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By Judith Shapiro

The Voice of Hope

Alan Clements in Conversation with Aung San Suu Kyi

In 1988, the daughter of a martyred Burmese military hero returned from England to Rangoon to care for her ailing mother. Aung San Suu Kyi had lived most of her life abroad as part of a diplomatic family, absorbing democratic traditions and becoming educated in the ways of the world. She had married an Oxford classmate, Michael Aris, a Tibet specialist, and was raising their two sons. Her father, General Aung San, had been assassinated in 1947, yet his legacy as father of his country and founder of the Burmese Army was very much alive.

Today, this legacy infuses an extraordinary political and moral confrontation. Aung San Suu Kyi, the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize laureate, faces off against the ruling military junta, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

Aung San's memory has shaped his daughter's dedication to Burma, renamed Myanmar by the military regime. It also shapes the dictatorship's inability to counteract its greatest threat since 1962, the year it first came to power in a coup. The generals cannot simply eradicate this delicate-looking child of the army, as they have so many of their enemies. So Aung San Suu Kyi stays on in Burma, a beacon of hope, publicizing Government abuses and deflecting much of the foreign investment and tourism the regime so desperately seeks.

Aung San Suu Kyi's return in 1988 may have been karma, to use a concept from the Buddhist philosophy so central to "The Voice of Hope," a collection of transcribed conversations with Alan Clements. When the Burmese took to the streets that year to protest authoritarian rule, the army massacred demonstrators and imposed martial law. This dire situation propelled Aung San Suu Kyi into political life. She founded the National League for Democracy (NLD), spoke eloquently at pagodas and defied armed soldiers. In

July 1989, the junta placed her under house arrest. Nonetheless, her party overwhelmingly won elections held in May 1990. The regime rescinded the elections and arrested, tortured and killed victorious members of her party.

Aung San Suu Kyi spent six years under house arrest, practicing Buddhist meditation and listening to news broadcasts. On release, she gave weekly talks at her gate to gathered crowds, captivating the people who heard her and enraging the junta.

The conversations in “The Voice of Hope” took place in Aung San Suu Kyi’s home over seven months beginning in October 1995, under Government surveillance and with the awareness that each meeting could be the last. The dialogues express Aung San Suu Kyi’s humor, erudition, wisdom and accessibility, and demonstrate why she has become a world spiritual leader.

Appended interviews with two colleagues, U Kyi Maung and U Tin U, give details of prison treatment and confirm Aung San Suu Kyi’s emphasis on the collective nature of her party’s effort.

The guiding theme of “The Voice of Hope” is politically engaged Buddhism. Clements, an American citizen who lived for nearly five years in Burma as a Buddhist monk, is the ideal interlocutor. He invites Aung San Suu Kyi to discuss mindfulness, truth, hope, sincerity, love, friendship, power, self-deception, fear, hate.

Turning to policy, she advocates a confederation for lasting peace with the ethnic minorities who have been fighting for decades for independence. She would end the drug trade by working with the poor to find substitute crops for poppies. She speaks also of her regret at missing years in the lives of her sons and of the familial closeness she feels toward her colleagues.

Buddhism is seen as an impetus for political action. “Engaged Buddhism is active compassion,” Aung San Suu Kyi says. Her compassion extends not only to the common people but also to the junta, which she sees as more stupid and insecure than evil.

Freedom from fear, one of Aung San Suu Kyi’s famous themes, lies in developing the habit of acting despite fear. Thereby is cultivated “the power of the powerless.” She and her colleagues live

this freedom. U Kyi Maung describes constant laughter in Aung San Suu Kyi's house, even when soldiers arrived to arrest them. "You have to realize," he explains, "Suu is really funny."

Aung San Suu Kyi speaks eloquently of the power of meditation, which she believes turned her incarceration into a spiritual opportunity. Meditation, she says, develops awareness of the present moment and of the impermanence of everything else. This awareness is the inner strength of the democratic movement. "I think a lot of us within the organization have been given the opportunity to develop spiritual strength because we have been forced to spend long years by ourselves under detention and in prison," she declares.

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