NLD), the party that Aung San Suu Kyi co-founded with them in September 1988. Their inclusion in the book was the sole condition placed upon me by Aung San Suu Kyi.

Indeed, their contributions help to define Aung San Suu Kyi herself more clearly, as well as providing a dynamic dimension to their shared involvement in the struggle for democracy.

So, how did we begin?

It was early December 1995 and for six weeks I had been holed up in a hotel room in Rangoon waiting for a telephone call from Aung San Suu Kyi's office to give me an appointment to proceed with our first taped conversation. Back in early October, when we initially discussed the project, she explained: "Our situation is unpredictable under the SLORC, so please be patient. And of course there are no guarantees about how far we'll get, but let's try." As she walked me to the door she stopped and said: "My father used to



say, 'Hope for the best and prepare for the worst.' I think this is always the best approach."

Day by day, the political crisis was intensifying. By late November, after the NLD party delegates had withdrawn from the SLORC's internationally condemned National Convention, Aung San Suu Kyi and her two main colleagues, U Tin U and U Kyi Maung, came under increasing attack in Burma's only English-language newspaper, the SLORC's *New Light of Myanmar*. Twelve pages of military slogans, racist and xenophobic propaganda and almost daily half-page editorials denounced Aung San Suu Kyi and her colleagues in violent terms. The military promised to "annihilate" those "destructionists" who disrupted the "tranquillity of the nation."

On Thursday 30 November, I was walking along dark lanes for my appointment with the NLD Deputy Chairman, U Tin U, a dear old friend. We had been Buddhist monks together after his release from prison in 1980. From a nearby monastery the sound of monks chanting reverberated through the stillness: "*Annica vatta sankara upadavio dhammino*"—"All things are impermanent in this world." I slowed my pace and as the chanting faded, I abruptly stopped in front of U Tin U's home. Eight armed military police looked me coldly in the eyes.

I walked past the police, opened the large gate and hurried up to the front door. U Tin U's wife greeted me with a determined stare and said, "He's upstairs gathering his medicines and a few belongings. I'll get him for you."

Minutes later U Tin U came down. "Don't worry," he said smiling. He took me gently by the hand and escorted me back to the door. "You shouldn't be here. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is preparing to be re-arrested too. She's preparing papers for the transfer of party leadership and directions on what to do. Go on, you shouldn't get yourself in trouble too."

Once back at my hotel, I fired off a short fax to my publisher stating that "the book is very likely off," packed my bags and went to sleep planning to leave Burma the next afternoon.

But, the following day, the telephone rang early in the morning, and the voice of Aung San Suu Kyi's foreign media coordinator, U Aye Win (arrested by SLORC on 21 May 1996 and still in prison),