

Aung San Suu Kyi

The influence of Buddhism on her beliefs and actions.

Burmese democracy leader, Aung San Suu Kyi is the world's most famous political prisoner, having spent 13 of the last 19 years under house arrest after her party, the National League for Democracy, won 82% of the seats in the 1990 Burmese election. She is currently incarcerated in prison after trumped up charges were levied against her in connection with an American swimming to her house uninvited across the adjacent lake. As a result of her dignified struggle for democracy and human rights for her people, she has become the world's premier human rights' icon. She is famous for her non-violent stand against the brutal SPDC military regime, but what motivates her and how does her Buddhism impact on her beliefs and her actions?

Starting in December 1995, Aung San Suu Kyi undertook a series of interviews with Alan Clements, during a period when her house arrest had been lifted. In the interviews she talked at length about how her Buddhism influenced her thinking and the way she tried to live her life. These conversations are documented in the book *The Voice of Hope* which forms the main source for this article. It has been impossible for anybody to get such access to Naw Suu Kyi in the years since her latest period of house arrest began in 2003. The thoughts and beliefs described in this article are therefore about as up-to-date as it is possible to gain.

The situation in Burma for the majority of the population is desperate and has been for many years now. Telling a joke against the regime can land you with seven years in prison as can using the internet without a licence from the police. Free trade unions are banned and the vast majority of the people live in dire poverty, despite the fact that the country has such bountiful natural resources that it should be the wealthiest country in SE Asia. It is instead the poorest. In Karen State, Eastern Burma, the Burmese army, the feared tatmadaw, regularly invade villages in the area, rounding up villagers for forced labour including being human minesweepers, forced to walk ahead of soldiers across minefields. It is against this kind of background that Aung San Suu Kyi has made her courageous stand for a free and democratic Burma.

She is the daughter of General Aung San, who led the Burmese army at the time of Burma gaining its independence from Britain after the Second World War. He was assassinated when Suu Kyi was only 2 years old and she then lived in various parts of the world. Aung San Suu Kyi was living in Oxford, where her husband Michael was a university don, when she received the phone-call which changed her life. Her mother had had a stroke back in Burma and Aung San Suu Kyi was asked if she would return to her homeland to help look after her mother. She naturally agreed and came back just as the country was rising up against the regime in the 8-8-88 uprising of August 1988.

This uprising was put down with great brutality by the army; indeed it was reported that the streets of Rangoon had to be hosed down afterwards to get rid of the stain of blood. It was with great surprise then that the regime called an election in 1990, which the National League for Democracy, led by Aung San Suu Kyi won 82% of the seats. The regime responded by calling the election null and void and arresting many of the M.P.s elected, some of whom were tortured and even died in prison. Aung San Suu Kyi herself has spent 13 of the last 19 years under house arrest and is currently in prison. It is in this situation that she has made her stand. In this she has been sustained by her beliefs and the way that they impact upon her actions.

In his commanding survey of the moral history of the 20th century, Jonathan Glover has noted that we have what he calls a 'moral identity'. It is this moral identity, which can help to stop us going along with the cruelties of regimes such as the Nazis or for that matter the SPDC regime in Burma. Glover argued that we have a collection of commitments, which we can see as the easy in which we respond to certain events or situations. Sometimes we only recognize these commitments when they are challenged but, "these commitments, even if hardly conscious, are the core of moral identity". (1) What then are the core commitments and beliefs which make up the moral identity of Aung San Suu Kyi?

We shall start with her views on the five precepts and the law of karma. We will then move onto the way that Aung San Suu Kyi sees the concepts of Buddhism and redemption, facing your self and your desires, and a comparison of Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. There will be a brief change of course with comments from Aung San Suu Kyi about Christianity, before a summing up of her views on Buddhism with a look at how we can deal with hatred and how the spiritual life is 'good friendship'.

There will then be a brief examination of ways in which Buddhism can interact with politics, firstly with a look at how a spiritual revolution can lead to a social revolution, while Aung San Suu Kyi also denies that she is a specifically Gandhian or Buddhist politician. We will then see how Suu Kyi argues that Buddhism is an active, not passive belief system and how accordingly, members of the SPDC regime do not act like the Buddhists they claim to be. Along the way we will reflect on how others have thought in similar ways to Suu Kyi. Finally there are some reflections on freedom being the root of both democracy and Buddhism and how Buddhism and politics can be linked together.

There can be little doubt of the great importance attached by Aung San Suu Kyi, to her Buddhist faith. Indeed on being released from house arrest in late 1995, one of the first people she visited, for a private meeting, was Burma's Buddhist spiritual leader the Sayadaw. It has also been reported that when released from house arrest, she visited pagodas and prayed regularly. (2) So what are the important parts of the Buddhist faith to Aung San Suu Kyi?

Aung San Suu Kyi has talked about the importance of the Five Precepts and said that she thought that ahimsa or non-violence was at the root of all of them. (3) She also mentioned how she wants Burma to maintain its Buddhist culture in the face of the onslaught of western music and other cultural aspects. When asked what the most important qualities of Buddhist culture to be preserved, she replied that they were, “the Buddhist values of loving kindness and compassion. A respect for education.” (4) I am sure that these are just the same qualities Aung San Suu Kyi would like to see a democratic government of Burma promoting.

Fergal Keane the BBC journalist has related two stories which show how Suu Kyi put these principles into practice. In one story, Suu Kyi noticed an old man who was struggling at a large lunch due to his arthritis. He was struggling in particular to wipe away hot red peppers. Aung San Suu Kyi noticed this and came up and wiped away the peppers for him, saying, “there you go uncle.... we must be careful of your stomach”. The same old man then got involved in telling what was described as a long, rambling story about the time of British rule. Rather than ignore him and move on or quieten him, Aung San Suu Kyi, with people waiting to speak to her, responded to her frantic secretary by calmly saying that they would have to start the meeting a few minutes later and finish a little later the other end. (5) This speaks volumes about her feelings for all people, that everybody is important. This is also reflected in her struggle for a free and democratic Burma, where everybody will indeed be treated as important, a far cry from now when it seems the population as a whole, are expendable and that only the military leaders are important.

When talking about the generals who control Burma, like some terrible school playground bullies, Aung San Suu Kyi is clear; they may be able to avoid the repercussions of breaking human laws, but, “they are not above the law of karma, because the law of karma is actually very scientific. There is always a connection between cause and effect. It’s like the light of a star isn’t it? The light that we see now was initiated so many light years ago, but there it is. In science too there can be a seemingly long gap between cause and effect. But there’s always the connection between them.” (6) It can also be seen as an extension of having self-respect and caring about one’s own dignity. Karen Armstrong has called this Buddha’s Golden Rule, that, “a person who loves the self should not harm the self of others.” (7) Aung San Suu Kyi backed this up by asserting that, “in the end, right will prevail.” (8) She also dismissed the idea of her being ‘Burma’s woman of destiny’, saying that idea was somewhat alien to her, and that it was up to her to create her own karma, rather than rely on some preordained destiny. (9) This she has been doing over the last 20 years in her work for a free and democratic Burma.

In another interview, Fergal Keane, in July 1996, Aung San Suu Kyi did admit that, she didn’t, “know that it’s my destiny to lead, but it is my destiny to serve the people my father had no chance of serving”. (10) This seems to be a different

idea to being a 'woman of destiny' who was born to lead and rather fits in with the ideas of service and compassionate Buddhism.

Whilst arguing that the generals couldn't escape the law of karma, Aung San Suu Kyi also made it clear that nobody could be beyond redemption. When it was suggested to her that some people are 'natural born killers' and beyond redemption, she questioned how someone could be so sure that they were irredeemable. Suu Kyi argues that, "just because I am not able to redeem people, doesn't mean that they are irredeemable." (11)

Indeed Aung San Suu Kyi, has stated that she doesn't hate the generals who have treated her so unfairly over the last 19 years. Her compassion and empathy with others has even extended to the men who have imprisoned her and vilified her in the state-run press. Her Buddhist beliefs call for her to seek dialogue and reconciliation with the SPDC regime. This equanimity is something which the Dalai Lama has noted has to be acquired, if genuine compassion is to be generated. (12)

Part of redeeming yourself, is the facing up to what you are and the inner struggle which goes on in all of us and it has been argued that in Buddhism, it is often seen as more difficult to conquer oneself than others. Aung San Suu Kyi talked about the struggles she faces every day in conquering herself, commenting that, "it's always a matter of developing more awareness, not only from day to day, but from moment to moment. It's a battle which will go on for the whole of my life." (13) It is also a battle which goes on within Buddhists of all persuasions.

The Dalai Lama has noted that the spiritual path is difficult for anybody. Commenting on the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5:1-10, from a Buddhist point of view, he has argued that those who go on the spiritual path will find tough times ahead. However, he goes on to say that if they do accept the hardships and pain, then they will reap the rewards. (14) Aung San Suu Kyi would surely understand these words better than almost anybody else alive today, as she has struggled to keep true to her beliefs, under terrible pressure and vilification. One gets the feeling that it is perhaps this struggle to maintain her dignity, which is helping her to keep going.

This leads us to comments on Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Aung San Suu Kyi points out that she is a Theravada Buddhist, but also respects Mahayana Buddhism and indeed other religions too. She argues clearly that she does not think, "anyone has the right to look down on anyone's religion." It is telling that the element of Mahayana Buddhism which she most admires is the emphasis on compassion, which she sees as greater than in her own tradition which is the dominant form of Buddhism in Burma and Suu Kyi has confirmed that she would like to see more active compassion in Burma. (15)

Meditation is very important to Aung San Suu Kyi. She notes that it is a form of spiritual cultivation and that, “meditation has helped to strengthen me spiritually in order to follow the right path. Also for me, meditation is part of a way of life because what you do when you meditate is to learn to control your mind through developing awareness.” (16) This mindfulness was also very important to the Buddha as he used the practice to make him aware that humans feelings and bodies are in a constant flux. (17) This developing awareness would no doubt lead to a Buddhist rejecting hatred as impure. Aung San Suu Kyi claims that Buddhists have, “our concepts of greed, hatred and ignorance, which create impurity.” (18)

Her Buddhist faith also gives Aung San Suu Kyi a sense of calm, which was perhaps best exemplified by what happened to her and how she responded to an incident in 1989. It was the dry season and in a dusty town some distance from Rangoon she was with a group of supporters, whilst all gatherings of more than four had been declared illegal following the uprising the previous year. Aung San Suu Kyi and her followers were confronted by a group of soldiers who took aim. A countdown was started and as it began so Aung San Suu Kyi left the group of supporters and walked alone towards the soldiers, their guns still aimed at her. At that point perhaps mindful of the publicity or that her father had been the army leader who led his country to independence an officer stepped in and countermanded the order. It is reported that at the time she remarked simply, “It seemed so much simpler to provide them with a single target than to bring everybody else in.” (19) It is this kind of raw courage which has helped to make Aung San Suu Kyi so revered.

Buddhism and the struggle for democracy

In her conversations with Alan Clements, Aung San Suu Kyi made it clear that any revolution had to be one of the spirit. She argued that, “you have to be convinced that you need to change and want to change certain things – not just material things. You want a political system which is guided by certain spiritual values.” (20) Part of the reason for this, according to Aung San Suu Kyi, is that the people of Burma are so hemmed in by regulations and laws making it difficult for them to organise a social movement and so a spiritual revolution is the only choice they have. (21) Linked to this is the idea that Buddhists are trying to find enlightenment and be more aware of suffering and the need to serve others. (22)

In this respect, Fergal Keane has noted after conversations with Suu Kyi, that “implicit in every statement she makes, personal or political, is an absolute dedication to the ideals of freedom and justice. Burma’s is a ‘spiritual revolution’ she says. When Aung San Suu Kyi talks about democracy it is with the kind of conviction and passion not often heard in our age. Hers is a voice that transcends the materialist scramble of modern Asia. There are constant echoes of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.” (23)

Aung San Suu Kyi's strong belief in non-violence or ahimsa, also echoes the life of Vardhamana Jnatraputra, an Indian spiritual leader (c. 497 – 425 BCE) Known as Mahavira, 'Great hero' by his disciples, he developed a new way of looking at the worlds, "informed through and through by ahimsa: harmlessness". Indeed Karen Armstrong has noted that, "for Mahavira, liberation was *non-violence*." (24) It could be argued that Aung San Suu Kyi has similar feelings about the importance of ahimsa or non-violence and how any change to democracy must be brought about by peaceful means.

However, it is interesting to note in reference to non-violence that Aung San Suu Kyi does not describe herself as a Buddhist or Gandhian politician. Rather she has a more practical reason for advocating non-violence; she doesn't want a precedent to be set in Burma, whereby regime change can come from violent insurrection. She commented on this as follows:

"Military coups, which have happened enough in Burma, are violent ways of changing situations and I do not want to encourage and to perpetuate this tradition of bringing about change through violence. Because I am afraid that if we achieve democracy in this way, we will never be able to get rid of the idea that you bring about necessary changes through violence. The very method would be threatening us all the time. Because there are always people who do not agree with democracy. And if we achieve it through violent means there will be the hard core of those who have always been against the democracy movement who will think, 'it was through violence that they changed the system and if we can develop our own methods of violence, which are superior to theirs, we can get back their power.' And we'll go on with this vicious cycle." (25)

Like Gandhi, Aung San Suu Kyi is no mystic simply hoping and praying that the SPDC regime will disappear and that the problems of Burma will disappear along with them. She is a very practical person and seeks to see her deep Buddhist beliefs in practical ways. Aung San Suu Kyi agreed with Nelson Mandela, when he said that he was a Christian but was forced into violence, like Jesus who was left with no alternative but overturn the money lenders' tables when he came across them in the Temple. Suu Kyi commented that, "yes. He took out the whip didn't he? I don't think one can afford to be too dogmatic in politics.". She goes on to claim that, "dogmatism is one of the greatest dangers in politics." (26)

Interestingly, Aung San Suu Kyi's father, General Aung San speaking little more than a year before his untimely death in July 1947, stated that he thought that that religion and politics did not mix, as religion should stay pure and not get corrupted by involvement in politics. (27)

Aung San Suu Kyi clearly sees Buddhism as a way of life, which is how it should impact on the politics of Burma. She talked about engaged Buddhism which, "is active compassion or active metta. It's not just sitting there passively saying, 'I

feel sorry for them”’. (28) Adding to this Aung San Suu Kyi contradicts her father’s position by arguing that metta should grow and that religion and politics **can’t** be separated, because politics is about people and people can’t be separated from their spiritual values. (29) As part of this, Aung San Suu Kyi spoke of her desire to see the people of Burma taking a deeper interest in their religious heritage and be more serious about practicing it, including all five of the precepts. (30)

Truth is very much part of the values which Aung San Suu Kyi sees as so very important. It is something which, “which cannot be separated from sincerity and goodwill”. (31) She describes the search for truth thus: “the search for truth is in a sense the struggle to overcome subjectivity. By that I mean you’ve got to remove as far as possible your own prejudices and distance yourself from them in assessing any given situation.” (32)

Burma is of course ruled by a group of generals, who try to portray themselves as good Buddhists. There is a saying in Burma that the ‘screen is green’ as the people for Burma are so used to seeing their leaders open hospitals or schools on the state-run television. This, when they spend 40% of the country’s GDP on the army, while only spending 1% on health and education combined. Referring to the regime, Aung San Suu Kyi has noted that members of the regime don’t act like Buddhists as they display so little loving kindness and compassion and are removed from the both the Buddhist way and from the people themselves (33) Again we see the importance to Aung San Suu Kyi of showing compassion and kindness to others.

However, for all their cruelty and duplicity, Aung San Suu Kyi has refused to give into hatred of them. In this respect she would be very much in line with the thinking of the Dalai Lama. Responding to the Biblical teachings of Matthew 5:38-40, from a Buddhist perspective, the Dalai Lama argues that the Gospel emphasizes the practice of tolerance and feelings of impartiality towards all creations, including enemies. The Dalai Lama sees it as important to develop a sense of equanimity along the lines of the Buddha- nature in Buddhism. (34)

The generals were also perhaps on Aung San Suu Kyi’s mind when she spoke about the dangers of giving alms merely to try to gain favour She argues that, “the teachings of Buddhism which delve into the various causes of suffering identify greed or lust – the passion for indulging an intemperate appetite – as the first of the Ten Impurities which stand in the way of a tranquil, wholesome state of mind. On the other hand, much value is attached to liberality or generosity, which heads such lists as the Ten Perfections of the Buddha, the Ten Virtues which should be practiced and the Ten Duties of Kings. This emphasis on liberality should not be regarded as a facile endorsement of alms-giving based on canny calculation of the possible benefits in the way of worldly prestige or other-worldly rewards. It 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. The late Sayadaw Ashin Janaka Bivasma of the famous Mahagandharun monastery at Amarpura taught that liberality without morality cannot really be pure. An act of charity committed for the sake of earning praise or prestige or a place in a heavenly abode, he held to be tantamount to an act of greed.” (35)

Finally we come to the ways in which Buddhism directly links in with the struggle for freedom, democracy and human rights in Burma. Aung San Suu Kyi agreed with her interviewer that truth, dhamma and politics are rooted in the same issue of freedom. Unlike her father, and as was intimated earlier, she does not see the spiritual and political worlds as separate. Indeed back in 1996, she was hoping that the monks and nuns would do more, as of course they did in 2007. The answer to the country’s problems can be found in ‘engaged Buddhism’ and revisiting the teachings of the Venerable Sayadaw U Pandita, Aung san Suu Kyi emphasised that one can never be too mindful. Suu Kyi herself has spoken of her ambition to become a Bodhisattva one day, but said that she was nowhere near it at the time of the interviews in the mid-1990’s.

Aung San Suu Kyi also responded to the idea that fear is a habit, by saying that the reason was that not enough ‘active compassion’. She also linked this to the teachings of Jesus, when she commented that, “there is a very direct link between love and fear, reminding me of the Biblical quotation that, ‘perfect love casts out fear’.” Suu Kyi went on to say that, “I’ve often thought that is a very Buddhist attitude perfect love should be metta which is not selfish....” (36)

Back in 1996, Aung San Suu Kyi did call for the monks and nuns to do more to promote democracy, which of course they did try to do in September 2007. She saw a direct link between Buddhism and democracy and human rights, when she said that they could be more effective, “simply by preaching democratic principles, by encouraging everybody to work for democracy and human rights and by trying to persuade the authorities to begin dialogue.” (37) Here we can see Aung San Suu Kyi directly linking Buddhism with democracy, in that the basic principles of Buddhism are seen as being compatible with the principles of democracy.

Aung San Suu Kyi is an incredibly brave, determined and compassionate person who must surely now stand as an equal to Gandhi, King and Mandela and an inspiration to the world. There can equally be little doubt that her Buddhism and to a lesser extent reading of other faiths, have inspired her greatly and are giving her the strength to continue in her struggle. Her Buddhist beliefs are deeply etched into her soul and one can only hope that she gets the chance to put her beliefs into action, not only for herself, but for all the people of Burma.

Aung San Suu Kyi, once famously asked those in the free world to “use your freedom to help us gain ours”. For more information about Aung San Suu Kyi and her beliefs and for how you can help to fulfill Aung San Suu Kyi’s hopes of freedom, democracy and human rights for the people of Burma, please contact me at sagar@biddlestone-road.fsnet.co.uk.

Notes

- 3 J. Glover, *Humanity*, p. 26
- 4 F. Keane, *Letter to Daniel*, p. 205
- 5 A.S.S. Kyi, *The Voice of Hope*, p. 64-5
- 6 *ibid.* p. 87
- 7 F. Keane, *Letter to Daniel*, p. 203
- 8 A.S.S. Kyi, *The Voice of Hope* p. 93
- 9 K. Armstrong, *The Great Transformation*, p. 287
- 10 A.S.S. Kyi, *The Voice of Hope*, *ibid.* p. 171
- 11 *ibid.* p. 187
- 12 F. Keane, *Letter to Daniel*, p. 207
- 13 A.S. S. Kyi, *The Voice of Hope*, p. 127-8
- 14 The Dalai Lama, *The Good Heart*, p. 67
- 15 A.S. S. Kyi, *The Voice of Hope*, p. 71
- 16 D. Lama, *The Good Heart*, p. 53-4
- 17 *ibid.* p. 92
- 18 *ibid.* p. 98
- 19 K. Armstrong, *The Great Transformation*, p. 283
- 20 *ibid.* p. 59
- 21 F. Keane, *Letter to Daniel*, p. 212-3

- 22 A.S.S. Kyi, *The Voice of Hope*, p. 82
- 23 *ibid.*
- 24 *ibid.* p. 195
- 25 F. Keane, *Letter to Daniel*, p. 209
- 26 K. Armstrong, *The Great Transformation*, p. 240-1
- 27 *Index on Censorship*, Volume 26 p. 165-6
- 28 A.S.S. Kyi, *The Voice of Hope*, p. 157
- 29 A.S.S. Kyi, *Freedom from Fear*, p. 8
- 30 A.S.S. Kyi, *The Voice of Hope*, p. 43
- 31 *ibid.* p. 45
- 32 *ibid.* p. 50-1
- 33 *ibid.* p. 58
- 34 *ibid.*
- 35 *ibid.* p. 27
- 36 D. Lama, *The Good Heart*, p. 49
- 37 A.S.S. Kyi, *Freedom from Fear*, p. 242
- 38 *ibid.* p. 44
- 39 A.S.S. Kyi, *The Voice of Hope*, 33

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