



Aung San Sū Kyi with Alan Clements. *The Voice of Hope*. New York: Seven Stories Press, 1997, 304 pages, ISBN 1–888363–83–5 (paperback), US \$14.95, ISBN 1–888363–50–9 (hardcover), US \$24.95.

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The interviews published in *The Voice of Hope* offer readers a new glimpse into the working of engaged Buddhism in the Burmese struggle for human rights and democracy. The work consists of interviews between Alan Clements, a British writer who spent five years as monk in Rangoon, and three leaders of the Burmese National League for Democracy: Aung San Sū Kyi, U Kyi Maung, and U Tin U. Although Aung San Sū Kyi is on the book's cover and is the focus of most of the book, it is the seventy-two pages of interviews with her political allies U Kyi Maung and U Tin U that provide a new and more complicated view of engaged Buddhism in Burma. The published interviews with Sū Kyi are from conversations that took place between October 1995 and June 1996 at her home a few months after her release from house arrest by the Myanmar military government. The interviews with her political allies are presented by Alan Clements as the "sole condition" placed upon him by Sū Kyi prior to agreeing to the interview. Although Clements sees the interviews with U Tin U and U Kyi Maung primarily as a courtesy to the humble Sū Kyi and as a way to see her more clearly, readers with an interest in engaged Buddhism will value the articulate responses from these former military men.

Alan Clements seeks to find a greater understanding of Sū Kyi's personality and interpretation of Buddhism. Unlike some published interviews with Buddhist leaders, the interviewer here is not too reverential to ask

the questions we would all like to ask. Clements has his own understanding of Buddhism and often pushes Sū Kyi to explain her views further. At times he even challenges her answers, but always respectfully. Sū Kyi at times pushes back in her efforts to maintain her views and to protect her privacy. Clements admits in his introduction that “ultimately I wanted more than she was willing to give” (p. 15). She refuses to accept the term *bodhisattva* he seeks to apply to her (p. 28). And she refuses the label “feminist” (p. 160). She challenges Clements when he assumes that Buddhists see *ahiṃsā* (noninjury) as the basis of the Five Precepts of Buddhism (pp. 58–59). Moreover, she repeatedly refuses to admit to any hatred or anger toward the military leaders who have caused her and her associates so much suffering. In one exchange, Clements compares the military government to Buddha’s “arch-nemesis” Devadatta. However, Sū Kyi responds by saying that “in worldly terms the opposition in a democracy plays the role of Devadatta for any legal government. It stops the ruling party from going astray by constantly pointing out its every mistake” (p. 83).

Clements’s interviews reveal the role of Buddhist practice among the democratic movement’s leadership. As someone who has studied Buddhism as a monk, he is able to ask intelligent questions about their practices. Sū Kyi says that her serious meditation practice began while under house arrest, guided by Sayadaw U Pandita’s *This Very Life* (p. 92). In his conversations with U Tin U and U Kyi Maung, we learn about the Buddhist practices that sustain these complicated former military men while under government surveillance or in prison.

U Tin U, the Deputy Chairman of National League for Democracy, joined the army in 1943, was dismissed in 1976 for ties to popular demonstrations, and spent seven years in prison and then two years as a monk. After joining the democracy movement in 1988, he was sentenced again to prison until 1995. In solitary confinement for nine years, he practiced Buddhism primarily by practicing *sati* (mindfulness) and reciting *sūtras* in Pāli. However, U Tin U also explained the value of reading quotations from Jesus, keeping the Eight Precepts, and reflecting on the preciousness of friends. He was able to consistently practice *dāna* (making offerings) by saving a small amount of the food brought by his wife to give to his jailers and even to the military intelligence personnel (pp. 277–278). He suggested that the SLORC (State Law and Order Restoration Council) generals “should lay down all their weapons just for ten days and undertake a period of *vipassanā* meditation practice under a competent Sayadaw [senior monk]” (p. 284).

Clements’s interview with U Kyi Maung, the man most responsible for leading the National League for Democracy to victory in 1990 while Aung San Sū Kyi and U Tin U were under arrest, explored in honest terms the

issue of military force in a Buddhist political movement. Like U Tin U, U Kyi Maung joined the Burmese military as a young man, but he was forced out in 1962 for opposing the military takeover. He was especially articulate in relating his Buddhist training to his ability to deal with threats and oppression. When asked about violence and military service, U Kyi Maung told Alan Clements that he did not believe in violence to achieve political change, but that he would defend others with violence if there was no other means (p. 248). In response to Clements's skepticism at the NLD's complete lack of fear and even sense of humor when faced with arrest and imprisonment, U Kyi Maung responded,

It can be explained by the fact that the narrator had no regrets at all for what had happened in the past. The "I" and the "me" of the past are dead and gone. By the same token, the narrator of the present is not worried about what might happen to "him" of the future. In fact, "he" is not status-conscious at all. What I strive for is to live a life of complete awareness from moment to moment and to provide the best service I possibly can to all living beings without discrimination and with a detached mind. Does religion serve politics? I do not speculate. I just try to do my best. (pp. 246–247)

Readers looking for an analysis of engaged Buddhism in the Burmese democracy movement will not find it in this book. For sustained analysis of the role of Buddhist practice in Burmese politics, one should look at Gustaaf Houtman's *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics* (Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, 1999). *The Voice of Hope* is a collection of lightly edited transcripts of interviews, not scholarly analyses. As Clements admits in his introduction, he was unable to even provide a thematic structure to the interviews because he was unsure when he might be forced to end them. This means that there is no real organization to the book. However, Clements's interviews provide new insights into the practices and views of three important figures of engaged Buddhism in Burma.