

**Part IV**  
**Aung San Suu Kyi and Buddhism**



## Chapter 14

# Sources on Aung San Suu Kyi

I will deal with Aung San Suu Kyi's own writings later, but here I wish to briefly draw attention to the source material available in book form, which has so far all been of journalistic provenance. An overall comment on her profile presented in these works is necessary here.

It is difficult to collect in-depth information about her as she has been isolated from the outside world except for the occasional interview with a journalist or politician. Her telephone has been cut off and visitors fear the unwelcome attention of military intelligence. More than that, however, it is difficult to come to terms objectively with personalities such as Aung San Suu Kyi because those who have written about her have also invested emotionally in her. It is difficult to be neutral.

This makes any attempt to write an objective account of her life very difficult. And yet it is important that an attempt is made to highlight her life in different ways, for there is no doubt that Aung San Suu Kyi plays a role internationally, as she has captured the imagination of people all over the world. Not only does she represent the hope for the future on the part of the majority of the Burmese people, but also most free-thinking persons in the international environment. Indeed, she is being held up as an icon of humanitarian and democratic values under threat.

It is uncommon for a political leader to have the first biography intended to inform children, but this is the case with Aung San Suu Kyi. The pedagogical value of her life seems inexhaustible in democratic countries. She has become an icon in particular for the women's movement. Her role as a mother deprived of access to her children has resulted in the earliest English-language biographies of Aung San Suu Kyi interestingly targeted as children's books. It is the women authors, namely Whitney and Victor who sketch these dimensions most effectively, thus exposing the threat that these military regimes pose to Burmese family life. In Japan, though her speeches and writings have been translated,<sup>1</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi was the focus of *manga* comic book-style young literature, before any other account of her life appeared.<sup>2</sup>

It is not surprising that this should be the case, for Aung San Suu Kyi's internationalist and humanitarian approach to democracy, transcends boundaries and appeals to internationalist sentiment, and it represents the major challenge to authoritarian governments particularly in Asia. Certainly, from the point of view of the Burmese regime she represents a serious threat. Its imagery, as represented by Hpe Kan Kaung, is that of a woman of loose morals who prefers foreigners to Burmese and is about to set fire to the nation. However, this literature came into existence, it should be noted, under severe conditions. The regime censored positive, and sponsored negative and destructive stories about her. For example, in October 1998 officials summoned local reporters, writers and publishers from state-owned and joint venture publications to print articles attacking her. Burmese newspapers and magazines typically receive articles written by regime officials that must be published on a daily or weekly basis.<sup>3</sup>

The resulting imagery of her is therefore polarised between these two, neither of which is without major flaws. The positive ideal of Aung San Suu Kyi is invariably the outcome of what brutal actions the regime perpetrates on the Burmese family, and the fact that Aung San Suu Kyi stands up to it by advocating a non-violent struggle while continually placed under house arrest and restrictions by the regime. Nevertheless, as Parenteau points out, 'biographers searching for facts on her early life have a difficult job', as she was not an activist, controversial ambitious, and 'even when she began appearing in public, she played down her own personality while emphasizing her ideas' (p 130). The lack of knowledge about her early life permits a selective view that is highly spiritual and spiritualised only more by the virulent attacks on her character by the regime's version of her life. Also, as I have pointed out in relation to Taylor's work, the NLD has often been academically side-lined, since it is still the military which retains control over government institutions. This has prevented an analysis of the cultural and Buddhist elements underlying its politics.

---

<sup>1</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi. *Jiyuu* [Freedom]. Translated by Yumiko Jansson. Tokyo: Shueisha, 1991; *Enzetsu huu* [Collected Speeches]. Translated by Ino Kenji. Tokyo: Misuzu Shobo, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> Akazu Mizuha. *Aung San Suu Kyi: Tatatkau Kujaku* [Aung San Suu Kyi: the fighting peacock]. 'Super Nobel Peace Prize Story.' No. 2. Tokyo: Ootoo Shobo, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Aung Zaw. 'Suppression of press freedom in Burma gets worse.' *The Nation*, 08.11.1998.

My aim, however, is to go beyond this polarisation. My aim is to elicit from among these conflicting views of her role and character some underlying continuities of her politics with that of her father, and with Burmese political values in general. My interest was to identify the cultural institutions and vernacular concepts that might just play a role in the conciliation process which I hope will eventually take place.

### John Parenteau

The biography *Prisoner for peace: Aung San Suu Kyi and Burma's struggle for democracy* (Greensboro: Morgan Reynolds, 1994) by John Parenteau was written for 'the young adult reader'. It uses no original interviews and is entirely based on previously published sources. It deals with her life until early 1994, while she was still under house arrest. In that sense it is out of date and, from our point of view, contributes relatively little.

Nevertheless, it is interesting that Parenteau, as part of his overall view of Aung San Suu Kyi as imprisoned, sketches Ne Win, whose house is in direct line of vision from Aung San Suu Kyi's house, as 'also imprisoned in his own home' (p 130). A reflection on this suggests that the idea of imprisonment works both ways, namely to punish and isolate, but also to protect from danger. This adds to the irony when in September 1998 the regime confined to guest houses NLD activists as 'guests' rather than prisoners on a large scale. The book also seeks to instil in the youth this value of the purity of Aung San Suu Kyi's resolution, for it concludes: 'regardless of what is to come, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has instilled that courage in her own sons, and in the sons and daughter of Burma, Aung San Suu Kyi has indeed lived the full life' (p 132).

Parenteau identifies Buddhism as a religion 'which overcomes worldly problems not by conquering them, but by understanding them and learning to make the best of them'. He also sees Buddhists as 'tending to be contemplative' and withdrawn from worldly problems (p 20). He does not, however, deal with either Aung San Suu Kyi's views on Buddhism, or with the role of Buddhism in her politics as a continuum with of past Burmese political values.

### Whitney Stewart

*Aung San Suu Kyi: fearless voice of Burma* (Minneapolis: Lerner Publications, 1997) by Whitney Stewart includes some fresh information gathered during a visit to Burma in 1995 and is presented in the form of interviews conducted with Aung San Suu Kyi and those surrounding her. Though aimed mainly at a young readership, it contains some useful information that I have not encountered elsewhere, including several photographs. As author of the previously published biography of the 14th Dalai Lama there is a little more detail in her treatment of Aung San Suu Kyi's relationship to Buddhism.

Like Parenteau, Stewart also begins with the threat posed by the regime to the family, in particular dealing with the mother-son and husband-wife relationships. Stewart's sketch is all the more commanding as the book begins with Aung San Suu Kyi's dilemma of impending arrest by the authorities while the children were with her and at risk. Also, she draws attention to the manipulation of Aung San Suu Kyi's husband by the SLORC for its own ends, which was to make him come and take his wife back to England, thus solving the problem of what to do with her.

She interprets Aung San Suu Kyi's mother as having taught her children that they should not demand revenge for their father's assassins, for the law of *karma* means that 'each person must control his or her own ignorance, hatred, and desire, or suffer the consequences in this life for the next' (p 25). Of particular interest is the reminiscence of a British journalist, namely that Aung San Suu Kyi was already deeply interested in conversing about politics when she was still living with her mother in India (p 40). She also drew attention to Aung San Suu Kyi spending two years University after high school studying political science at Delhi, which would have been between 1962–64, and that while Ne Win was taking over the country she 'kept an eye on Burma's problems'. And 'although some people believed that Suu Kyi had forgotten her country while she lived abroad, those who knew her well understood the depth of Suu Kyi's continued devotion to Burma' (p 43). Furthermore, she gives examples of Aung San Suu Kyi's maturity for a political role, such as her debate on the issue of her passport with the Burmese officials, and her response to the accusation that she was a spy while in India (p 64).

Interestingly, she sketches the Ne Win regime attempting to intimidate Aung San Suu Kyi as early as the early 1970s while she was on friendly terms with UN Secretary General, who was hated by Ne Win. Furthermore, at that time U Chit Myaing, Burma's former Ambassador to London, claimed that if he had attended her wedding to Michael Aris, a foreigner, 'I knew that ... I would be fired that day' (p 53).

She makes one error, in calling Aung San Suu Kyi's wedding a 'Buddhist ceremony' (p 55). In Burma, people are circumspect about bringing Buddhism into the wedding ceremony, which involves instead a *beik-theik saya*, an honourable Brahmin. Buddhism is involved only at the level of making a joint offering on a separate occasion to cement one's family relationship through joint merit, thus also securing the conjugal relationship for future lives.

### Mikio Oishii

*Aung San Suu Kyi's struggle: it's principles and strategy* (Penang: Just World Trust) was published in 1997. The author, Mikio Oishii, studied at Bradford School of Peace Studies where he developed the interest 'in developing a spiritual and moral approach to conflict resolution' and where he completed a PhD on 'Conflict resolution and development: a case study of domestic development-related conflicts in Malaysia' in 1995. The book, the result of a Fellowship from the Just Trust, primarily attempts to advocate reconciliation within Burma within the ASEAN perspective.

It is divided into four chapters: Aung San Suu Kyi's struggle, the essence and principles underlying this struggle, the strategy to bring about democracy and human rights, and the issues and prospects for resolution.

One interesting theoretical idea the author applies is the way democracy movements threaten national boundaries through 'integrative power', as proposed by Boulding in *Three faces of power* (London: Sage Publications, 1989), that is different from 'threat' (capacity to coerce or destroy) and 'exchange power' (capacity to mobilise resources). Integrative power 'assumes that every human being has a capacity to respond to such values as truth, love and justice', and that the democracy movement mobilizes transnationally.<sup>1</sup>

As the preface states, the book aims to show how an Asian leader 'could harness the traditions and spiritual beliefs found in the country's culture and history and employ them to their fullest potential in the struggle against tyranny'. The book, though of interest in other respects, is ill-informed in its understanding of the spiritual dimension to the democracy struggle, and links it to Hindu Karma Yoga.<sup>2</sup>

### Hpe Kan Kaung

A book entitled *What is Aung San Suu Kyi? Whither does Aung San Suu Kyi go?* [အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည်ဘယ်လဲ၊ အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည်ဘယ်လဲ] (သတင်းနှင့်စာနယ်ဇင်းလုပ်ငန်း) was published in 1997. It collects the articles published in *Myanmar Alin* by Hpe Kan Kaung [ဖေကံကောင်း], one of the regime's infamous journalists. The cover of this book has a princess, a puppet-on-a-string, carrying a flame. Throughout the book, he puts forward the regime's various theories. Sometimes the strings are pulled by ex-colonial forces, and if we are to go by earlier interpretations, by her English husband.

This person whom the Puppet Princess thinks is very good to her as a spouse is no ordinary person. He is a good acquaintance of people of high society and aristocracy of England and moves in and out of the Oxford circle of scholars and keeps company of famous reporters and is capable of influencing and is capable of influencing them to write whatever he would like them to. He is a great director and puppeteer who can pull the strings.<sup>3</sup>

In this particular volume, however, the strings are pulled by the Communists. It is often the case that the rationale for labelling the opposition is derived from an internal structure already present, and Victor makes the interesting reference to Ne Win as 'puppet master', not of Aung San Suu Kyi, but of the regime.<sup>4</sup>

In one particular Burmese dance, women used to carry an oil light [ဆီမီးခွက်], which was later substituted by a candle attached to a ring on the finger. There is no other Burmese tradition of dance with fire, and the main interpretation has to be that the intention is to depict her as about to torch the country. With 368 pages, it is appended with seven photographs selected to depict her at her most foreign.

The photographs are worthy of analysis since they convey the intentionality behind the book and most clearly communicate the image the regime wishes to project. The first photograph is of her sitting youthfully on the floor in a room with Michael Aris, suggesting love affairs with foreigners in various countries. This is immediately juxtaposed on the same page with a second photograph in which she is surrounded by six young men about which is said that this is 'Aung San Suu Kyi, photographed with youngsters pretending to

<sup>1</sup> Oishii (1997:31–32).

<sup>2</sup> Oishii (1997:21).

<sup>3</sup> Myo Chit. 'Let's tell the truth'. *NLM*, May–July 1996.

<sup>4</sup> Victor (1998:175).

be students, unaware that she lowered the standard of political behaviour'. Photograph three shows her sitting in a lecture room with other NLD leaders, suggesting that she 'ignorantly destroyed the purity of politics' [ခေတ်အဆက်ဆက် နိုင်ငံရေးဇာတ်ပျက်များအကြား အသိမဲ့ ပါဝင်ခဲ့မိသော အောင်ဆန်းစုကြည်]. Photograph four is a wedding photograph of her with Michael Aris in western dress, which says 'She loves Burma. The wedding of Aung San Suu Kyi, who proclaims to love Burmese culture and traditions, but where do these traditions of Aung San Suu Kyi's wedding ceremony come from?'. Photograph five depicts her arm-in-arm with her two sons with the caption 'Aung San Suu Kyi who, though a daughter born from two truly Myanmar parents, is unable to live the life of a truly Myanmar mother'. Photograph six shows her embracing US Secretary of State Albright, suggesting that she greatly longed for her. Finally, photograph seven is a photograph of Michael Aris with their son suggesting that he is the 'go-between' in Aung San Suu Kyi's liaison with international organizations.

### Barbara Victor

*The Lady: Aung San Suu Kyi, Nobel Laureate and Burma's prisoner* (London: Faber, 1998) by Barbara Victor, a journalist who normally specialises in the Middle East and has written a biography on Hanan Ashrawi and a work on domestic violence in the United States, is billed as 'the first full account of one woman's struggle against SLORC'.

This account is an unusual one, for Victor received official permission from the regime to perform her research in Burma, visiting Burma in September 1996 for two months. Perhaps because of her critical attitude to violence in the United States, the regime saw in her someone who might sketch it in a positive light. During her stay she lodged in the guest house owned by the Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence, where she found listening devices in her room. The condition for her visit was that she would not contact Aung San Suu Kyi or members of the 'political opposition' and would write a 'fair and unbiased' account. The regime expressed the hope that she would 'tell the world the real story of Myanmar'. Victor, however, interpreted this as meaning that she could not interview whom she wanted and that she would be under severe restrictions, which was of course the case (p 8). She was heavily restricted in her movements, 'for her own safety', by Colonel Hla Min, a Defence Ministry official and one of the principal advisers to General Khin Nyunt. In the event, though she had to report daily to Colonel Hla Min, she was sometimes free to see the people she wanted. Victor also subsequently visited Burma through the Thai border.

The advantage of this book is that it actually includes exclusive interviews carried out over two months between September and October 1996 with the SLORC military leaders – with General Khin Nyunt, General Maung Maung, General Able – with General Ne Win's daughter Sanda Win, with Khun Sa, soldiers who guarded Aung San Suu Kyi, the head of the cultural think-tank Khin Maung Nyunt, and businessmen. She also interviewed Tin U.

However, the book is not academically substantiated and she does not actually reveal her sources. Furthermore, her interpretation of Aung San Suu Kyi's spiritual underpinning as 'a kind of self-hypnotic trance' (p 107) is not doing justice to the ideas that underlie Aung San Suu Kyi's politics.

# Chapter 15

## Aung San Suu Kyi: a personality cult?

In his press conference General Khin Nyunt justified the employment of the authoritarian instruments of State against the NLD by saying that the Communists ‘decided to fully exploit the propensity of the Myanmar masses to be enthused with personality cults and the sudden rising popularity of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’.<sup>1</sup> The army, used to holding the reigns of power since 1962, know that their *ana* instruments have failed to create enduring structures of State, and they fear the invisible, fluid and unbounded trickling of *awza* personalities throughout the country who might just succeed in snatching away their privileges.

### The regime's predicament

The regime's psychological warfare campaign has only a very limited repertoire. The generals hope to justify their power, and diminish Aung San Suu Kyi's, by pointing at ‘conspiracies’ and ‘personality cults’. The shape these accusations take are woolly and lack consistent logic, but they do involve certain features. First, since party politics is in their view personality politics, those involved in party politics are not looking at the interests of the country as a whole, but at their own clique. Since the army fought as a national army for Burma as a complete political entity, it proclaims a privileged position in the annals of history, and a superior vision for the country. This should be accepted by everyone without question or any form of discussion. Second, since party politics is invariably centred around a popular personality, the people who support this personality are open to exploitation. Hence, national politics becomes dependent on the personal characteristics of a few leaders with their greed and desire for power, thus ‘destablizing’ the country. Third, the subject of such a personality cult has no loyalty to the army. Since the army represents the country, this person is easily tempted to sell out to foreigners. Hence, with the nation thus narrowly defined, party politics becomes a front for ‘foreign’ interests. It is by this ‘hermit land’ logic through which the military ends up proclaiming the following kind of statement, of which there are all too many:

the Myanmar people place the interest of the country before that of an individual, whereas the NLD and its supporters place the interest of the individual before that of the country, resulting [in] a personality cult. One wonders whether a group of new masters-would-be [Britain] are trying to play the behind-the-scene role to install in power in Myanmar an individual who is married to a British citizen and is widely suspected to have vowed her allegiance to that foreign power.<sup>2</sup>

The regime's view of politics – both of its own and of the NLD – is fundamentally flawed. As I have shown in chapter 6, the regime bases itself entirely on ‘authority’ (*ana*), for ‘influence’ (*awza*) would endear certain army personalities with the public, and this would soon result in a coup and cause a split in the army and therefore ‘disunite’ the country. The army must be liked as an institution, but it is better if all its individual personnel are hated, so that there is no question about the loyalty of all of its individual members. In other words, the army does not generate personalities, let alone cults. In this respect, I fundamentally disagree with Taylor's view that Ne Win was a more pragmatic man than U Nu simply because he ‘decided’ not to pursue personality politics<sup>3</sup> – Ne Win became a thoroughly unpopular man around whom no cult of any sorts could be generated even if he had wanted to. By contrast, around U Nu a cult arose spontaneously. This is all the more so with Aung San Suu Kyi.

In trying to encourage the popular view of the army as institutionally loved (‘the army is father, the army is mother’), but willingly disliked at the level of personnel, the army is in fact foreignizing people who under normal circumstances could be its ‘friends’. It is manufacturing its own enemies. The more it emphasises *ana*, the more *awza* figures will jump out of the woodwork. These *awza* figures appear like circles drawn by Bo Bo Aung that you can never – however hard you try – wipe out as they multiply endlessly. The Wunthanu movement and the Freedom Bloc tell us something about Burmese political culture and how they respond to dissatisfaction with an authoritarian government – they practise mental culture and they produce *azani* whose powers will ultimately prove unstoppable. To introduce a programme of ‘frameworks’,

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Burma Communist Party's Conspiracy to take over State Power’. General Khin Nyunt Special Press Conference, 5 August 1989.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Allegations of forced labour in Myanmar categorically rejected. Conclusions in Commission report one-side, untrue and unfair. Mr Fatchett's statements fatally flawed, most deplorable. Most imprudent to interfere in Myanmar internal affairs’ [based on Burmese Embassy Press Release, 19.10.1998 in reaction to Minister Fatchett's Letter in the *Financial Times*, 15.10.1998.]. *NLM*, 18.10.1998.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor (1987:367).

'structures' and 'traditions' to contain these personalities, only produces stronger *azani*, who will sooner or later present the generals with the consequences of the same law of *samsara* with which Ne Win judged U Nu's elected government. Tin U said that 'incarceration didn't impede our struggle, it enhanced it'.<sup>1</sup> In short, the paradox then is that, while the army complains about personality cults destroying Burmese politics, it is its own very authoritarian measures that produces the personality cult it feels threatens it, and that it so intensely dislike. Just as Aung San and Gandhi were products of British colonial politics, so Aung San Suu Kyi is a product of Burmese army politics. It is as simple as that.

### Aung San Suu Kyi's predicament

Undoubtedly, the most influential personality in Burma today is Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of the *azani* who, having great *awza*, was able to bring national independence to Burma as a civilian. Though people in Burma may feel uncertain about the future, in their hearts they support her fully and they hope that the generals will see that. Until they incorporate her *awza* into government, Bo Bo Aung's circles will continue to multiply – there will be no end to personality cults and conspiracies.

Her approach has been to emphasize the spiritual in the political. Indeed, she has said that there is no conflict between Buddhist and political pursuits [H1][H7], that 'politics is about people, and you can't separate people from their spiritual values' [E9]. The result is that her political aspirations become linked, in the public eye, to her spiritual aspirations.

Facing a corrupt and repressive military regime, that continuously endeavours to expose her as corrupted by personality characteristics and foreign money, Aung San Suu Kyi has consistently emphasized a more spiritual and ethical approach to political leadership. However, in proclaiming that liberation of the country can be found through personal mental culture, and in criticising the regime for not personally reforming in terms of personal Buddhist practice, she herself only further raises the spiritual capital invested in her by her supporters and her spectators. Her use of Buddhist concepts and practices – *byama-so tayà*, *metta*, *karuna*, *parami*, *samatha*, *sati*, *vipassana*, *nibbana*, *yahanda*, *bodhi* – in the fight for democracy inevitably lead to a personality cult from which she finds it difficult to extract herself. As the gap increasingly widens between the dirt and corruption represented by a repressive military regime and the purity and power of the heroic democracy fighters, so also the impersonal continuity of political organizations demanded by a truly democratic system is increasingly at risk.

### Angel or female bodhisattva ?

The Thirty-Seven Nats in Burma are spirits associated with a particular region or with particular families, who were instituted by King Anawratha at the Shwezigon Pagoda in Pagan. These spirits were elevated to be paid respect by the public. They were either greatly loved or greatly pitied by the people, before they met their violent death, often at the hands of the authorities. One difference between a *nat* and an *azani* [martyr] such as Aung San is that the latter is worshipped as a hero by government itself also, and not just propitiated by a selected and factionalised public.

Some of Aung San Suu Kyi's followers refer to her as 'Angel [Nat] of University Avenue' [တက္ကသိုလ်လမ်းနတ်သမီး]<sup>2</sup> and 'female *bodhisattva*' [J2]. Some intellectuals have suggested to me that she is the 'Angel [Nat] of Democracy' [ဒီမိုကရေစီ နတ်သမီး]. Others have referred to her as 'a heroine like the mythical mother goddess of the earth who can free them from the enslavement of the evil military captors.'<sup>3</sup> This supernatural attribution to Aung San Suu Kyi is affirmed when the SLORC refused to hand over power in August and September 1990, by the way many Burmese people interpreted the swelling of the left breast of Buddha statues and the bleeding of the eyes as indicating Aung San Suu Kyi's imminent rise to power soon – the swelling of the left breast indicating Aung San Suu Kyi's nurturing characteristic.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Tin U in ASSK (1997b:209).

<sup>2</sup> 'There seems to exist a big discrepancy between Burmese peoples' expectations of Suu Kyi and her own image of the future democratic Burma. The ordinary supporters of Aung San Suu Kyi tend to worship her as the goddess [Angel] (*Nat-thami* in Burmese) of ... suffering Burma. If Suu Kyi herself is content with this personality worship, there will be little unhappiness between them. But she is not.' (Nemoto 1996a:9 writing of a visit in 1990). ['Angel' is a more appropriate translation of နတ်သမီး].

'When I visited Rangoon later in February 1994, some of the people even used a Burmese expression "Tekkado yeitha lan ga Nat-Thami" which meant "the goddess [Angel] of University Avenue" ... The University Avenue is the place where her house is located.' (Nemoto 1996b:27).

<sup>3</sup> Mya Maung (1992:163).

<sup>4</sup> '... people have been worshipping her [Aung San Suu Kyi] as a saviour. To give an example, when I visited Burma in August

These positive characterisations of Aung San Suu Kyi's supernatural power contrast with the negative characterisations by her self-made adversaries. They call her the spirit 'Mother of the West' (Anauk Medaw).

Your Mrs Michael Aris, called Anauk Medawgyi, is just following the course of Thakin Than Tun, her aunt's husband. As I have experiences, past and present, I can see her steps well. Both of them are of the same mentality. They are [the] same in having great aims and thinking highly of themselves in arrogance. They are same in marching along the path towards their wishful goal.<sup>1</sup>

They also refer to her as the Head of the Byahma [ဖြူညွှန်းခေါင်း] which is too hot to handle, supposedly after she supposedly contributed to ruining economic progress after her release in 1995:

Persons who are called the Byamma's Head always get angry as soon as they know their nickname ... I can't be certain whether Mrs Aris would be angry or take pride if she were called the Byamma's Head. But she has surely become the terribly hot Byamma's Head right after the restriction was revoked ... Even though you are being held by golden hands, your terrible heat will melt them down as you are the Byamma's Head. So, you'd better leave this nation. As citizens, we are demanding deportation of Mrs Aris. The only word we have to say to you is 'Get out'.<sup>2</sup>

If the Burmese supernaturalise her in these contrasting ways, some of the publications aimed at foreign audiences have been equally extreme. For example, in one publication she has been characterised as 'Burma's Saint Joan'.<sup>3</sup> She is also referred to as 'Burma's Woman of Destiny'. Although he has asked many interesting questions, Alan Clements does sometimes excessively overemphasize her spiritual side, such as when he suggests Aung San was a 'spiritual seeker'<sup>4</sup> or when he asks whether she turned her house arrest into a 'monastic-like life'.<sup>5</sup>

Victor has argued that some Aung San Suu Kyi's supporters are responsible for creating her supernatural image. Journalists sometimes complain that she does not distinguish her personal identity from her political image.

According to several, The Lady takes umbrage if she is challenged on any specific issue or position. She becomes haughty, they say, retreating behind an academic snobbism that tends to intimidate and discourage people from approaching her. A journalist from *Time* magazine recalls that when she asked a question that Daw Suu Kyi perceived to be challenging, her response was to rise and exit. 'One of her aids came in and just announced that The Lady had a previous appointment', the journalist says, 'and the interview was over'.<sup>6</sup>

Her followers are unwilling to permit the 'deconstruction' of Aung San Suu Kyi herself, and only permit engagement of the SLORC's criticism. Supporters argue that the SLORC makes use of the slightest criticism of Aung San Suu Kyi for its own ends.

Aung San Suu Kyi herself must take some responsibility, for these views are not just the creation of her situation or her commentators. To some extent they also have been stoked up by Aung San Suu Kyi's view of the human condition as 'trying to gain enlightenment and to use the wisdom gained to help others' [S1][Y15], and 'while we can't all be Buddhas, I feel a responsibility to do as much as I can to realize enlightenment to the degree that I can, and to use it to relieve the suffering of others' [Q2]. Her highest personal goal is 'purity' in a 'spiritual' sense [V1], which is related to the purity of an arahant [V2]. Though she has denied being a 'female *bodhisattva*', she greatly emphasizes the development of *metta*, one of the Ten Perfections (*parami*) practised by *bodhisattvas*, and admits to meditating [J2]. Aspiring to mental perfection, and believing that only incessant self-perfection permits a political leader to be worthy of respect, she has

---

1990, just two and a half months after the general election, people were talking about a strange phenomenon of growth in the left-hand side of the chests of many images of Buddha in the country. This story was believed even by the people living in big cities like Rangoon or Taunggyi. To make sure of the truth of the matter, I myself visited a house in a remote town where people alleged that such kind of Buddha image existed. It was "true" that the image's left chest was thicker than the right side. But most of the left chests of Burmese Buddha images are originally sculptured thicker than the right, because the Buddha's original style of wearing his robe has been thought of as the right shoulder bare and left shoulder covered. Therefore, I would not judge whether the thickness of the left chest had been originally sculptured this way, or whether it might have grown later by "supernatural" power. However, I was more interested in their interpretation of this as a good omen relating to Aung San Suu Kyi. They said that her power would grow in order to save Burma from all the sufferings. The people's interpretation of the phenomenon varied a little, but here I would like to show a typical interpretation made by my young Burmese friend, who was a graduate of the Mandalay University.

This phenomenon and its interpretations spread throughout the country up to September the same year. It is likely that the phenomenon gave an impetus to many Buddhist monks to take part in the protests with the NLD supporters between September and October against SLORC's neglect of the result of the 1990 election ...' (Nemoto 1996b:26–27).

<sup>1</sup> Thanlyet. 'Harm caused by one's own deed, being caught in one's own trap – all should beware!' *NLM*, 25.11.1996.

<sup>2</sup> Thant Ein Hmu. 'The Byahma's head'. *NLM*, 18–19.09.1998.

<sup>3</sup> This reference occurred in *Vanity Fair* (ASSK 1997b:9).

<sup>4</sup> ASSK (1997b:1).

<sup>5</sup> ASSK (1997b:104).

<sup>6</sup> Victor (1998:222).

used the concept of saint for herself, though in a metaphorical sense, as part of the never-ending struggle for perfection that musicians and artists strive for in an imperfect world [Y2].

Some journalists have been antagonised by this cocktail of holy imagery. For example, Lintner wrote: 'Suu Kyi's almost mystical streak makes her writings, and books about her, different from those about and by other democratic leaders who have spent time in prison, such as Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel or Mahatma Gandhi, who was but a saint and a shrewd politician ... These three books show that Suu Kyi is indeed a good saint but ...'. Moreover, Lintner goes on to criticise her lack of detailed economic planning for action in Burma and that this 'may fail to prevent more martyrs being made by the kangaroo courts of Burma'. In other words, playing her saintly role leads her to neglect the hands-on style leadership required for a good politician. This echoes the criticism U Nu received, who has been characterised by Brigadier Maung Maung as 'a Gandhi without Gandhi's predilection for politics'.<sup>1</sup>

Such criticism has, of course, much truth from an outside observer's point of view. Indeed, it reiterates what one observer said about the relationship between Buddhism and the political order in U Nu's style of political campaigning in the 1960s as 'this tendency to over-value the personal and discount the systematic and technical, seems to be the Achilles heel of all present Buddhist social-political philosophy and methodology'.<sup>2</sup> Here, 'the controlling philosophy is that good men make good government' and there is the tendency 'to set personal character over against plan and technique, and to substitute it for the latter in actual procedures'. The result is that 'a "Buddhist" political campaign may be more like a religious preaching mission than a statement of political principles, and a party platform an exhortation to be pure rather than a statement of basic policy'.

Because there is no rigid legalistic system of standards and controls, a personal-relations way of carrying on government affairs may be in actuality only the best possible way to perpetuate a system of personal 'pull', influence, and corruption. And emphasis upon 'government by character' rather than government by principle, may well become only a camouflage for an indisposition or inability to plan and execute intelligently.

Aung San Suu Kyi evidently realises this because she has responded to the regime's personal attacks on her, which she finds 'less disconcerting than articles or speeches that attribute me with vaguely saintlike qualities', for such practice, she says, runs counter to democracy. Quoting one of the drafters of the Constitution of India, 'hero worship is a sure road to degradation and to eventual dictatorship', and these in her own words 'there is no room for hero-worship in a true political struggle made up of human beings grappling with human problems'.<sup>3</sup> But in this very same article, in which she seeks to moderate the public image of her spirituality, she cannot avoid using the metaphor 'dark nights of the political soul', an evident play on Teresa Avila's contemplative experiences of the Night of the Soul.

When I am asked what sustains me in the dark nights of the political soul, I am inclined to answer: 'understanding, compassion, friendship.' This is perhaps not the kind of answer the questioners want. Perhaps they would rather hear about mysterious inner resources, some wonderful inspiration, some memorable experience that gives us the strength to withstand the hardships of the human lot. But our powers of endurance are slowly and painfully developed through repeated encounters with adversity.<sup>4</sup>

Evidently there is much tension between Aung San Suu Kyi's attempt at coping in adverse circumstances by perfecting herself in the battlefield – watching over and sharpening herself into an incorruptible leader for the cause of democracy, capable of sacrificing her own life for the cause – and make true her desire to advance democracy for the country as a whole.

### Complexities in Aung San Suu Kyi's situation

We must, of course, appreciate the complexities of the situation pertaining to Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD for they operate in a very difficult political landscape. On the one hand, there is the total repression by the military, and on the other, there is the inherited culture of politics to contend with.

First and most importantly, to say that Aung San Suu Kyi is behaving like a saint without framing this against the Burmese cultural background leads to a skewed picture of what she is trying to do. It ignores the history of traditions of mental culture and political opposition in Burmese politics.

I have pointed out that political opposition is denied a secular legal space in Burma. Furthermore, it is unable to express itself in terms of material culture that might convey it the status of Buddhist legitimacy,

<sup>1</sup> Maung Maung (1963:65–66).

<sup>2</sup> King (1964:275–76).

<sup>3</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi. 'The game rules in Burma: there are no rules'. *Asahi Evening News*, 25.08.1998.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

such as building pagodas, for such is reserved for the military. What it can do, however, is to emphasise mental culture, which has a long historical tradition in Burma. Aung San Suu Kyi, along with the senior NLD leadership, are in that sense carrying on a local political tradition. They have in common with their reformist predecessors (U Nu, Mindon, U Hpo Hlaing) an emphasis on the practice of *vipassana* and the deployment of Buddhist terminology as a reformist technique of political leadership in which some discourse is unavoidable, in particular when choosing the non-violent route. This specifically Burmese element is readily understood by the Burmese, but not so easily by non-Burmese [C19][D6][D7][E19]. As suggested earlier, it internalizes evil as a fight with one's own mental impurities through the practice of mental culture.

Second, the regime has greatly neglected all fields of academic analysis, in particular analysis of the economy and political order. It is common for regime spokesmen to confidently field questions about Burma by foreign journalists and international organisations without any form of research or evidence. It obviously wants to prevent such an analysis. The few who are qualified to comment are harassed if they speak out. If they live abroad, and the regime cannot reach them directly, then their relatives are subject to harassment. This makes it difficult to reflect on policy matters at this stage.

Third, without even the most basic human rights, there is no possibility even for telephone calls or letters to be exchanged between interested parties, let alone collect data and publish extended analyses. The flow of communication is closely monitored and long prison sentences are routinely handed out for possessing a fax machine or a computer without a government licence.

Fourth, it should be noted that in the origin myth, the Mahathamada, the first king elected by the people, was characterised as a *bodhisattva*. Also, this claim has been commonly made for Burmese kings and also Prime Minister U Nu whose popularity was largely part based on his supportive work for the higher forms of Buddhist practice instead of charity alone. That Aung San Suu Kyi should be referred to by some as a 'female bodhisattva' is but a manifestation of such a long-standing tradition.

Furthermore, as for 'practicalities', in this particular environment of political culture, the concepts of 'practice' and 'practicality' are more closely linked with mental culture in Burmese than is at first sight apparent. In the English language, 'contemplation' is the original meaning of 'theory' (*theoria*) which in contemporary parlance is considered unable to engage reality. This is opposed to 'practice' which does engage reality. Meditation traditions in Burma, however, are firmly known as 'traditions of practice' [ဝဇ္ဇိဝိသိယ] which are based on 'hands-on experience' [လက်တွေ့] in opposition to scriptural learning or 'theory' [ဝိသိယ]; this is very much related to discerning truth and reality. The Buddhist concept of practice, with its intrinsic relationship to mental culture, was subsequently used to translate political concepts such as the Marxist idea of practice.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, in this culture of perception, practicality is in fact, not that far removed from *vipassana* practice.

### Sainthood and the political inheritance of Aung San

Aung San Suu Kyi has repeatedly sought to side-track her designation as a 'big leader' (*gaungzaunggyi*) or an 'extraordinary' person,<sup>2</sup> or a saint or female *bodhisattva*:<sup>3</sup>

Do not think that I will be able to give you democracy. I will tell you frankly, I am not a magician. I do not possess any special power that will allow me to bring you democracy. I can say frankly that democracy will be achieved only by you, by all of you ...<sup>4</sup>

Her party colleagues have also regularly denied that she is, or indeed pretends to be a saint [O4]. In interviews also, she has frequently and very strongly suggested that democratic change should involve the democracy movement as a whole, and not involve her as the personality representing it [Y3]. When described as representing Burma in interviews, Aung San Suu Kyi has clearly said that 'we must not

<sup>1</sup> Marxism was interpreted in terms of Buddhism in particular by Thakin Soe (1934:125,123,246). Sarkisyanz (1965:168), who took an interest in Marxism after his study of Buddhist philosophy. He used Buddhist terminology to explain Marxist concepts, so that Leninistic unity of revolutionary theory and practice was understood in terms of the distinction between scriptural learning (*pariyatti*), practice (*padipatti*) and penetration (*padiveida*). Political leaders must possess perfections (*parami*). Also, the Marxist notion of dialectical materialism and the flux of matter was to be interpreted in terms of Buddhist periodical destruction of worlds (*upathi bin*).

<sup>2</sup> ASSK (1997b:62).

<sup>3</sup> Cf ASSK (1997b:9).

<sup>4</sup> ASSK (1997b:212–13).

emphasize this personality business'.<sup>1</sup>

SLORC blamed the Aung San Suu Kyi personality cult as responsible for stalling a meeting that it had called with NLD chair U Aung Shwe on 16 September 1997, who initially accepted but later declined because the General Secretary (Aung San Suu Kyi) was not included in the invitation. The following appeared in the state owned newspapers:

After a study and assessment of all the developments, conditions, stands and causes, it can be concluded that the one who disrupted the meeting is the National League for Democracy with dishonest attitudes and the personality cult, the serious disease, relying solely on a person instead of relying on organizational strength that has been pestering it since its formation.<sup>2</sup>

It was evident from the resolutions of the NLD conference held between 27–29 September 1997 how internally the NLD was positively working towards avoiding personality cults, in part as a response to such accusations.<sup>3</sup> This is reminiscent of her father, Aung San. He wanted to discourage popular perception encouraged by writers such as Thahkin Kodawhmaing, which vested in him the role of the concentration meditation wizard, the mental cultivator *cum* universal ruler. He said in his first AFPFL conference speech that we must 'take proper care that we do not make a fetish of this cult of hero-worship'.<sup>4</sup> And nine months later in his 1 September 1946 speech he said that

At this time I am a person who is very popular with the public. But I am neither a god [VYad], wizard [kWaBYa] or magician [Wc ʔBYa]. Only a man. Not a heavenly being [QmʔW^M], I can only have the powers [aəδ:] of a man [Z].<sup>5</sup>

Despite being satisfied about the working of political parties after AFPFL victory in the Constituent Assembly Election on 17 April 1947, he said that 'the masses have supported the AFPFL on an organizational basis and not on personalities basis' and that 'the standard of Burma politics has risen'.<sup>6</sup> There is no doubt though that his personality was as crucial an element in the vote for the AFPFL as was Aung San Suu Kyi's in the vote for the NLD. Indeed, Aung San Suu Kyi, whose popularity rests on Aung San's political personality, inherited the personality problem her father encountered. This, as we have already noted, is a product of an unpopular authoritarian regime.

<sup>1</sup> ASSK (1995:255).

<sup>2</sup> Kaytu Nilar. 'Who disrupted the meeting'. *NLM*, 24.09.1997.

<sup>3</sup> 'We recorded that a "spirit of cooperation without holding grudges and without any personality cults" is to be used as the NLD's guidelines in organizing. This was mentioned in part of the response by General Secretary Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to questions posed by delegates.' ('The resolution of the NLD Congress.' *soc.culture.burma*, 27/9/97).

<sup>4</sup> 20 January 1946 in Aung San (1971:25).

<sup>5</sup> Aung San (1971:140) cited in ASSK (1991=:28).

<sup>6</sup> Silverstein (1993).

# Chapter 16

## Buddhisation of Aung San Suu Kyi

Aung San Suu Kyi's views are understood through her own writings and the numerous interviews and biographies written on her. Her views on Burma differ depending on the audience addressed. It is difficult to determine exactly when she wrote some of her work, and sometimes it is not clear to what extent her statements, in particular when delivered and published in her absence, have perhaps been interfered with by others in translation or otherwise. Nevertheless, broadly speaking her communications on Burma may be divided into four main periods (1) the period up until the Shwedagon speech, (2) the campaign period from the Shwedagon speech until her house arrest, (3) the period of her house arrest, and (4) the period subsequent to her release.

Her output during the pre-Shwedagon period is dominated by academic and educational essays. Afterwards, the material is more varied in terms of campaign speeches, interviews, letters to newspapers and international bodies, party addresses and speeches at international gatherings abroad – usually delivered in her absence – on humanitarian and political issues confronting her, the NLD and the Burmese people as a whole in the context of a repressive regime. Naturally, the pre-Shwedagon speech literature has a more analytical and less engaging flavour when compared to the latter, which has an urgent and humanitarian quality.

There are many continuities between the two, such as the references to her father's thoughts as a benchmark, and the way her political engagement marks a shift in the way she portrays Burma in the English medium. For various reasons that I will set out below, what has taken place is what may be termed a 'Buddhisation' of her discourse. By Buddhisation, I mean a process that has existed in Burma since the advent of Buddhism. In one sense, it means attributing extra-Buddhist roles and characters such as Min Mahagiri (who became Sakka) to a Buddhist identity.<sup>1</sup> Here, however, I apply it more specifically to mean a particular circumstance in which a politician is pressed in the context of crisis politics into adopting a Buddhist stance. More specifically, this involves an adaptation to Burmese ideas about political life in terms of mental culture, the *summum bonum* of Buddhist practice. This occurred with all Burmese politicians to a greater or lesser extent.

### Assessing the role of Buddhism

Some observers, in particular journalists such as Lintner<sup>2</sup> working to tight deadlines, with the political perspectives of the ethnic minorities, and no doubt recalling U Nu's call for Buddhism as the State religion, have dismissed this shift out of hand as necessarily detrimental to Burmese politics. Other observers, on the other hand, including long-term observers of the political scene from a Burman perspective such as Steinberg,<sup>3</sup> have argued that Aung San Suu Kyi should involve Buddhism more in order to address the Burmese electorate. She 'must speak to her own people through the Burmese cultural medium or see her internal legitimacy erode'. Citing the example of 11th century Mon King Manuha who was permitted to build a pagoda from his Pagan prison in which he had been placed under the Burmese king, he suggests that 'King Manuha's actions remind us how to speak through culture to politics. Aung San Suu Kyi must speak to her own people, drawing upon the traditions and resources of her own society.'

This conflicting assessment of Aung San Suu Kyi's politics raises the perennial problem to what extent modern politicians are able to modernise Burmese politics without losing the support of the majority public. Furthermore, it also raises questions about the political analysts themselves. Evidently, in a predominantly Buddhist environment Buddhist concepts have to inform the country's politics at one level or another. To what extent are observers of the political scene able to detect the relevance of the Buddhist concepts and their implication for the country's politics when these do not enter into the English versions of their speeches?

---

<sup>1</sup> It is sometimes accompanied by 'Palicizing' and 'de-Sanskritizing' an identity or a text, as happened with the appointment of Sakka to replace Min Mahagiri and the reduction of the number of nats to the Buddhist number thirty-three, the increased involvement of the Buddha and his teachings in Manu law texts and in the Ramayana.

<sup>2</sup> Lintner, Bertil. 'Burma's voice of democracy.' *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 11.09.1997, pp. 52-53.

<sup>3</sup> Steinberg, David I. 'What medium for the message?' *Bangkok Post*, 16.08.1997.

That there is much confusion on this matter is clear. For example, Mikio Oishi's *Aung San Suu Kyi's Struggle: its principles and strategy*, though drawing attention to Buddhism as the source, nevertheless mistakenly traces Aung San Suu Kyi's spiritual dimensions ultimately to *Bhagavad Gita*, to Karma Yoga and to Gandhi's concepts of *satyagraha* (grasping the truth) and *ahimsa* (non-violence).<sup>1</sup> Though she admired Gandhi and Tagore, and was well-aware of Burma's history of Indianization and shared colonial history with India, this does not remotely touch the core of Burmese sensibilities about her spirituality.

Below I will present evidence that Aung San Suu Kyi has indeed addressed the Burmese in terms of 'the traditions and resources of her own society', as have other senior NLD leaders. However, contrary to Steinberg, I do not believe it necessitates building a pagoda to engage the Burmese people in this way. If this were all it entailed to achieve legitimacy, then Ne Win would have attained legitimacy long ago. Indeed, Manuha's imprisonment experience has elicited a response in terms of higher forms of Buddhist mental culture. Also, contrary to Lintner, I do not find evidence that the way Buddhism is appealed to by Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD poses significant problems for the country. Finally, contrary to Oishi, there is little space here for Gandhian concepts of yoga.

To the contrary, the NLD have formulated their political problems in terms of widely known and popular Buddhist practices, and these in turn, point towards attempts to open up narrow self-interests and soften ethnic identity. The practices they appeal to have the broadest support among Buddhists and are furthermore extendible to an inter-ethnic and inter-religious environment.

### Before the Shwedagon speech

During this period, Aung San Suu Kyi wrote four main essays addressing the biography of her father, Burma as a country, Burmese literature and the development of nationalism. These four essays were all collected together as the first part of her *Freedom from fear* first published in 1991, and translated into Burmese with a different set of essays in 1993.

The ideas of her father and Mahatma Gandhi play a central role in the essays. Crucial is her realisation that 'actions without ideational content lose their potency as soon as the situation, which called for them, ceases to be valid'. In India, as her father pointed out, there were older leaders with strong ideologies such as Gandhi, a Nehru and a Tilak, but in Burma this was not the case, and he said 'let anybody appear who can be like such a leader, who *dares* to be like such a leader. We are waiting.' Her father's assassination and the lack of an enduring ideology that could capture the Burmese masses led to the military coup. She herself, when she lived in India with her mother and afterwards, read Gandhi's work.

This led Aung San Suu Kyi to later emphasize the 'spiritual revolution' in terms of Buddhist ideas, with the aim to conceptualize an enduring ideology on a political level that the Burmese were lacking.<sup>2</sup> Buddhism plays a role in these early writings insofar as Aung San Suu Kyi recognizes it as providing the spiritual side of the independence struggle.

### Aung San Suu Kyi's campaigning period

The period during which Aung San Suu Kyi was able to campaign freely extended from her first speech to 20 July 1989, when she was placed under house arrest. At the end of August 1988 she still said that 'a life of politics holds no attraction for me. At the moment, I serve as a kind of unifying force because of my father's name and because I am not interested in jostling for any kind of position.'<sup>3</sup> The military seized power on 18 September 1988 and Aung San Suu Kyi felt prompted to take a stance on a political platform. And so she co-founded the National League for Democracy (NLD) and became its General Secretary.

The speech at the Shwedagon Pagoda on 26 August 1988 marks a turning point for Aung San Suu Kyi. The Shwedagon Pagoda she herself had designated, quoting a *Times* journalist, as 'the soul of the nation'. Her first rally was held at the Western Moat Entrance of the Shwedagon Pagoda on 26 August 1988, where she appealed for silence for the students who had fallen in the struggle for democracy, so as to 'share the merit of their deeds among all of us'.<sup>3</sup> Sharing merit is a fine Buddhist concept, and her use in this context is innovative, for it implies (but does not explicitly state) that the democracy struggle encompasses work for the good of the Buddhist realm of the *sasana*. Her first lines in the Shwedagon speech addressed the uncertainty she thought the Burmese would feel about her marriage to a foreigner, reassuring the Burmese

<sup>1</sup> Oishi (1997:19,21,27).

<sup>2</sup> I think Kraeger (1995:330) is right in his interpretation of the revolution of the spirit.

<sup>3</sup> ASSK (1995:193)

people that in spite of this her love for Burma had been continuous.

The Shwedagon speech was a historic one, for her father gave his first AFPFL presidential address there and students sought refuge at the pagoda during the protests in the months prior to her speech. Estimates of her audience range from 500,000 to one million people.<sup>1</sup>

This initiated a golden campaigning period, and during the time between her first speech at Shwedagon and her house arrest nine months later, she estimates that she delivered one thousand addresses country-wide.<sup>2</sup> From this period onwards, the NLD organised its own celebrations of national days, and unless the regime forced people to attend its celebrations, people would by preference attend the NLD-organised celebrations. For example, Armed Forces Day on 27 March reverted on the NLD diary to the earlier Fascist Resistance Day, suggesting that the current army is fascist.<sup>3</sup> This became a major problem for the regime and national days ‘became an informal way of polling the people to see which party they supported’. Other new commemorated days were added to the NLD calendar:

- 13 March – Burma Human Rights Day (death of student leader Phone Maw, 1988)
- 27 May – Celebration of the 1990 elections
- 6 June – Workers Day
- 21 June – Myenigone Anniversary Day
- 7 July – Student Day (Ne Win dynamited the Student Union, 1962)
- 19 July – Martyrs' Day (Aung San Suu Kyi's father was assassinated)
- 8 August – The 1988 uprising
- 26 August – Aung San Suu Kyi's Shwedagon speech and entry into Burmese political arena
- 18 September – The SLORC was founded in 1989<sup>4</sup>

During her campaigns, she would often enter Buddhist temples and monasteries, pay her respects to respected monks, take the five precepts along with her supporters, and listen to the monk's preaching who would bless her. Sometimes she would then support their building activities by performing some symbolic tasks such as carrying building materials or expressing the wish to attain democracy. She would then proceed to ‘preach the *tayà* [of politics]’ [တရားဟောတယ်] from the heart. Her free-ranging speeches are very different from the regime officers who ‘announce’ [မိန့်ခွန်းပြောသည်] from pre-scripted materials. Her preaching would normally end with the Buddhist blessing ‘May you be free from danger, and may you be happy in body and mind’.

Such spontaneous speaking poses a risk, of course. For example, in a speech on 3 December 1988 she spoke about the possibility of humans becoming Buddhas as an encouragement for people to emulate in the attempt to perfect themselves as follows:

So I am talking to all of you. Aspire to be noble. Aspire to be as noble as can be. Don't we have the idiom that ‘if we try hard enough we too can become Buddhas’? Why can't we aspire to this? If we try hard ordinary people, [1] the Buddha too was an ordinary human being. [2] [3] If even the Buddha could try to become Buddha in this way, so also ordinary human beings can aspire to attain high nobility.

အနီတောလူတိုင်းကို ကျွန်ုပ်မပြောတယ်။ မြင့်မြင့်ကြပါ။ အမြင့်ဆုံးကြပါ။ ကြိုးစားရင်ဘုရားဖြစ်နိုင်တယ်လို့ ကျွန်ုပ်တို့ဆိုရိုးရှိပါရောလား။ ဘာလို့ မကြံနိုင်ရမှာလဲ။ ကြိုးစားရင်ရိုးရိုးသာမန်လူ၊ [၁] မြတ်စွာဘုရားဆိုတာလည်းသာမန်လူပဲ။ [၂] [၃] မြတ်စွာဘုရားတောင်မှ ဒီ လိုဘုရားဖြစ်အောင်ကျင့်ကြံနိုင်ရင် လူတွေဟာ မြင့်မြင့်ကြနိုင် ပါတယ်။

The awkwardness of this passage gave the regime ammunition to criticise her, though it is the opinion of most that the regime overplayed their hand, for it was shrugged off by the Burmese in general as well-intentioned and not as sacrilegious in any way. Though in English this passage seems fine, in Burmese there are three problems with this statement. First, to say that [1] ‘the Buddha is an ordinary human being’ is not correct, for the Buddha is emancipated from human status through his Thirty Perfections (*parami*) as a *bodhisattva* [ဘုရား လောင်း] and is nowhere referred to as ‘an ordinary human being’. Second, to say that [2] ‘the Buddha could try to become a Buddha in this way’ is not correct, for before he became a Buddha he was a *bodhisattva* and this is the term that should have been used for him at this stage. Third, to say that ‘even the Buddha could try to become the Buddha in this way, so also ordinary human beings can aspire to attain high nobility’ would imply that the Buddha was a lesser, not a greater being than human beings. In sum, Aung San Suu Kyi's statement here did not follow Burmese sensibilities concerning the stages of transformation towards Buddhahood, all of which deserve recognition and separation.

<sup>1</sup> Parenteau (1994:100).

<sup>2</sup> ASSK (1995:192).

<sup>3</sup> Jannuzi (1998:206).

<sup>4</sup> The regime attributes appropriating a diary by the opposition on Gene Sharp's influence in Burma. (See Di Hlaing. ‘Strategic political defiance.’ *NLM*, 15.08.1996.)

The military regime attempted to attack Aung San Suu Kyi's reference. However, its members are not renowned for their sophistication in Buddhist ideas, and they distorted this into a supposedly sacrilegious statement that 'any human being can become a Buddha in this life' [J1].<sup>1</sup> Since women are not able to attain Buddhahood in their life as a woman, such a statement would run counter to received orthodoxy. This accusation was of course never rendered believable with the Burmese public, she was supported by Burmese monks.<sup>2</sup> But the accusations persisted, and Saw Maung claimed that on the 68th anniversary of National Day (3 December 1988) she had said that 'Human beings are not even as faithful as dogs'.<sup>3</sup> By the time of his 1991 crisis with the Sangha military boycott, however, he presented this somewhat differently, claiming she had said that 'Buddha was an ordinary man. Dog is more loyal than man.'<sup>4</sup> 'Dogs are more loyal than man'<sup>5</sup> is a common Burmese saying, and there was no such direct relationship made in her speech between the status of dog and Buddhahood.

She responded to the SLORC's attacks on her reference to Buddhism at a later press conference on 26 June 1989 saying that intentional attacks on her were 'childish and mean' [ခလေးဆန်ဆန်အောက်တန်းကျကျ], and that she intended to say that human beings who were intent on becoming Buddhas could do so. She then challenged the SLORC, 'how about abiding by at least the two precepts, namely killing and lying'. She recommended keeping the five.

Another example of an awkward expression was at an international press conference on 26 June 1989, when she said that she would go and take care of Burmese soldiers at the front line fighting with the Karen, which conveys an ambiguous message to the ethnic minorities.

I am not satisfied merely with writing a letter. Really, I will go and take care of them. Invite me and I will go to Methawal and I will take care of them in person. In this way the government will know whether I am sincere in my attitude towards the army.

အဝေးကနေပြီးတော့စာရေးရုံနဲ့တော့မကျေမနပ်ပဲ။ တကယ်ပဲကျမသွားပြီးတော့ပြုစုပေးပါမယ်။ အဲဒီတော့တကယ်ပဲကျမဟာတပ်မတော်ပေါ်မှာစေတနာရှိလား မရှိလား ဆိုတာ နုတ်က သိစေချင်လို့ ရှိရင် ကျမကိုမဲသခေါ ကိုသွားမို့ မိတ်ဆော်လိုက်ပါ။ ကျမသွားပါမယ်။

On another occasion, she said that she would place garlands around the necks of soldiers at the front. Such statements, though intended to demonstrate her own commitment to the army as an inheritance from her father, nevertheless can be used to legitimize the army's activities in exterminating Karen opposition rather than coming to terms with it democratically.

In response to criticisms of her affiliation with a foreign husband, in a speech in January 1989 in Thabaung Myo, Irawaddy Division, she said her husband agreed to release her from her family responsibilities so that she could dedicate her life to the struggle for democracy in her country [A1]. Before that, just after her mother's funeral, she said she permitted her husband to remarry. This emotionally affected her, and the Burmese who were present at the announcements viewed her situation with great empathy. This loneliness was, of course, to carry a particular significance for her practice of mental culture during the period of her house arrest.

Many of her speeches became available as videos and were translated into other ethnic languages, and many felt that she was able to reach out to the ethnic minority groups in the way that her father had done.

### Aung San Suu Kyi's house arrest

Aung San Suu Kyi was placed under house arrest for six years between 20 July 1989 and 11 July 1995. Though there were times when she was able to arrange interviews and receive visitors, the period between July 1990 and May 1992 involved almost no contact with the outside world. During this two-year period, contact with her family and friends was cut, and her mail and telephone conversations were intercepted.

On a personal level, the pressure on her family life and this long period of house arrest spurred her to reflect on her ambivalent position. During this period, she completed the essay 'In quest for democracy', and finished writing the essays 'Freedom from fear' and 'The true meaning of Boh'.

Her essay 'Towards a true refuge', though not explicit, may be interpreted as an analysis of the causes and sufferings of refugee status in terms of the three 'refuges' in Buddhism. 'Refugee' in Burmese means 'one who has to bear suffering' (*dukkha-the*). Suffering is a central and extremely elaborate concept in Buddhism. In this essay, she is preoccupied not just with the particular problems faced by refugees but also,

<sup>1</sup> See also Hpe Kan Kaung (1997:121).

<sup>2</sup> Mya Maung (1991:248).

<sup>3</sup> Saw Maung (1990a:60).

<sup>4</sup> Saw Maung (1991:7).

<sup>5</sup> လူထက်ခွေးကသစ္စာရှိတယ်။

in the broadest of Buddhist relational terms, with the global conditions that give rise for refugees to leave their homes. She suggests that catastrophes ‘have small beginnings’ which are ‘barely discernible from the private ... Calamities that are not the result of purely natural phenomena usually have their origins in common human failings’. We guard against germs, but ‘more attention should be paid to correcting “common” attitudes and values which pose a far more lethal threat to humankind’.<sup>1</sup> These arguments so far are not dissimilar to the idea that disasters happen as the result of impure mental states (see App. I.2).

‘Material yardsticks’ alone are insufficient as a measure of human well-being. The concept ‘poverty’ (*hsinye*) in Burmese also means discomfort of mind. To be poor ‘is to suffer from a paucity of those mental and spiritual, as well as material, resources which make a human being feel fulfilled and give life a meaning beyond mere existence’. Conversely, ‘rich’ (*chantha*) in Burmese also means rich in mental and spiritual resources.

In this essay, Aung San Suu Kyi identifies a number of mental qualities and practices which she feels ‘could reconcile the diverse instincts and aspirations of mankind’ from a Buddhist point of view [B1]. According to Buddhism it is not lack of material wealth, but greed or lust, the first of the Ten Impurities (*kilesa*), which stand in the way of a wholesome state of mind. On the other hand, it is liberalism or generosity which head the various lists of the Ten Perfections of the Buddha (*parami*), the Ten Virtues, and the Ten Duties of Kings. This ‘is a recognition of the crucial importance of the liberal, generous spirit as an effective antidote to greed as well as a fount of virtues which engender happiness and harmony’ [C1]. Furthermore, in Buddhism loving-kindness, compassion and sympathetic joy are ‘divine’ states of mind which ‘help to alleviate suffering and to spread happiness among all beings,’ and the obstacle to the cultivation of these noble mental states is ‘narrow self-interest’ [D1].

In short, it is ‘a generous spirit’ which peoples and nations should cultivate, ‘which welcome the happiness of others as an enhancement of the happiness of the self’ which will make ‘many seemingly insoluble problems ... prove less tractable’ [C2].

Her belief in *karma* as the inevitable relationship between cause and effect permits the view that people who do evil or act as if they are above the law are punished for their own wrong-doings [G1].

Her personal views on the interrelationship between Buddhism and politics do not become evident until her statements and interviews in some of the later sections of *Freedom from fear* are examined. More Buddhist concepts are employed in ‘Quest for democracy’, where due to her newly found political role, she has tended to address a broader audience to include the Burmese electorate as a whole and the international public.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, though guided by Buddhist principles, she does not think of herself as a Buddhist politician: ‘I don’t think of myself as either a Gandhian or Buddhist politician. I am Buddhist of course, and I would be guided by all the Buddhist principles that I have absorbed throughout my life’.<sup>3</sup>

In the face of such difficult personal circumstances, she began to take a greater interest in the development of ‘inner spiritual strength’ [S5] and in the practice of Buddhist techniques of mental culture [D4–7].<sup>4</sup>

### Post-house arrest

At an interview shortly after her release from house arrest on 11 July 1995, Aung San Suu Kyi said ‘I hope I’ve matured. I feel spiritually stronger; in a sense I’ve been tested and that has strengthened me. And I think that I have learned to put a much greater value on compassion. I think compassion is very important in this world.’<sup>5</sup>

Two major publications arose from the material she provided after her release on 11 July 1995, namely *The voice of hope* and *Letters from Burma* both published in 1997. A new edition of *Freedom from Fear* with five additional essays was also published in 1995. In addition, a number of speeches and other kinds of presentations were published in various newspapers and on the Internet.

It is interesting to gauge the regime’s reaction to *The letters of Burma*.

<sup>1</sup> ASSK (1995:240).

<sup>2</sup> It is possible that Buddhist concepts may be found in the original Burmese of some of the speeches, but it is difficult to make this out in the translation. There are some sections, such as her speech at Shwedagon Pagoda on 26.8.1988, ‘In the eye of the Burmese revolution’ (12.09.1988) which are not given over to references to Buddhism at all

<sup>3</sup> ASSK (1997b:79).

<sup>4</sup> Aee also Mallet (1994).

<sup>5</sup> ‘Patience, pragmatism pays off for “the Lady”’. *The Nation*, 01.11.1995.

Since November 1995, Daw Suu Kyi has been writing the column Letter From Burma series of articles in the Mainichi Shinbun. To date, she has written 42 such articles. She touched upon topics to make foreigners, who have not been to Myanmar, to have a low opinion of the Myanmar people and misunderstand the Government. In some articles, she exaggerated that Myanmar are too poor to have proper breakfast and had to drink congee water instead, that living standard is so low, that NLD members are being suppressed, that though Myanmar are famous for their hospitality, they do not wish to receive visitors now so on and so forth. In fact, Daw Suu Kyi only belongs to one political party in Myanmar. It should be considered whether it is proper for journalists to public the articles of a mere political activist. What is worse is that broadcasting and dissemination of roadside talks on Saturdays and Sundays by foreign radios amount to destabilization of Myanmar. Even if not intentional, it still constitute to aiding and abetting a lone political party in Myanmar.<sup>1</sup>

This material combined – and in particular *The voice of hope* – and demonstrated an extremely strong commitment to make Buddhism relevant and central to her politics. One of the first things she did after her house arrest was to visit the Thamanya Sayadaw (see below).

She has explicitly argued for not separating ‘the secular from the [Buddhist] spiritual’ [H1]. She expressed her view that in Vietnam the Buddhist movement could not succeed as there were many non-Buddhists holding power and ‘the Buddhist movement could not activate those who were crucial to the situation’. Though in Burma this is not the case, however, she also recognizes that Buddhism, which has no parish, has features that hold back the political organization of people and permit greater control by the regime [H2].

Some awkward elements still enter her speeches. In a speech on 14 October 1995, she referred appreciatively to the status of Upper Burmans [အညာသား], who were the majority present, who will ‘lead the country to prosperity’ [အကောင်းစားသည်]. This may be appropriate in a particular context, but if the speech were to be reported country-wide then it is unlikely to endear the Lower Burmans. In the same speech, a monk interrupted and asked her opinion of the saying, ‘if you learn knowledge, it is for the country progress, but if you look for money, the country suffers’. Though her answer was cleverly phrased in terms of the contrast between mundane knowledge and transcendental wisdom, instead of answering by addressing the monk politely using the monastic sacred language such as ‘your holiness’ ‘pupil’ (*ta-byí daw*) and ‘lord’ (*a-shin-hpayà*), she answered the public directly going against the grain of Burmese custom which her father observed in his speeches, always showing politeness to the Sangha.

### Factors influencing Aung San Suu Kyi's Buddhicisation

I have already drawn attention to the value of Buddhism in political opposition, both through the Sangha and the concepts that accompany Buddhism in terms of salvation from *samsara*. Though Aung San Suu Kyi's choice for Buddhism may be thus interpreted, there were more specific factors that led to her emphasis on Buddhism.

First, in early September 1988 prior to the foundation of the NLD Aung San Suu Kyi was accused of being surrounded by Communists [N1]. Indeed, she has been accused of ‘going the same way as her uncle's [Than Tun's] Burma Communist Party’.<sup>2</sup> One observer put it that Buddhism ‘is an invaluable weapon in defending the political system against the attacks of the only hostile ideology capable of posing a serious threat, i.e. communism.’<sup>3</sup> This drove Aung San Suu Kyi, in turn, to emphasize her Buddhist credentials from the start. The accusation of communism was continued by military intelligence in mid September 1988,<sup>4</sup> and later similar accusations were made by Aung Gyi on 3 December of the same year and in 1989.<sup>5</sup> Though Aung San Suu Kyi denied this, stating on two occasions in June 1989 that these members had long renounced their communist views and that the NLD was, in fact, anti-communist,<sup>6</sup> this became a repeated criticism by the SLORC. The accusations were perpetuated in subsequent journalist reports,<sup>7</sup> and have continued right up until today.<sup>8</sup>

In response she appealed to the Buddhist precepts, ‘denied she was a communist or sacrilegious, and reminded the country's military leaders of two Buddhist precepts, against lying and killing’. Aung San Suu Kyi could not have survived these attacks on her political aspirations without countering with Buddhist

<sup>1</sup> Yangon's Press Conference (3), Rangoon, 01.10.1996.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Very sorry – in the Tawgyi. *NLM*, 04.06.1996.

<sup>3</sup> Smith (1965:311–312).

<sup>4</sup> *Working People's Daily* (Rangoon), 18.09.1988; ASSK (1991:274).

<sup>5</sup> *New Yorker*, 09.10.1989, p. 91; ASSK (1995:341); ASSK (1991:274–75).

<sup>6</sup> Amnesty International (1989:40,55); ASSK (1995:343,344).

<sup>7</sup> Hpe Kan Kaung (1997:114–20).

<sup>8</sup> Thanlyet. ‘Harm caused by one's own deed, being caught in one's own trap – all should beware!’. *NLM*, 25.11.96.

ideas. Her critique in terms of Buddhism is made all the easier given the regime's lack of interest and understanding of Buddhism [H3], who are sometimes said to have five 'anti-Buddhist' moral precepts, namely jealousy, envy, anger, greed and childish stupidity.<sup>1</sup>

Second, the course of events pointed to Buddhism as the last bastion of freedom and democracy. The Sangha played a supportive role in the democracy movement as 'their monasteries have offered a haven for poor students and Burmese dissidents'.<sup>2</sup> Once all the students and politicians opposing the regime had been silenced, the political arena shifted to the monkhood, the one element which the regime has never been able to establish full control over despite its attempts in the 1980s. Burmese people care intensely about their Buddhism, and the regime acted against the collective will of the Sangha, which itself for a moment became the most effective idiom of opposition [L1]. This completely delegitimised the regime in the eyes of the majority of Burmese Buddhists and inflicted irreparable damage.

Buddhism was therefore more than a way of countering the accusation of communism; it proved to be the last possible form of opposition against the ruthless military regime once all other forms of protest had been silenced. In countering with Buddhist ideas, and with the army's subsequent behaviour towards Buddhism, Aung San Suu Kyi evidently did much more than counter accusations of her as a communist – she gained the regime's high ground.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1950s, the Burmese army has justified its prominence in the political arena in terms of its role in fighting communist insurgency and has periodically uncovered communist inspired conspiracies commonly presented as a major danger to Buddhism. With the regime now perceived as opposing Buddhism, however, it has left the defence of Buddhism to the NLD and has effectively delegitimised itself.

Third, the personal attack on her 'foreign' lifestyle, connexions and her supposed ignorance of Burmese and Buddhist ways [L2-L4] have pressed her to play up Buddhism, for Buddhism is the most highly valued aspect of Burman culture.

Fourth, as already suggested, her emotional state as the result of her confinement is linked to the adoption of Buddhist techniques of mental culture.

Fifth, democracy has been designated as incompatible and 'foreign' by the regime. The same is the case with human rights. Aung San Suu Kyi has argued that democracy and human rights resonate with the Burmese Buddhist value system. She argues that The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is 'wholesome and good' and is present in indigenous Buddhist values. Furthermore, without the geographical exchange of ideas Buddhism would never even have reached Burma. Taking the regime's argument to the extreme, Buddhist values, themselves the core of Burmese society, would have remained in India, so that 'Buddhism would be confined to north India, Christianity to a narrow tract in the Middle East and Islam to Arabia'.<sup>4</sup> As she responded to the question whether 'you are ushering in a renaissance period in Burma, which is combining timeless Buddhist values with modern political principles?' she said: 'When people face troubles, they are forced to reassess their lives and their values, and that is what leads to renaissance.'

Sixth, after a few half-hearted attempts in 1989, the regime has been unwilling to involve themselves in dialogue with the elected NLD. Her commitment to pursue a politics of non-violence, which she has consistently advocated since,<sup>5</sup> meant that she had to take up all possible instruments for peaceful opposition to the regime. This meant the involvement of those ideas most strongly advocating non-violence, which were bound to draw her back to Buddhism and to influential monks for inspiration.

Seventh, the regime has criticised the NLD for engaging in anti-Buddhist activities [H4], which the NLD responded to with Buddhist arguments.<sup>6</sup> See Appendix 4 for an example of an article attacking Aung San Suu Kyi on two of the ten defilements, namely jealousy and envy.

Finally, her husband Michael Aris is a renowned scholar of Buddhism, and she has herself spent much time in Nepal; this has undoubtedly influenced her views, in particular *metta* and *karuna*, which are

<sup>1</sup> U Kyi Maung in ASSK (1997b:180).

<sup>2</sup> Mya Maung (1992:174).

<sup>3</sup> 'This cultural taunting of bad rulers by the leading clergy of Upper Burma spread to other Buddhist monks across Burma and apparently caused some psychological trauma to the military rank and files. Indeed, being Burmese and Buddhist is synonymous and these cultural sanctions may well be the most potent weapon against the army.' (Mya Maung 1991:303).

<sup>4</sup> ASSK (1995:175).

<sup>5</sup> *Bangkok Post*, 26.03.1989; ASSK (1991:324).

<sup>6</sup> The regime, in their 45th Press Conference, accused Aung San Suu Kyi as anti Buddhist, and of having said The Buddha also was an ordinary human (Hpe Kan Kaung 1997:121).

particularly strong in Mahayana Buddhism [I1].

The political arena in which she found herself increasingly brought Buddhism to the fore. Sensing that Buddhism was one of the last remaining platforms for NLD opposition, the regime proposed a purge of the monastic order towards the end of September 1996 in order, to prevent the ordination of NLD members [H5].

It is not until her 1997 publications that we find out how much this Buddhist discourse has advanced. This has surprised some observers. For example, Lintner (1997), in his review of her two 1997 books, says that 'her tendency to explain political phenomena in terms of Buddhist philosophy alienates her from the local and international business communities, as well as other potential supporters of the open, pluralistic society that she advocates'.

Aung San Suu Kyi's attitude towards Buddhism, already evident in her early writings before 1988, has been that historically it played an important role in Burmese concepts of identity and in politics.<sup>1</sup> In particular, she characterises education in Burma as 'connected with the teachings of the Buddha who had pointed out the way to *nirvana*', so that to be educated 'meant more than the mere acquisition of book learning; it meant the mastery of supreme knowledge that would lead to enlightenment', which was quite different from British colonial education.<sup>2</sup> She recognizes her father's preoccupation with Buddhism in his early youth. Though she sketches her father's actions against a Buddhist background,<sup>3</sup> she also recognizes that he later expressed a firm dislike for integrating Buddhism into politics.<sup>4</sup> Her own early education included visits to Shwedagon Pagoda, listening to her aunt's stories about the Buddha's lives and Buddhist values.<sup>5</sup> In her letters, she demonstrates her commitment during her campaigns to listen to the advice of members of the monastic order from all over Burma, including a Sagaing monk who instructed her to bear in mind the example of Sumedha who took the vow to become a Buddha and postponed enlightenment for the good of the world [H6-H7].

Furthermore, I am not sure when this began, but by 1998 Aung San Suu Kyi was donating money every month to monks from the following monasteries: Shwetaungkon Monastery (U Pandita); Mun Pali Tekkatho (on the 19th to commemorate her father's death); Chanmyei Yeiktha; and Shwe Kyetyek Kyaung (on the 27th to commemorate her mother's death). The Shwetaungkon Monastery and Chanmye Yeiktha are *vipassana* training centres, and the Shwekyet Yek Kyaung is the monastery where her sons were novitiated.

However, she has also warned against the pitfalls of a 'bigoted and narrow-minded attitude' towards Buddhism.<sup>6</sup> She not only expresses her tolerance for religion, but she considers religion a positive value. She says that 'religion is about increasing peace and harmony in the world', and 'Everyone should be given a chance to create peace and harmony in their own way' [ZN1]. Her maternal grandfather in particular, who was a Christian and to whom she read the Bible in Burmese, helped her appreciate this.<sup>7</sup>

So, though her politics are within the Buddhist idiom, this is largely because it provides the main practices and concepts with which she was brought up, which her father and prior politicians used, and which is the idiom with which the majority can be addressed. Aung San Suu Kyi has expressed the view that benefits would accrue to the country were the regime becoming more, rather than less, Buddhist [H8]. This is indeed, what the regime has done since her release in 1995, though mostly in perfunctory ways.

<sup>1</sup> ASSK (1991:113,141–42).

<sup>2</sup> ASSK (1991:124–25, 294).

<sup>3</sup> e.g. ASSK (1991:187–88).

<sup>4</sup> ASSK (1991:7,8).

<sup>5</sup> Whitney (1997:25–27).

<sup>6</sup> ASSK (1991:202).

<sup>7</sup> Parenteau (1994:61), Whitney (1997:32).

# Chapter 17

## Freedom from fear

*Freedom from fear* is the title of the book first published in 1991. It refers to the title of Aung San Suu Kyi's speech delivered on the occasion of the 1990 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought published as the centrepiece of this book. This prize was presented in her absence at the award ceremony at Strasbourg on 10 July 1991.<sup>1</sup>

Aung San Suu Kyi's concept of freedom from fear is influenced to some extent by the Anglo-American attempt to gain co-operation of the democratic forces in the fight against fascism and the subsequent Universal Declaration of Human Rights. However, this influence is only indirect. Aung San Suu Kyi, instead begins her essay with the concept of fear within a Buddhist classification, and ends with the concept of perfection in a manner highly suggestive of emancipation from fear on the path to arahatship. Here I attempt to distinguish various layers that go into this expression.

Aung San Suu Kyi emphasises freedom from fear more than any other kind of freedom.<sup>2</sup> She underlines the close link to the Buddhist concept of mental training by means of both *metta* but in particular *vipassana* in the model of the Buddhist saint (*yahanda*) and the martyr (*azani*). What we can say is that freedom from oppression, fear and national independence are all related to mental culture. One irony that should be pointed out from the beginning is that the techniques of *vipassana*, that are so useful in the prison context, are rivalled by heroin addiction in prisons, which is also known in Burma as 'freedom from fear'.<sup>3</sup> There is thus overlap between drugs and mental culture, both of which aspire to freedom from fear.

### Freedom

In a recent article on Aung San Suu Kyi's concept of freedom, Silverstein argues that the struggle in Burma today 'turns on the idea of freedom'. This idea in Burma has, he argues, two sources, one of which is 'deeply embedded in Burma's religion and culture', while the other is represented by the 'ideas and values brought to Burma by the British rulers following their conquest'. At the beginning of the twentieth century 'the two streams merged', so that today, as during the time of U Nu, 'the idea of freedom in Burma is a mixture of the two traditions'.

According to him, Aung San Suu Kyi's idea is 'in the mainstream of Burmese thought' and therefore 'easily understood and widely accepted by the people'. Of the two streams of thought, the Burmese Buddhist idea of freedom is more powerful, for the Burmese concept 'has its roots in Buddhism, customs and traditions even though it was not claimed in its own right before the advent of colonial rule.'<sup>4</sup> He argues that political freedom was experienced more by ethnic minorities and villages remote from the power centre. Religious freedom, on the other hand, was 'implicit in Buddhism and explicitly practised by Burmans and non-Burmans alike without ever being extracted and claimed as an independent good'.<sup>5</sup>

I think Silverstein is right in saying that Buddhism has an important influence on Burmese ideas of freedom. However, largely because he does not deal with the English and Burmese terminology itself in detail, he ends up oversimplifying Aung San Suu Kyi's vernacular expression of freedom. In Burma, concepts for freedom and self-determination have historically been linked to the Buddhist quest for liberation, though this is a rather complicated relationship based on several different concepts of freedom as I have already indicated in my argument about the hermit state vis-à-vis the hermit practice.

There is the attainment of *nibbana*, which is a total unconditioned kind of freedom, but there is also the more esoteric and millenarian style of freedom that proclaims sovereignty and control, as in *htwet yak pauk* (the Freedom Bloc). For Aung San and Aung San Suu Kyi the former kind of freedom has a function in purifying politics and raising the politician's mind to a higher level, though the latter kind is seen as a corrupt and undemocratic form of freedom based on charismatic leaders claiming to be universal kings at the heart of government. Furthermore, there are other concepts delineated by U Hpo Hlaing in *The taste of*

<sup>1</sup> It was published in *The Times Literary Supplement*, the *New York Times*, the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the *Bangkok Post*, the *Times of India* and in other newspapers in Germany, Norway and Iceland.

<sup>2</sup> Though she has also referred to the other 'basic freedoms', namely of association, expression and unlawful restraint (Aung San Suu Kyi 'Honoring those of fought for freedom'. *Mainichi Daily News*, 12.01.1998).

<sup>3</sup> Christ Beyrer. 'War in the blood: sex, politics and AIDS in South East Asia'. *Burma Debate*, V, 2, 1998, pp. 6–8.

<sup>4</sup> Silverstein (1996:212).

<sup>5</sup> Silverstein (1996:214).

*freedom [vimutti rasa] which is productive of the various levels of ariya.*

### Depressed by fear

A distinction is often made between fear and anxiety. With fear, an idea exists as to the cause (fear of something in particular), whereas anxiety is less abrupt, more nagging psychological condition with a less identifiable source (one is anxious about a general situation). In Burma, fear is the predominant condition, the cause of which is well known. The opposite of fear is courage, and the repression and uprooting of fear is an attribute of heroes, martyrs and renouncers.

Though fear is cross-cultural, and psychologically a similar condition, there are different mechanisms for coping with fear. In Burma there are two different parties experiencing fear for different reasons, namely members of the regime who experience the fear of revenge by the people they repress, and the political opposition representing the common people who experience fear under repression. They cope with these fears differently, and while the regime initiates hard authoritarian behaviour, the NLD members respond non-violently with *metta*..

Aung San Suu Kyi has isolated ‘fear’ and ‘intolerance of diversity’ as the main characteristics of the regime [O1]. Similarly, U Kyi Maung characterised the regime as ‘fear-based’ and works like ‘Big-Brother’.<sup>1</sup> So, too has Tin U, who furthermore says that ‘this “fear” they live with is identical to the “fear” they have created among the people’.<sup>2</sup>

The people in particular fear forced labour [O2] and forced portering, which could lead to injury, disease or even death [O3]. However, like the feeling of imprisonment, fear is produced by the general state of the entire country in which human rights are denied.

Within a system that denies the existence of basic human rights, fear tends to be the order of the day. Fear of imprisonment, fear of torture, fear of death, fear of losing friends, family, property or means of livelihood, fear of poverty, fear of isolation, fear of failure. A most insidious form of fear is that which masquerades as common sense or even wisdom, condemning as foolish, reckless, insignificant or futile the small, daily acts of courage which help to preserve man's self-respect and inherent human dignity. It is not easy for a people conditioned by the iron rule of the principle that might is right to free themselves from the enervating miasma of fear. Yet even under the most crushing state machinery courage rises up again and again, for fear is not the natural state of civilized man.<sup>3</sup>

### Freedom from fear – democracy and human rights

Freedom and fear are closely related concepts in Aung San Suu Kyi's discourse. On a mundane level, they have everyday meanings. For example, to the question ‘what does freedom mean to you?’ Aung San Suu Kyi replied ‘Freedom would mean that I would be able to do what I understand to be right, without the fear that by doing so I would be exposing myself and others to danger’.<sup>4</sup> Thus freedom and fear are inversely related: true freedom can only arise in one who has overcome fear which, in turn, is related to an accurate perception of what is dangerous in a particular political environment. As I shall argue, there is here a complex relationship between fear and wisdom.

More concretely, Aung San Suu Kyi placed freedom from fear [ကြောက်ရွံ့ခြင်းမှလွတ်တင်းရေး] alongside freedom from want [ချို့တဲ့မှုကင်းလွတ်] as the two basic human rights ‘without which human beings cannot lead dignified, meaningful lives’. For ‘As long as there are parts of the world where the two freedoms are not fostered there will be refugees’ [K1]. The purpose of the democratic struggle then, is to liberate people from these two psychological conditions for, as she says, ‘In working for democracy and human rights we are striving to establish political and social institutions and values that will free our people from want and fear.’ [K3] She defines the democracy struggle as ‘a change in our everyday lives’ and ‘we want freedom from fear and want’ [Y23].<sup>5</sup>

Aung San Suu Kyi does not relate her particular use of the expression freedom from want to the Allied war effort. However, objectively speaking, that is where this discourse started. During World War II, the freedom from want and fear were originally enunciated in 1941 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt as the third and fourth of the Four Freedoms.

<sup>1</sup> ASSK (1997b:194).

<sup>2</sup> ASSK (1997b:232).

<sup>3</sup> ASSK (1991:184–85).

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Aung San Suu Kyi by Ivan Suvanjiëff. *Shambala Sun*, January 1996.

<sup>5</sup> By contrast, the regime steers clear of such mental view of rights and refers to striving towards ‘practical human rights [internal to the country]’ [နိ,ရဲ့,ပြည်တွင်ကျတဲ့လူ့,အခွင့်အရေးတွေ ] as meaning the ‘security of life and property, food requirements, and social social advancement of the people’. *NLM* and ကြေးမုံ, 16.09.1998.

In the future days we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms. The first is freedom of speech and expression. The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way. The third is freedom from want. The fourth is freedom from fear.<sup>1</sup>

These were brought up in the Roosevelt meeting with Churchill in August 1941 off the coast of Newfoundland, when they established joint war aims under the Atlantic Charter as part of the democratic (as opposed to Fascist) ideology of the Alliance. It subsequently entered the discourse of human rights through the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights by an eight-member UN committee chaired by the American humanitarian worker Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.<sup>2</sup>

Aung San Suu Kyi has repeatedly subscribed to the entire Declaration of Human Rights [Y30][ZD5], and so is well aware of its contents. She undoubtedly uses these expressions conscious of their international meaning in terms of human rights.

What is noticeable is that, of the four freedoms, only freedom of fear is actually prominent in her speeches; freedom from want is only referred to once, and freedom of speech and belief do not form cornerstones in Aung San Suu Kyi's political discourse. Freedom of speech is mentioned in particular by U Kyi Maung, who says that 'Suu's [Aung San Suu Kyi] compound is the only liberated area in Burma. From there we say all sorts of things' [K5]. Freedom of belief implies freedom from fear, for it is 'fear of persecution for their political beliefs that has made so many of our people feel that even in their own homes they cannot live in dignity and security' [K2]. Furthermore, freedom from want is a much underdeveloped concept, only referred to occasionally in relation to freedom from fear.

In contrast to the NLD perspective which psychologizes freedom, the regime steers clear of such mental view of rights and prefers to strive towards 'practical human rights [internal to the country]' [နိ့ရဲ့ပြည်တွင်ကျတဲ့လူ့အခွင့်အရေးတွေ ] as meaning the 'security of life and property, food requirements, and social advancement of the people'.<sup>3</sup> The regime cannot control the psychology of freedom.

### Freedom from fear – Aung San and Gandhi

What is clear from the above contexts is that, though freedom from fear as an English concept had a predominantly secular strategic meaning within the Atlantic Treaty, and later a humanitarian purpose within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Aung San Suu Kyi does not relate her own use of freedom from fear directly to these. Instead, she 'Asianizes' and 'indigenizes' the concept by focusing on two personalities – Aung San and Gandhi.

The war created a situation of fear world-wide. But to the Burmese and Indian population this very same war situation also brought onto the horizon the possibility of national independence after a long period of colonial domination. During this time, the state of fearlessness of the national political leaders became the nation's focus. Do they dare to oppose colonialism? Aung San Suu Kyi finds the words used by Jawaharlal Nehru to describe Mahatma Gandhi could therefore well be applied to Aung San: 'the essence of his teaching was fearlessness and truth, and action allied to these, always keeping the welfare of the masses in view'. Aung San Suu Kyi has suggested that Aung San and Gandhi share 'an inevitable sameness about challenges of authoritarian rule anywhere at any time' which is reflected in 'a similarity in the intrinsic qualities of those who rise up to meet the challenge' [O19]. Both were, of course, the leading political figures during a period of intense locally aroused nationalist sentiment, so that fearlessness attained particular cultural interpretations for their own respective countries.

The allied forces asserted the same concept in their own way against the threat of ultra-right nationalists in Germany (and later Japan). Nationalists in both India and Burma hoped that Article 3 in President Eisenhower's Atlantic Treaty, which affirmed that peoples would have the right to choose their own government, would apply to their respective countries. Indeed, we know that on 8 September the British Prime Minister exempted all elements of the British Empire from the Atlantic Treaty. Premier U Saw visited Britain in October 1941, shortly before Japan entered war, specifically to look for a promise of freedom for the colonies under this Treaty. However, the British government suggested to U Saw that the Atlantic Treaty

<sup>1</sup> *New York Times*, 07.01.1941, pp. 4,7.

<sup>2</sup> Chorba, Timothy. 'The Charter is still relevant, says a diplomat.' *Asia Week*, 31.10.1997.

<sup>3</sup> 'General Than Shwe speech on the occasion of the AGM of the USDA'. *NLM* and မြေစုံ, 16.09.1998.

did refer to freedom for the colonies, including Burma.<sup>1</sup>

This is why Aung San emphasized the importance of freedom from fear regularly, for it had been mentioned in the Atlantic Treaty and he hoped that the four freedoms would be extended to Burma also. The Declaration of Human Rights was not formulated before Aung San's death, and so we can only investigate Aung San's relationship to President Eisenhower's notion of freedom from fear.

It is through the image of Aung San that she came to appreciate the need to resist fear. Resisting fear was a feature of her upbringing by her mother, who taught her to respect Aung San's values of fearlessness [O11]. As Aung San Suu Kyi explained, in his speeches Aung San, once he attained political power, was able to become a civilian and 'lay aside his sword without fear' because of his faith in *metta* and truth [E26]. Aung San, in his inaugural address to the AFPFL delivered on 20 January 1946, encouraged the Sangha to foster 'freedom from fear' with the people. The role of the Sangha, in their propagation of Buddhism, should 'go amongst our people, preach the doctrine of unity and love; carry the message of higher freedom to every nook and corner of the country, freedom to religious worship, freedom to preach and spread the Dharma anywhere and anytime, *freedom from fear* [ခကြာတ်ရှုံစိုးရိမ်ပူန်ခြင်းမှကင်းလွတ်မှု], ignorance, superstition, etc., teach our people to rely upon themselves and re-construct themselves materially, spiritually and otherwise'.<sup>2</sup>

Aung San Suu Kyi quoted a resolution which was proposed by Aung San on 16 June 1947 in the Constituent assembly, as the basis of drawing up the new constitution which she said 'encapsulated the hope of the people of the Burma for a state sustained by democratic values that would enable them to live in freedom and dignity'. The fourth point is that the constitution shall 'guarantee and secure to all the peoples of union, justice, social, economic and political; equality of status, of opportunity, and before the law *freedom of thought, expression, belief, worship*, subject to law and public morality ...'.

Aung San, as co-founder of the Anti-Fascist Party League, thus skilfully blended this anti-Fascist and pro-democratic idea of the concept of 'freedom from fear' with its Buddhist ramifications as advocated by the Sangha, while providing for the other two freedoms (expression and belief) in the constitution. Aung San died young, and is generally seen as a modern pragmatic man of action who advocated a secular politics. Aung San relied much on intermediaries such as Thakkin Kodawhmaing to translate his political views into the more religious-minded ideas of the common people. To develop a coherent political philosophy meant that Aung San Suu Kyi had to look elsewhere for inspiration. She looked initially in the direction of Gandhi. Gandhi's greatest achievement she quotes Nehru as saying was the 'instillation of courage to the people of India'. He used the ancient political philosophy of ancient India and found that 'the greatest gift for an individual or a nation ... was *abhaya*, fearlessness, not merely bodily courage but absence of fear from the mind'.<sup>3</sup> She also looked at Mandela, whose *Long walk to freedom* she had read.<sup>4</sup>

### Buddhist freedom from fear

One explanation for Aung San Suu Kyi's emphasis on freedom from fear is that this is readily interpreted in Buddhist tradition in terms of psychological comportment rather than substantive political realities. When properly translated, this is less controversial in the mental culture of Burmese politics, as it appeals to the Burmese aptitude to interpret politics in terms of Buddhist psychological concepts.

One reason for the neglect of the other three freedoms is to be found in Burmese Buddhism. Freedom of belief does not translate well into Burmese, for it is too readily associated with ideology and with monotheistic religion, which translates into Burmese as 'wrong-viewed' [မိစ္ဆာဝါဒ] and 'selfness' (*atta*), and runs directly opposite to the Buddhist teachings about non-self (*anatta*). Also, freedom of speech is not so important in Burmese discourse, for in Burmese opinion the spiritual and conciliatory nature of speech is seen as more important than the freedom to say what one wants [R2].

Though used, 'Freedom from want' may also be controversial. 'Want' is too readily linked to the mental defilements related to sense-gratification. In Pali, there are no less than sixteen different terms for 'desire', many of which overlap with 'want' in a negative sense, of which the most important in Burmese are 'craving' [တဏှာ *tanha*] and 'desire' [ဆန္ဒ *chanda*]. Though sometimes positive, as in the desire to do good or to attain *nibbana*, for the most part these concepts are seen to go against the grain of even minimal Buddhist behaviour because they are based on attachment, which prevents the practice of Buddhist charity (ဒါန *dana*)

<sup>1</sup> Cady (1958:429–31).

<sup>2</sup> Silverstein (1993:93–142), Aung San (1971:28).

<sup>3</sup> ASSK (1995:184).

<sup>4</sup> Victor (1998:103).

and renunciation of offerings ‘without regret’.

Indeed, the regime has sometimes justified its socialist path by means of the idea underlying Schumacher's ‘Small is beautiful’, i.e. what matters is the reduction of want rather than the increase of consumption. It is by these means that the regime has justified its ‘hermit’ status of closed borders and egalitarian socialist development. It is possible, therefore, to see in this cynical manipulation of Buddhist ideas of ‘want’ a history of human rights violation. Freedom from want takes a peripheral role in Aung San Suu Kyi's speeches and writings compared to the central role designated to freedom from fear. As she said, ‘among the basic freedoms to which men aspire that their lives might be full and uncramped, freedom from fear stands out as both a means and an end’ [K6].

In ‘Freedom from fear’ Aung San Suu Kyi categorises ‘fear’ (*bhaya-gati*) as the worst of the Four Corruptions (*agati*) in the monastic code of conduct, for not only does *bhaya*, fear, stifle and slowly destroy all sense of right and wrong, it so often lies at the root of the other three kinds of corruption’ [O6].<sup>1</sup> She holds that fear creates a corrupt society, saying that ‘in any society where fear is rife corruption in all forms becomes deeply entrenched’ [O6]. The political situation becomes confrontational because hate and fear are ‘the opposite sides of the same coin. It's the same thing. You don't hate unless you fear, basically’ [O7].

I have already noted that Aung San Suu Kyi tied this concept to Aung San's fearlessness of Aung San [R12][U1], her father, who spoke truth ‘fearlessly’, and Gandhi, who said: ‘the greatest gift for an individual or a nation ... was *abhaya*, fearlessness, not merely bodily courage but absence of fear from the mind’.<sup>2</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi, however, moved away from this in favour of indigenising and Buddhicising her concepts – the concepts of Law as *dhamma*, human rights as ‘the shade of the Buddha's teachings’ [E32], and freedom from fear as the development of *metta* and *karuna*. Indeed, she says that enjoyment of these basic freedoms will come when the country is ‘peaceful like the *dhamma*’ [K4]. Thus the broader concept of freedom and human rights, from which all four particular freedoms follow, are closely linked to Buddhist practice.

Of all freedoms, freedom from fear is therefore Aung San Suu Kyi's focus. Fear sums up not only the regime and the conditions in the country [Y1-Y16], but emancipation from fear very much at the heart of the Buddhist concept of martyr (*azani*) and saint (*yahanda*).

### Overcoming fear

The political niche of Gandhi and Aung San, of course, parallels that of Aung San Suu Kyi today, which is why theyse men are an inspiration to her. The main difference is that she is facing not a colonial but an indigenous military Burmese regime. Nevertheless, the situation of fear generated by repression by police and military is as pertinent today as it was then. To overcome fear is a major preoccupation on the part of Aung San Suu Kyi. She draws attention to several techniques in which she herself and her colleagues coped with her fear, and through which she also expects the regime to cope with its fear.

The regime ‘fear change’ [O4]. If fear is ‘not the natural state of civilized man’, then civilisation consists of drawing on that ‘wellspring of courage and endurance in the face of unbridled power’ by reasserting ‘the sanctity of ethical principles’ and see to it that ‘spiritual and material advancement’ takes place through ‘self-improvement’, and in particular ‘perfection’. By these means, ultimately, it is ‘man's vision of a world fit for rational, civilized humanity which leads him to dare and to suffer to build societies free from want and fear’. Aung San Suu Kyi views international support as ameliorating the fear of the people (though not of the regime) such as the support by the former European Economic Community for the Burmese cause [O5].

First, she claims that in her youth she conquered fear from the dark by facing it for two weeks [O8]. After she was subsequently brought up outside Burma she had not further developed fear as a habit [O9].

Second, *brahma-vihara* proves to be a major element in overcoming fear. As we shall see below, Tin U also emphasizes that *brahma-vihara* and a monastic education allowed him to turn away from ‘a shallow and fearful life’ associated with his life under the military [E1]. Also, Aung San Suu Kyi views the regime's fear as the product of its lack of compassion for others, and developing compassion would dissipate its fears [F2]. This is a view she shares with Tin U, who holds that ‘fear compromises the feelings of compassion’ and ‘when SLORC eases their fear a bit they will have a dialogue with us’.<sup>3</sup>

Third, a more basic way of overcoming fear is by taking refuge in the Three Jewels – the Buddha,

<sup>1</sup> General Saw Maung in his first statement appealed to the military ‘should not indulge in the four *agati* (biases) in the general election.’ (Saw Maung 1990b:8,15).

<sup>2</sup> ASSK (1995:183–84).

<sup>3</sup> ASSK (1997b:234).

Dhamma, and the Sangha. Also known as the Three Refuges (*sarana tiratana*), ‘those who seek its protection overcome their fear, alarm, physical and mental suffering and various miseries’. Wholesome consciousness (*mahakusala-citta*) inclines one to the Three Jewels, and through devotion and veneration mental defilements are ‘moved’ resulting in ‘refuge consciousness’ (*sarana-gamana*). Though these benefits are often seen as taking place ‘in the lower worlds after death’, the Three Refuges are commonly recited at funeral services with the aim of benefiting the dead in the process of being dispatched to their new abodes.<sup>1</sup>

Fourth, we have already noted that *vipassana* practice leads to states of mind that permit one to be ‘free from fear’. Indeed, as we will note later on, the issue of uprooting fear (rather than temporarily suspending it) through *vipassana* was addressed by U Pandita in *In this very life* in which Mara's Sixth Army is known as ‘Fear’ itself, and only ‘a person who reaches *nibbana* is completely protected and can therefore be called “The Fearless”, the one without danger’. This is attained ‘even before arriving at the perfect safety of *nibbana*’, for ‘one is protected from fearful things while walking the Noble Eightfold Path’ so that ‘this path itself is the haven’. It is ‘attachment’ that makes for ‘a very shallow fearful life’ [E1].

However, ‘freedom from fear’ is not unambiguous, both in the context of the Burmese language and in Buddhism. Though in some contexts it works well in Burmese, its use is contextual and sometimes it does not translate well. For one thing, in Rangoon and Mandalay the drug heroin is now known locally as ‘freedom from fear’, an alternative form of courage needed to face dictatorship which is allegedly fostered by the military to defuse opposition.<sup>2</sup>

The reason why it does not translate well is because in Buddhism fear is not necessarily always negative. Indeed, it is often seen as positive. For example, ‘fear’ [ထဲတဲ တဲး, P. *ottappa*] in the sense of ‘not doing, saying or planning out of fear of doing bad deeds’ (i.e. moral dread, scrupulousness) together with ‘shame’ [တိရိတဲး], are seen as the ‘two guardians of the world’ [လောကဝါလတဲး ဟိး], which are ‘cultural rules guarding the world from destruction’.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, *samvega* [သံဝေဂ] represents the fear of the consequences of action for a future state, and as a result, the experience of remorse.

Just in case it be thought that these are merely Buddhist theories, it should be noted that they are also of some political significance. This is evident when we look at the political speeches of Burma's leaders. *Ottappa* was quoted as a protest against the regime's actions. Aung Shwe in his letter on the subject of the National Convention to the Chairman of the SLORC, wrote about the National Convention that ‘no resolutions based on the development of a genuine multi-party democracy and *law ka pa la taya* have been reached in the Convention’, so that the National Convention has not addressed matters vital to the country's problems.<sup>4</sup> It was also used by Aung San in appreciation of Burmese modesty as opposed to the Japanese tendency to jump collectively naked into their public baths.<sup>5</sup>

The concept of *samvega* features in Maung Maung's explanation for Ne Win's rule.<sup>6</sup> In Buddhism ‘fearlessness’ (အနောတပ္ပ P. *anotappa*) in the sense of ‘lack of fear of bad action’ [မကောင်းမှုမှ မလန့်ခြင်း သဘော],<sup>7</sup> the tenth of the Ten Mental Defilements, is a negative attribute when it contributes, along with other mental processes, to lust (*tanha*), conceit (*mana*) and wrong belief (*ditthi*), all of which prolong *samsaric* existence.<sup>8</sup>

After some time, Aung San Suu Kyi contextualised her ideas about fear more carefully. While foreign journalists continued to trumpet the attractive idea of fearlessness, she herself increasingly came to link ‘freedom from fear’ to the positive practice of *metta* and *brahma-so tayà*, so conducive to national unity. Later she also revised her views and admitted she had fears, but not for herself or her own safety, only ‘fear of letting down people who have faith in me’ [O18]. Freedom from fear, therefore, in a good sense is only experienced by the martyr (*azana*) without self (*atta*), who has permanently uprooted fear and no longer returns to this world. True fearlessness, therefore, does not have a particularly long lifespan in politics.

<sup>1</sup> Mingun (1990–96,4:483).

<sup>2</sup> Institute for Asian Democracy. ‘The heroin trade’. In *Towards democracy in Burma*, 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Awbatha (1995:538).

<sup>4</sup> Aung Shwe (1992:39). The meaning is inserted as a note by the ABSDF editors of the volume as follows: ‘the Buddhist principles of shame and fear which guard the world from falling into chaos.’ However, exiled Burmese are often unaware of the Buddhist message underlying the terminology of politicians back home. In this case, it may well have meant the four guardians of the world, namely *byama-so tayà*, which has come to be associated with democracy.

<sup>5</sup> Sagaing Han Tin (1985:48).

<sup>6</sup> Maung Maung (1969b).

<sup>7</sup> Awbatha (1975).

<sup>8</sup> Mahasi Sayadaw. ‘Tuvataka Sutta.’ Translator Daw Kay Mya Yee. Rangoon: Nyo Maung, 1982, p. 8.

# Chapter 18

## Revolution of the spirit

Closely related to freedom from fear, Aung San Suu Kyi refers to a ‘revolution of the spirit’ [စိတ်စိတ်  
တော်လှန်ရေး] in her speeches and writing. The earliest and central reference to this concept is to be found in the speech ‘Freedom from Fear’ (Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought). Nevertheless, it is a much broader concept than freedom from fear, for it advocates striving more broadly for spiritual perfection. I have already introduced the concept of political revolution, constituted in terms of a revolution that involves uprooting mental defilements such as greed, and here I wish to elicit more specifically what these senior NLD leaders make of it.

### Aung San Suu Kyi's revolution of the spirit

In the essay *Freedom from Fear* she argued that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights does not have the reach that it should have, as it can not be guaranteed by the international community while there are governments ‘whose authority is founded on coercion rather than the mandate of the people’ and while there are interest groups which ‘place short-term profits above long-term peace and prosperity’. As long as this persists, ‘there will continue to be arenas of struggle where victims of oppression have to draw on their own inner resources to defend their inalienable rights as members of the human family’. Here Aung San Suu Kyi made a close association between the ‘revolution of the spirit’ and the struggle for democracy, for she says that ‘a people who would build a nation in which strong *democratic institutions* are firmly established as a guarantee against state-induced power must first learn to liberate their own minds from apathy and fear’ [S8]. In other words, the struggle for democracy is a struggle to cleanse one's own mind, it is a revolution of the spirit.

However, the revolution of the spirit is more than just this, for it also means ‘perfection’. Spiritual values must accompany material advancement: ‘at the root of human responsibility is the concept of perfection,<sup>1</sup> the urge to achieve it, the intelligence to find a path towards it, and the will to follow that path if not to the end at least the distance needed to rise above individual limitations and environmental impediments’. To cultivate truth, justice and compassion, they cannot therefore ‘be dismissed as trite when these are often the only bulwarks which stand against ruthless power’.

In her 1991 Nobel Peace Prize speech, presented by her son Alexander Aris on 10 December 1991, this concept of ‘revolution of the spirit’ is reiterated. However, by this time the Gandhi and Aung San element of ‘fearlessness’ is absent, and it more specifically uses the Buddhist discourse drawn from ‘In the quest for democracy’. Her son reminds the audience that his mother is not just a ‘political dissident’ who ‘strives by peaceful means for democratic change’, but ‘we should remember that her quest is basically spiritual’ [S1].

The speech, after asserting that in the military regime ‘there are those to whom the present policies of fear and repression are abhorrent, violating as they do the most sacred principles of Burma's Buddhist heritage’, it much more clearly delineates the spiritual revolution as a Buddhist quest for enlightenment.

... Buddhism, the foundation of traditional Burmese culture, places the greatest value on man, who alone of all beings can achieve the supreme state of Buddhahood. Each man has in him the potential to realize the truth through his own will and endeavour and to help others to realize it<sup>2</sup>

Between the 1990 Freedom of Thought and the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize speeches, which were delivered only five months apart, this spiritual revolution concept has undergone a noticeable shift from a ‘universalist’ cross-cultural concept (Gandhi and Aung San), towards more specifically universalising those practices and perfections (*parami*) permitting attainment of Buddhahood, in which enlightenment is combined with compassion for the world. Though both may be characterised as ways of overcoming fear,

---

<sup>1</sup> This concept of perfection is, in turn, closely tied to her view of Aung San (see previous note). However, it is also related to the concept of perfection for attainment of Buddhahood.

<sup>2</sup> ASSK (1991:174, 238). Francis Sejersted, Chairman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, though mentioning Gandhi as a role model for Aung San Suu Kyi, also quoted more extensively from the Buddhist ‘In the Quest for Democracy’ in his speech on the same date. Distorting her views, newspaper articles in Burma have heavily criticised Aung San Suu Kyi for suggesting that ordinary people can become Buddhas ‘in this life’.

the methods by which these are achieved are inherently quite different.

This shift may be understood in several ways. First, it may be understood in terms of the chronology of events. In May 1991, just prior to the Freedom of Thought speech, the regime forced the NLD to drop all leaders from the party, allowing only three ex-military commanders as leaders. This was a low point in NLD politics, and firm and final evidence of the regime's total disregard for election results. Her attitude was more confrontational then, than after five months of reflection, when she had to rethink her political strategy in terms of a longer-term ideology.

Second, 'fearlessness' fits differently in the context of the different prizes. The Sakharov Prize was given for freedom of thought in which fearlessness is a positive attribute. However, in the context of a Peace Prize 'fearlessness' is not necessarily a positive attribute, for the same quality can give rise to war. The metaphor Aung San Suu Kyi used for fearless resistance is that of the 'glass splinter', which 'with its sharp glinting power to defend itself against hands that try to crush' is a comparatively violent metaphor. Buddhist enlightenment, on the other hand, is attractive for its emphasis on non-violent means of changing attitudes and making conquests.

However, a third explanation may be found in her assertion that the revolution of the spirit involves a change of mental processes by means of specific homegrown solutions. In this respect, the Gandhi concept of fearlessness, since it uses a 'Hindu' technique, is not adequate as a primary role model for Burma. Nor is, for that matter, Aung San's, which was not always a non-violent fearlessness in his military career.

Some support the idea that Aung San Suu Kyi revised her views in order to develop an ideology that may persist in the long-term. Philip Kraeger in his essay 'Peaceful Struggle for Human Rights in Burma', attempts to relate this concept to Aung San Suu Kyi's awareness that 'continuity of vision' and 'ideational content' is an important component of a revolution. He suggests she may have feared that similar discontinuities would take place, as they did between the older generation of revolutionaries. Saya San depended on charisma, and harked back to kingship in 'mundane knowledge' style, and the newer student-type leaders, such as Aung San, looked forward and attempted to give leadership a more modern intellectual framework (though translated by Kodawhmaing and Ba Maw). Unlike India, where 'political and intellectual leadership often coincided' and where 'there had been an uninterrupted stream of able leaders from the last years of the nineteenth century until independence', in Burma the development was 'more fractured'. In this context, she writes in her analysis of intellectual life in Burma and India: 'actions without ideational content lose their potency as soon as the situation, which called for them, ceases to be valid. A series of pragmatic moves unconnected by a continuity of vision cannot be expected to sustain a long-term movement.'<sup>1</sup>

Kraeger's argument, though interesting and relevant, does not incorporate the perspectives added by the revolution of the spirit as an internal cultural debate. In *Voice of hope*, Aung San Suu Kyi describes a 'true revolution' as going beyond a change in the material world, and as a change 'of the spirit'. Thus, the 'struggle for democracy' is based on 'spiritual values', 'values that are different to those you have lived by before', which inevitably change peoples' mentality [S2]. This notion also exists in her essay 'In quest for democracy', where the quest for democracy is 'part of the unceasing human endeavour to prove that the spirit of man can transcend the flaws of his own nature' [S1] [Y18].

Furthermore, the call for a 'revolution of the spirit' is necessitated by a lack of room to manoeuvre in the political and social sphere.

AC: What shift in consciousness has been required in order to make the struggle a 'spiritual revolution' from a socio-political one?

Aung San Suu Kyi: Because of the tremendous repression to which we have been subjected it's almost impossible for it to be either a political or a social revolution. We're so hemmed in by all kinds of unjust regulations that we can hardly move as a political or a social movement. So it has had to be a movement very much of the spirit.<sup>2</sup>

This idea is given more substance in her essay 'Towards a true refuge', which she presented at Elizabeth House, Oxford, where the Refugee Studie Programme is located. Here, she identifies with the many Burmese and other refugees against the hunger of repressive regimes for power and wealth, which can only be countered by developing their inner spiritual resources, for 'there only remain to sustain them the values of their cultural and spiritual inheritance' and 'the great majority of the world's refugees are seeking

<sup>1</sup> ASSK (1995:128).

<sup>2</sup> ASSK (1997a:50–51). See also [S3].

sanctuary from situations rendered untenable by a dearth of humanity and wisdom'.<sup>1</sup>

She proceeds to write of a 'dream of a society ruled by loving-kindness, reason and justice'. The 'revolution of the spirit', though in many contexts conceived of as Buddhist, has loving-kindness in common with every religion [E23].

In a more general sense, however, the concept of a 'spiritual revolution' may be understood as making an opening for free spiritual practice in a state regulating every aspect of peoples' lives. As she says, 'the authorities accuse us of using religion for political purposes, perhaps because this is what they themselves are doing, or perhaps because they cannot recognize the multi-dimensional nature of man as a social being. Our right to freedom of worship has become threatened by the desire of the authorities to curtail the activities of our party'.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, given the lack of fronts on which she can fight the regime with any success, the spiritual sphere is a very good beginning for it elicits the broadest support with the Burmese people and of all battles, it is a battle that can be won. Whether this can translate into a pragmatic government capable of handling the complex political and economic problems is a different matter that I cannot address at this juncture.

The concept of 'spiritual revolution' is extended by the idea of 'spiritual and intellectual reconciliation' that she sought with the SLORC, which is the 'reconciliation between different ideas' [Y3]. Tin U put it that democracy can be attained under the SLORC if they demonstrate 'kindness' and 'compassion'. In his view, this is why 'Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has called our movement for democracy a "revolution of the spirit."' [S4]

To evoke this spiritual revolution we must again draw attention to Pandita's preaching about reconciliation with the regime through right speech supported by *vipassana* practice [R2]. This revolution does not start with one's adversary, but with the development in oneself of 'inner spiritual strength' and 'spiritual steadiness' which helps 'to shore up ... spiritual powers' of pro-democracy activists [S5][S6].

#### Tin U's spiritual revolution

Tambiah once wrote that the 'passage from violence to righteousness is problematic for all actual rulers'. The Buddha had admitted to violent rule during his lives prior to his spiritual conquest while carrying out his role as a universal ruler (*cakavatti*), for 'the wheel of righteousness conquers more effectively than the scepter of *danda* [punishment]'.<sup>3</sup> Asoka and Anawratha had a history of violence before they turned to Buddhism. Ultimately, the people appeal to the military regime to become part of the 'spiritual revolution' by practising *vipassana* and developing *metta*. To repeat Tin U's words:

... In all honesty, I think the SLORC generals should lay down all their weapons just for ten days and undertake a period of *vipassana* meditation practice under a competent Sayadaw [Senior monk]. If their meditation is developing nicely then I think they should extend this practice indefinitely. I think the whole country would applaud them for this noble behaviour. In this way, the meditation practice will automatically reveal to them, by themselves, without anyone's help, their true inner state of being. All Burmese will understand this. They can foster *metta* in this way ...

... it is possible they might change, and then we might be able to see some redeeming qualities in them. But I still think they should meditate first. That may hasten the process. People are suffering [C19].

Tin U began his practice of *vipassana* during his first prison term.<sup>4</sup> When he was released from prison in 1980, he became a monk for two years<sup>5</sup> at the Thathana Yeiktha in Rangoon, the chief centre in the *vipassana* tradition of the Mahasi Sayadaw (1904–82). I first met Tin U when he was a monk, while I was engaged in my fieldwork in the centre between 1981–82. Why does Tin U so firmly hope for this change? Is it because he himself has been part of this 'spiritual revolution'? Once he was on the side of the military regime, but the change brought about by *vipassana* brought him into the fold of the democrats. In response to the question how he, who was once in charge of Ne Win's military and participated in the repression of the Burmese people, could now join hands with the democratic movements, he says

When you live for nine years in solitary confinement under the most severe forms of repression, a man has a lot of time to reflect. Since I know the worst in human nature it gives me more confidence to seek the best in people. I've seen both sides. The dark and the light. I've seen it in myself. From observing my mind through the practice of *vipassana* meditation. I have come to realize that loving-kindness and compassion can be developed. If I can do it, it gives me great hope that others can do

<sup>1</sup> ASSK (1991:247).

<sup>2</sup> ASSK (1997a:199).

<sup>3</sup> Tambiah (1976:45-46).

<sup>4</sup> For Tin U's own account of his prison experiences see ASSK (1997b:228–29) as cited below.

<sup>5</sup> See ASSK (1997b:229).

it too. Since I was blinded by a deeply unrecognized level of ignorance, I feel more sympathy when I see others that are so deluded. But it was all those long years in prison and my years as a monk that really made me appreciate *metta*.

It is worth recounting in some detail the moment at which the revolution of the spirit took place within him – his conversion from soldier to monk to democrat as the result of his experiences in prison. This began with his inability to cope with the humiliation of confinement that ultimately expressed itself in physical illness.

AC: What prompted you to be ordained as a Buddhist monk and enter at the age of fifty-four?

UTU: During my first period of incarceration from 1976 to 1981, my conditions in prison were harsh – extremely harsh. Sometimes, when I thought over my affairs, I felt full of resentment and outrage.

I was in a terrible state of mind, alone in solitary, and without anyone to discuss things with. I was at times seething, really mad. And I had no ability to control my mind. I knew very little about meditation at that time, nor was my conviction in the *dhamma* very strong. You know, I was trained to be a soldier, I was a combatant.

In solitary confinement I felt like a caged, enraged animal. Furthermore, after my sacking from the army as Chief of Staff, I received a few months' pay and that was it. My pension stopped and my name was struck from the annals of history of the Burma Army. My photographs and speeches during the tenure of my service were all destroyed.

In addition, they issued an order stating that nobody was to address me as 'General', only as U Tin U. In fact, if someone were to address me by rank they would be punished. Then the BSPP party published a scathing book portraying me as a notorious criminal. At the same time, I thought about my wife and how difficult it would be to live without an income. The situation as I felt it in prison was like a pressure cooker. I was ready to explode. Suddenly I came down with severe dysentery. My stomach-pains doubled me over. And my anger made the pains in my stomach worse. The combination of the two forms of suffering, and without any release, was terrible. I sat down on the floor of my cell and felt like I was going to weep.

The suffering then prompted him to find a way out, which was suggested by the *satipatthana* method of the Mahasi Sayadaw.

Well, it just so happened that I had brought a small booklet with me by the Mahasi Sayadaw on *vipassana* meditation. I picked up the booklet and started reading his instructions on mindfulness or bare attention. He suggested that one should simply be aware of all experiences as they arise. If it's pain, be aware of pain. If it's joy, well, just be aware of joy, so on and so forth. So I sat cross-legged on the floor and just started to be aware of the pain and the anger. Well, it was like a miracle. After the first ten minutes or so the anger and pain increased. I said, 'This is only creating more pain.' But I stayed with it and after an hour or so, the pain and anger simply disappeared. So you can imagine how I felt. I now had a friend in prison, myself, my mindfulness. So when I came out of solitary in 1981 I was ordained at the Mahasi monastery and learnt meditation under the guidance of a teacher. Of course, this is when we [i.e. with Alan Clements] met. So many good things can come from critical moments, if you're mindful.

Subsequently, he practised in tranquillity, until he joined the democratic movement.

During the pro-democracy upheavals of 1988 my colleagues urged me to address the public. At first I declined. I wanted to continue living quietly practising *vipassana* [insight] meditation. I think I was a bit attached to the tranquillity and peace of the practice. But my colleagues would not give up, and after many discussion we all agreed to form a league which we named the All-Burma Patriotic Old Comrades' League. Nearly all the retired officers from all over the country came to our headquarters, which was my house, to offer their services.<sup>1</sup>

One of the principal elements of the 'revolution of the spirit' is the overcoming of the habit of fear and apathy, and as already argued above, this may be done by cultivating *metta* and attaining the habit of mindfulness through mental culture [S7]. Ultimately, however, one of the most effective ways of accomplishing this revolution of the spirit, is by uprooting the defilements in the way the revolution concept was originally conceived (see chapter 11).

In the Indian prisons, it was the authorities who experienced the first change as a result of the revolution of the spirit, before the prisoners.

Mrs. Bedi [Inspector-General of Prisons] made inquiries and contacted Ram Singh in Jaipur. He advised her that the first step for introducing *Vipassana* into Tihar would be for some of the jail officials to take a course. Mrs. Bedi made a deliberate decision to send some of the angriest members of her jail staff to attend a *Vipassana* course. These officials were authoritarian and short-tempered, feeling themselves to be above correction. Yet when they returned from their ten-day *Vipassana* course, their interactions were markedly more congenial and cooperative, as confirmed by their colleagues and the inmates alike. This gave Mrs. Bedi and the other jail coordinators growing confidence that *Vipassana* was indeed an effective method of reform.

This puts a very different light on the characterisation of men such as Hpo Hlaing and Ledi Sayadaw, who were interested in practising and teaching *vipassana* as 'revolutionary' in spirit. Ba Maw's revolution merely rode on the back of this ultimate idea of revolution.

<sup>1</sup> ASSK (1997b:209).