

CIVIL-ISATION

THE PROBLEM WITH AUNG SAN SUU KYI

The cultural historian Anthony Russell reflects on his recent return to Burma and on the risk of the on-going reforms there now unravelling into civil war.



I'm sitting in a simple but clean hotel room in the unassuming old British hill-station of Kalaw. The town's a two hour flight north from Rangoon (the former capital renamed Yangon) and then a dusty hour in a car, but you soon appreciate why the colonial British withdrew here from the sweltering heat of the plains to relax beneath the mauve flowering jacarandas. The people here in Southern Shan State smile at you with even greater ease than in the city and the pace of life is reassuringly slow, providing you're not banking on fast broadband.



I've come for a few days rest, to gather my thoughts after a punishing ten days in the unforgiving intensity of Rangoon during the hottest month of April. Not that I recall the city as much cooler during my previous visit in July 2011, when un-air-conditioned taxis seemed just as stuffy but with the windows open, the regular rain made you wet as well as hot. Then I had come to see the country that had figured so large in the writing of my book 'Evolving the spirit'. The first half had been

about how we find inner peace, on the understanding that if we want peace in the world, we have to start at home, with ourselves. But the rest of the book had concentrated on how you take that 'spirit' of inner peace out into the real world. The book had an implicit assumption woven through its pages; that democracy and violence are incompatible and that we in the West understand this no better than anywhere else. After all, part of Britain's very identity is built around the assumption that our peaceful democracy was forged through war, as if you could heat society until white-hot and then hit it till its shape resembles civilisation. The truth

that few dare admit, is that the war to end all wars only caused another even worse, capitulating us into the *Cold War* of a cooling civilisation. As it threatened to freeze completely, we appeared to sleepwalk into a *War on Terror*, only to awaken terrified.

So much of what I had written then seemed very personal and provocative before the book's London launch on 25th January 2012, the anniversary of the foundation of the League of Nations. But I have since been fortified by the unexpected flow of support, not least from Burma's Aung San Suu Kyi, who'd said how much the book meant to her and how she hoped it could help her people in their struggle, as "*we are not yet at the end of the road*". This endorsement had meant the most because I had mapped in the book a line of the very few enlightened through history, who had understood that respect for the individual - what even Buddhists today call democracy - and violence are opposites. This historic flow had of course included Jesus Christ, The Buddha, Mahatma Gandhi, M. L. King, Havel and Mandela and led straight to the lakeside door of a remarkable, indomitable lady, in an impoverished Far Eastern country long forgotten by the developed world. I distinctly remember the moment, sitting at my desk before my completed manuscript, thinking; if the basic premise of my book is to gain authority, this brave lady's lonely mission to change her country by unequivocal nonviolence had to succeed. I had to do all I could to make sure Burma proved the case in the world of realpolitik and I realised our intent was indelibly linked. Of course, I now know our cause was not a private one but that she carried the hope of a whole nation with her, as well the goodwill of caring people the world over.

So I return to the land for which the world holds its breath, partly to ensure the second edition of the book gets directly to her, in a society where phones are sporadic and emails go unanswered. But there were many other related reasons for my wanting to return. I had been approached by Professor Julia Häusermann (founder of 'Rights and Humanity' and writer of the book's foreword), to ask Suu Kyi to become one of the NGO's international patrons, along side the Dalai Lama and Desmond Tutu; then shortly before I departed, Sir Richard Branson had asked me to pass on the best wishes of the Elders, that august body of former statesmen he had founded with Peter Gabriel, of which Suu Kyi had been a member before her return to politics meant standing down; I was also requested by the director Richard Shannon (writer of the play 'The Lady of Burma'), to forge links on behalf of Goldsmiths, University of London, offering to run Media and Communication courses at Yangon University; NADFAS, the National Association of Decorative and Fine Arts (though now decidedly international) thought it quite viable to start a society in Rangoon and welcomed my making inquiries; the National Theatre in London was prepared to offer the opportunity to stage productions at Yangon's National Theatre.



But I also came on behalf of the Chandos Foundation, set up as my family's commitment to understanding the purpose of civilisation and helping to improve it worldwide. That meant also taking the goodwill of its affiliated organisations; the UK Peace Foundation and the charity Spirit of Peace. Finally, I was returning to reflect on the spirit of the book, to see where this much loved country and famed 'Lady' were heading and consider the outline of my next book, aimed at a younger generation.

That all seemed a lot to do and certainly weighed heavy on my mind when I landed in a blisteringly hot Rangoon in the afternoon of 3rd April for a planned two weeks in the city. All the same, I reassured myself that in summary my brief was to enter a dialogue with anyone about ways Burma might move further towards the spirit of democracy. This would include considering what Dr Gene Sharp - the unsung architect of most of the recent nonviolent revolutions - called the *intangible factors* of democracy, though he never really went into detail. Even in the old democracies, we are more familiar with the *tangible factors*, such as the need for free and fair elections and the separation of powers. But what of all the other elements without which 'polite' democracy cannot function? It is after all these components that amount to a nation's culture; what Gandhi called the "*heart and soul of a people*". They give a nation the nuance in its thinking that prevents destabilising extremes of thought and action. So I was bringing a concept of culture and civilisation that was universal, not exclusively Western-colonial but as obvious to caring Muslims and Buddhists alike. As Suu Kyi had intimated, the majority of Burma didn't need to learn the spirit of democracy afresh from the West because it was implicit within Buddhism.

The car that picked me up from the airport took me to the friendly, French-run Alamanda Inn. This proved a good choice, though it hadn't been my first. I had wished to return to the timeless glamour of the Savoy Hotel, but it had gone from around \$50 a night in 2011 to \$180 and I wasn't going to spend the Chandos Foundation's money on that for two weeks. Here was a first lesson in Burma since my last visit. With the release of Suu Kyi and other political prisoners as a result of a closer relationship with the president U Thein Sein, the international sanctions had been all but removed. This had opened the international floodgates to business in a country barely prepared for such monumental change. Rangoon's hotel capacity is still only 7,000 visitors per night, leaving market forces to inflate the cost of everything.

My first engagement was a breakfast I had planned at the Alamanda the following day with Joe Fisher, undersecretary at the British Embassy and Peter Popham, author of the definitive biography of Suu Kyi; 'The Lady and the Peacock'. These two I felt, would set my compass well from the start; one a respected diplomat who had been particularly helpful to me reaching Suu Kyi previously and the other a hard-headed journalist from the Independent, who knew as much about Suu Kyi as anyone. And I learned a lot at that breakfast. It gave me vital background understanding though it also proved a little chilling. Not even that measured diplomat was prepared to mince his words about the potential risks at hand. He spoke of how, despite all the hope of change, recent interracial violence could spill into widespread civil unrest. The situation might not be helped by the approaching New Year celebrations, bringing vast numbers into the city for the annual chaos that is the closing year's Water Festival. It should be light-hearted children spraying water blessings over anyone in the street between the 13th and 16th April, but it only needs the participation of enough older, drunken gangs to turn into a serious bloodbath. This sober prognosis was echoed in recent words I had heard from Ben Rogers of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, "*There is a risk that the flickers of hope and light we are seeing could be snuffed out by chaos, religious and*



sectarian hatred, brutal violence and terror.” I thought carefully and decided I would endure one day’s soaking on the 13th for curiosity’s sake, before retreating north to hopefully a little less of the *terror*. So this would give me 10 days to complete all my obligations. Should be do-able I thought, without the need to be winched by helicopter from the roof of the British Embassy with seconds to spare before an angry, alcohol fuelled mob with mouths full of red beetle juice, tore us to pieces.

So straight after our breakfast, I set off for an obscure address in a particularly unglamorous part of downtown Rangoon, to the cramped offices of the Yangon School of Political Science. This was the democratic think-tank set up by Suu Kyi in December 2011. With the help of Anna Roberts from the Burma Campaign UK, I had agreed to address its members with my thoughts on democracy. At the meeting we arranged that I would speak at 2 pm on Saturday. That was good, though I was warned that if I came with the ‘spirit’ of Suu Kyi, I must expect some hostility. While I had known from attending All Party Parliamentary Group meetings in London that the Kachin and Rohingya were dismayed with Suu Kyi, I haven’t expected it within her very own think-tank, for all her love of democratic descent. All the same, I left the office pleased to have the engagement confirmed and asked my taxi driver to take me straight to Yangon University. Time to grab the next task by the horns and see if I could put Goldsmiths case for running media courses there. Now my driver was thoughtful even by the generous-minded standards of Rangoon’s taxi drivers and he didn’t think twice about driving a foreigner straight into the university campus. Had he thought, he might have remembered that it was still prohibited without official sanction, a vestige of the ‘cold war’ between the government and students. I recalled the 1988 unrest, spearheaded by students with reforming zeal and that even after the 2007 Saffron Revolution, universities were dispersed, especially away from urban centres of unrest. It explained why we now drove through a shimmering desert of a campus, dotted with grandiose, sparsely populated colonial buildings. My obliging driver found two friendly faces in a cool, cavernous corridor, one a history lecturer who, while initially suspicious of our motives soon warmed to the possibility of collaboration. But while my business card and related documentation helped, they were adamant that even the Dean could progress nothing without ministerial approval, achieved via the embassy. Well that seemed to me fair enough in Burma and I thanked them for their kindness and determined to return to the British Embassy another day.



In the afternoon I went back into town, intrigued to meet the Burmese man and Canadian woman who had created the Pansodan Gallery. Suggested by the British Embassy as a possible bridge into the local art scene, I hoped to progress the possibility of a lecture program from the UK on behalf of NADFAS, as previously mentioned. When another and equally considerate taxi driver eventually found the gallery, the Canadian Nance Cunningham was reassuringly enthusiastic about the possibility. It transpired they were shortly to move to larger premises with more gallery space and room for lectures. NADFAS headquarters in London had felt that the only real hurdle to operating in Burma, would be the financial constraints of lecturers traveling to get there. But

we now envisaged my passing by July or August next year, on route to or from my planned lecture tour of Australia and New Zealand. Again, it seemed quite achievable.

The following day was Friday and quietly confident that I had made some progress, I wandered through the exclusive township of Bahan, known as Golden Valley on my way from the Alamanda to breakfast at the Savoy. I passed a stately old colonial residence, nestled in a large, cool garden of lush vegetation and noticed a sign declaring it an art gallery. Intrigued and with a mind to gaining further contacts in the Rangoon art world, I introduced myself at the door. With a kindness that I had come to appreciate as very Burmese, I was shown around the gallery and then given a tour of the beautiful gardens. I gathered it was the



home of Patrick Roberts, a French designer of furniture, sculpture and works of art and



evidently very good at what he did, judging from the proliferation of objects throughout the house and garden. This beautiful setting was perfect to display his innovative designs that revealed a respect for both the classical and natural world. It transpired that the owner was on a rare two months break abroad, but I took contact details and resolved to pursue the matter.

While enjoying the Savoy at least for its worthy breakfast, I had the good fortune to meet an American named Cem Ozturk, spending a few days in Burma as a risk consultant. He told me this was not just for businesses but NGOs and other organisations curious about the prospects in Burma. Here I sensed, was the impressive brain of the outside world, eyeing up the land at this most critical time. Ozturk was not just assessing the technical viability on the ground; issues such as law and communications, but also local human resources and how dependable they would be. So in a sense like me, he too was assessing the spirit of Burma as a workable democracy on behalf of others. But one of his many useful insights came from his telling me he lived in Singapore. There he said, they were really keen for international cultural interaction of the NADFAS type and what's more, better placed to carry it off. Though my first priority was Burma, I imagined that Singapore could work well in partnership for possible lectures, where the cultural mix would be beneficial to all. This was an exciting time to be in Burma and though early days, the possibilities were becoming evident.

I decided I could afford the time for a bit of sightseeing. On my previous visit in 2011, the Bogyoke Aung San Museum - the home of Suu Kyi's parents during her formative years - had been closed. It was where as a child, one of her two brothers had drowned in the garden pond. But it was also where the family had lived when history was made by her father's visit to Britain after the war, followed by his tragic assassination soon after having secured the country's independence. The reopening of the museum marked not just the end of recent renovation work but more significantly, the government's new willingness to celebrate the connection between the previously inconvenient Suu Kyi and the country's heroic founding father. Wandering round, I could understand their previous reticence, for this was an

impressive shrine to ‘Bogyoke’ (the general’s) memory. It also proved a fascinating 1940s time-capsule of furnishing and evocative photographs. Passing back into the house from its cool veranda, I noticed a plaque on the wall that remembered a quote by Aung San from a speech of 1947; *“separately there will be no effectiveness. Only unity among ourselves can be more beneficial.”* Unity had obviously been important as his country fought against the warring powers of Britain and Japan but of course after independence, with so many different ethnic groups to hold together, it was crucial. I had also heard that this Buddhist was adamant Buddhism should not become the state religion, appreciating the possible divisiveness of this and also I imagine, the harm that state control does to any Faith.



Aung San, as the dashing young founder of the nation, was inevitably going to be central to the myth-making of the state but on closer inspection, this freedom-fighter to some - terrorist to others - was indeed an impressive individual. Dominating a wall in an upstairs room of the museum was a board listing all the books he had devoured before his untimely death aged 32. It reads as a remarkable catalogue of Western literature, philosophy and political science. That he was a force to be respected, was also the opinion of the British during and following the war, especially when he arrived from its remotest corner to the empire’s capital to negotiate terms for independence. For Aung San, in siding first with the communists and then the Japanese and finally with the British by the end of the war, had worked out for himself the futility of violence. Even if somewhere along the way, his young nation had missed the point, he appreciated that it had not been armed struggle that had won them independence in 1947. Change came because of a debilitated, bankrupt Britain; a labour government bent on off-loading far off dominions and most importantly; the united will of the Burmese people themselves, a force that ultimately nothing could resist. Conviction and unity were his weapons and any other notion would become the fantasies of propaganda.



Aung San also knew that while notions of Western democracy would be useful tools for building a nation, Burma understood even more about the spirit of democracy from its own Buddhist tradition. I was reminded of this truth as I made an evening pilgrimage to Rangoon’s great Shwedagon Pagoda. As each day’s intense heat gradually subsides, thousands flock to circle barefoot on the cooling marble round the mighty gilded sputa and chat idly of the day’s events.

On Saturday, following my now routine Savoy breakfast, I make my way back to give that address to the YSPS. I spoke for about forty-five minutes trying to assess as I spoke, both my audience’s capacity to understand English and the depth of their appreciation of the democratic issues. I introduced myself, spoke of my book and why I was in Burma. I mentioned the inspiration I had gained like so many, from the example of Suu Kyi and of the differences between the *tangible* and *intangible* factors in democracy. I outlined the need to build up the culture and spirit of democracy as if it were acidophilus bacteria cultivated in the gut of Burma. I suggested that only a strong immune system would free its people not just from internal domination but - with the floodgates now open - from the immensely powerful and sophisticated global forces. Were they prepared for these?

I argued that the intangible factors of Western democracy had taken much time to develop and yet needed constant vigilance. This was one reason why the West knew it could learn from Burma's experience at this time. I related that I was deeply concerned for a regime not that respectful of democratic principles; over manipulative of its people and failing to foster democratic understanding nationally. This nation I ventured to suggest, was not Burma but Britain. And finally, I drew them the image of an elephant with her calf. I submitted that to get beyond, you could walk between them but that as a fundamental law of political science, you should expect to be attacked. If you wanted to live, it was worth taking the time to find another route. Democracy needs time, time for dialogue, understanding and compromise to take effect. Burma to my mind needed to stay calm and focussed and allow "*the power of dialogue*", as Alan Clements had described it, to prevail.

The response to my somewhat impassioned monologue, coming as I ventured to apologise, from a relation of Sir Frederic Fryer, the First Governor of the United Burma under the British, was decidedly mixed. There were some who I perceived to have greatly warmed to the ideas, though I was aware of another element less convinced. Some expressed frustration with Suu Kyi for not speaking out, for not making greater effort to unite the disparate elements within the country at this crucial time. I listened with fascination, not disagreeing but venturing to plead consideration for Suu Kyi's limitations. After all I argued, while she was already the nation's spiritual leader, politically she had near to no real power. Debatably, the president himself, U Thein Sein, didn't have a great deal more and while their new working relationship was symbolically important, shifting the entrenched - and possibly unnerved - inner regime, would take longer. I then reiterated my belief that only the cooperation and trust that allowed for a gradual shifting of power, would be sustainable and more immediately, stop a potential bloodbath. I had the sense that if Burma was to cope with the full heat of international 'corporatocracy', it would need more than ever to unify the complex mix of deeply faith-based ethnic groups, ruled by tribal identity and an overbearing central authority. Despite the sensed undercurrent, I left the YSPS delighted by the stimulating discussion and determined to pursue the ideas raised through further dialogue with any of its willing students.

Monday was an important day. Thanks to a tip off, I realised it would be my only opportunity to get a copy of the book's second edition direct to Suu Kyi, together with the letter from Professor Häusermann regarding 'Rights and Humanity' and a letter of my own, summarising all I was up to, in case any useful strings could be pulled. The occasion was an important



executive meeting of the NLD (the National League for Democracy), at the party office. I had been advised to come at 9:30 as the meeting would start at 10 and last till 12 noon. I duly arrived in good time with my documents, to see a serious looking U Tin Oo arrive for the meeting. Here was the former general, turned democratic campaigner, released after years in prison and now the party's Vice Chairman. I then saw a relaxed U Win Tin arrive; another NLD grandee but looking more like a university professor; bespectacled, with a sympathetic smile and wild hair, turned grey during 19 years in prison.

And finally, into a scene of growing anticipation, arrived the fresh and surprisingly youthful looking 'Lady of Burma', who passed smiling through the NLD office and up the stairs into

the meeting. Now, I was keen to pass my bundle over to her in person, to ensure she received in particular, the invitation from Professor Häusermann. With temperatures again on the inevitable rise to 40 degrees, I decided I had time to return to my nearby hotel and freshen up before Suu Kyi re-emerged. So I left my package with the office reception on the understanding that if she were to reappear before I returned, that they would hand it to her. It is curious how history is usually remembered as the inevitable march of destiny, without acknowledging the accidents that play so great a part in shaping it. On my return I was informed that someone had already taken my parcel upstairs and that Suu Kyi had seen it and opened the book, though sadly I had no confirmation of this to report to Professor Häusermann. It was therefore a huge relief to witness a relaxed Suu Kyi emerge with my documents in her hand and as she passed close by the only Westerner to be seen, I was moved to say very quietly *"Bless you Suu"*. But she heard and it seemed to catch her by surprise as she turned and said in perfect Oxford English *"Oh hello!"* And that was it and good enough for me. I had no need to meet her, for I felt I knew her philosophy as well as she did herself. There was only one question I would have asked, though a theoretical one. Why had she recently said that she believed in nonviolence *"not on moral grounds, as some believe, only on practical political grounds"*? I knew how much she admired the memory of Mahatma Gandhi and how he would have raised an eyebrow at such a statement. Surely, I reasoned, the *ethics* and the *spirit* was what it was all about? You might resort to hostility in self defence but you would not have changed the inevitable; that you would by violent action be taking yourself and your people further from the ultimate goal of peaceful coexistence, understanding and trust.



Surprisingly bolstered by Suu Kyi's proximity, the next morning I set off for the British Embassy and my meeting with Kevin Mackenzie, Director of the British Council. This was a chance to tie up various ends and benefit from the good offices of another impressive British official. I had come to realise the extent to which the FCO considered Burma an important front for the advancement of British interests and that it was therefore attracting some outstanding individuals. He was indeed extremely helpful and as a final consideration, arranged a meeting for me with Kyaw Min Yu at the 88 Generation's office. As I left the embassy, I noticed its Union Jack at half-mast. Having avoided newspapers or television for several days, I had not heard of the death of that other formidable *Lady*, the Iron Lady. As my un-air-conditioned taxi made its hot and dusty way to the 88 Generation office on the very outskirts of the city, I recalled the films about each; 'The Lady' and 'The Iron Lady', released at roughly the same time. I considered how I had been pleasantly surprised by the clever and thoughtful account of Margaret Thatcher, while hugely disappointed by the portrayal of Suu Kyi in the other. Even if you argue that any exposure helps, 'The Lady' seemed to have completely missed the point by portraying Suu Kyi as a victim, languishing in her lakeside prison, weeping over letters from her absent husband in Oxford. I knew enough about this equally formidable lady to know that the reality was very different. Putting aside the fact that she is anything but sentimental; is tough and apparently doesn't suffer fools lightly (another reason why I thought I didn't need to meet her) and has a famously short fuse, the whole point was that everything HAD happened while she was incarcerated. Not only was there a now phenomenal international profile but equally a galvanizing of national feeling. This had been developing over years through the understanding that she was determined, reliable, dedicated and carrying a message of huge power. She was now perceived, in the language of my analogy, as a life transforming 'bacteria' of hope.

By this stage in my inexorable taxi journey out of town, my *heat oppresséd brain* was beginning to spin, as another thought offered itself. How much I had enjoyed the day, back in June last year, when Suu Kyi had addressed both Houses of Parliament, friends and family under Westminster Hall's great medieval roof. It had represented not only an indication of the respect for her ideas and commitment in the West, but also to my mind, that this Mother of Parliaments thought she and the whole Burmese dilemma had lessons in democracy for us back home. I had remembered being told how on that day, she had met with the foreign secretary William Hague at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and it had been ensured that she arrived through the labyrinth of offices of the various administrative staff that support him. This had apparently been an intentional attempt to impress upon her the significance of the inevitable structure required to administer and promulgate British interests. For it had apparently been a source of some diplomatic frustration that the channels of democratic communication in Burma still seemed to amount to Suu Kyi, her trusted 'gate-keeper' in the form of her PA, Dr Tin Mar Aung and the 'Uncles' (now more accurately grandfathers) of the NLD. For all the cultural respect for elders, this was a generation after all, that communicated in Burmese, had an ambivalence to the internet and even the use of emails.

That made my meeting at the 88 Generation all the more important to me. I wanted to confirm how widely the democratic spirit reached and perhaps more importantly, how united a front it presented. As the midday sun beat down on my taxi one more thought crossed my mind. I was passing heavily tanned road construction workers, some working by hand squatting in the scorched gravel. I mused that I would probably never comprehend what effect on the mind, years of forced labour in such conditions would have upon any individual. I contemplated a world that could impose such inhuman hardship and what might distinguish such unfortunate souls from the mangy dogs I saw kicked in the alleyways of Rangoon.

Kyaw Min Yu, known throughout Burma as Ko Jimmy, greeted me at the 88 Generation office; a courteous and relaxed man of 44. Offered a cup of strong sweet Burmese tea, I was invited into a small meeting room and immediately warmed to his unassuming manner as we chatted in easy English about my recent experiences. The so-called 88 Generation Students, were at the forefront of the drive for democratic reform, that blew up into the civil unrest on 8th of the 8th month of 1988. Jimmy described how like many others he had been another hot-headed youth, desperate for change and rallying support among other students of Rangoon University. But it had resulted in violence and perhaps more significantly, panic within the regime that spilled into a bloodbath with atrocities on both sides and ultimately caused the death or imprisonment of many. The following year, at the age of 20 Ko Jimmy found himself behind bars and the victim of a routine of regular humiliation and torture designed to crush the spirit. He was to remain so constrained for the next 16 years, including 4 in solitary confinement.



Without a touch of resentment or even the appearance of regret, he described the passing years and then just as unsentimentally, recounted how something strange had begun to



happen. I learned how as he gained understanding of the system and more specifically, incriminating evidence of the staff's violence and corruption, the power balance gradually shifted. He was even amused to realise the genuine terror with which the prison authorities viewed the mysteries of the evolving internet age. For their perception of this omnipotent global force, of continuously scrutinising satellites, monitoring their every move, created an ever more debilitating paranoia within them. Finally released in 2005 he was again imprisoned in 2007, following the disturbances

caused by the Saffron Revolution, when monks famously filed out of their monasteries on to the streets en masse to protest. But so much had the tide changed that for the next 5 years, until his release last year, the prisoners were now in control. I listened with huge admiration for his fortitude and good humour and with growing emotion at the unimaginable commitment and sacrifice of so many.

But there is only one thought that provokes tears in me these days and that is the understanding of pure love. It became apparent to me in my dialogue with Jimmy that this spirit was alive and potent in the office of the 88 Generation. He spoke of recent history's three types of liberation struggle. The first was for liberation from imperialism, the second from capitalism and the third from suffocating socialist domination to a new open democracy. Burma he believed, had the tools to achieve the first two but had little understanding of the third. Then in what was pure music to my ears he declared; *"you cannot have democracy with violence, they are two completely different things"* and that to avoid a *"retaliation cycle"*, you have to eventually *"build confidence"*, you have to negotiate to build trust. I left his office thrilled to have heard such a clear vindication of the spirit of my book and as much as I could have hoped. Here in an office in the dusty outskirts of the capital, was exactly the same spirit as I had shared with Suu Kyi, but were we all working together?

Wednesday prove no less significant, as I had planned a meeting with Wai Wai Nu, the 25 year old daughter of the Rohingya Muslim leader U Kyaw Min, released last year after 7 years as a political prisoner. However, at the age of 18, Wai Wai had herself also served the same sentence in a Burmese prison and was evidently angrier about it than Ko Jimmy. We met in the bar of the Savoy and it was in that tenderly air-conditioned atmosphere that I had anticipated conducting my interview. However, before her arrival, I overheard from adjacent armchairs, the start of a business meeting. An American addressed an impeccably presented, middle aged Burmese by thanking him for coming and proceeded to relate in glowing terms how they had been informed that he was the most effective and admired of ministers. Assuming my own meeting would produce statements not entirely welcome to such a neighbouring party, when Wai Wai arrived, we agreed that despite the sweltering heat, we'd sit outside around the hotel's swimming pool. Wai Wai, perfectly contained and very pretty in a silk dress, may have looked remarkably cool on the outside but I could tell she was smouldering within. Her English was impressive as she reiterated what I had heard from others; the desperate grievance of the Rohingya Muslims, suffering in the western Rakhine State, bordering Bangladesh. She spoke of how the police had been complicit by their indifference to the on-going violence. As she calmly related her personal story; of losing her most precious years of youth to imprisonment, I again struggled with my emotions in even

beginning to comprehend the implications for this young life. Who was I, a theorist, to say in response to her claim that they “*had to be angry with the government*”, that this probably wouldn’t help and that as Jimmy had articulated, eventually cooperation and trust would be needed. She agreed that working towards a carefully considered ‘federation’ of states, making up the nation of Burma, was the only sensible solution and that they had always aimed for this. However, what she really couldn’t understand was the position of Daw Suu Kyi. They admired her and saw her as the nation’s natural leader but why hadn’t she condemned the anti Muslim rioting and violence and more specifically, why had she not arranged a meeting with Wai Wai’s father? He was after all, part of the CRPP, the Committee Representing the People’s Parliament, a working group set up by Suu Kyi and the NLD as an instrument for political cooperation with ethnic groups. Now all had gone silent. This apparent indifference had hurt them deeply and they were feeling abandoned, especially by Suu Kyi. These Rohingyas had apparently been in Burma for hundreds of years and were no more politically Bangladeshi than any Burmese Buddhist. As we spoke she continuously returned to one comment by Suu Kyi. Wai Wai related how just days after receiving her Nobel Peace Prize, Suu Kyi had declared that she didn’t know if the Rohingya’s were Burmese. This had obviously stunned the Rohingya Muslims into an overpowering sense of betrayal and now by the pool, beginning to betray some emotion, Wai Wai simply said “*she should know us.*”



This cool young lady represented the determined face of a people whose crisis, along with that of the Kachin people in the north, threatened to unravel the entire Burmese democratic process. I could understand why Suu Kyi might not wish to make a statement at this time, as Peter Popham had intimated, to “*avoid interventions that don’t make a difference*”. But why could she not call an urgent meeting within the NLD? It seemed to me imperative that as Aung San would have advised his daughter, she now do all in her power to bring the disparate parties in from the cold to the negotiating table to be seen to be part of the process. This act would surely also reposition her more squarely at the heart of authority, morally if not politically. Wai Wai had spoken to me of Suu Kyi being led astray by racist elements within the NLD and I didn’t want to concede to her that the levels of ethnic factionalism within Burma had indeed always been a strikingly divisive element. Instead I protested that while I was at the NLD offices on Monday, I had watched a delegation of Muslims enter the meeting upstairs. But again Wai Wai insisted “*They were Burmese Muslims!*”.

Her case was well made but I was also aware of the real fear existing among the country’s majority Buddhist population about the gradual creep of Islam in neighbouring countries. These concerns were gently articulated by a young Buddhist monk I met, during a second visit to the Shwedagon Pagoda another evening. Also 25, Tazau Basa possessed a remarkable grasp of English with an impressive vocabulary, though I only came to appreciate these once I had mastered his exotic pronunciation. He told me he came from a small village near Mandalay, devastated in 2008 by Cyclone Nargis. He recounted how his parents had sent him to become a monk aged 15, a decision he had respected if not necessarily welcomed. He related how because of the limitations of a monk’s education, he had not been able to learn

English at the nation's largest Mahagandayon Monastery. However, in the last two years he had worked hard to learn the language, declaring his resolve with the adage; "*no pain no gain*". I was curious by the apparent contradiction of an *ambitious* Buddhist monk, though in fairness, he also appeared to possess the rigorous discipline expected of a religious life. Anyway, I admired the initiative in approaching me to practice his language skills and any other motives were not my business.

So we agreed to meet up the following day to work on that pronunciation as well as perhaps reveal a few home truths. He spoke of the genuine fear among Buddhists of evangelising Islam, with its iconoclastic zeal, that detested his culture and forced women into burkas and men into 'holy' violence. In turn, I expressed the personal wish that Burma should indeed



remain predominantly Buddhist, with all the stability and culture that it had provided, but that I knew many moderate Muslims and had been working happily with the Muslim Council of Britain. I spoke of the Muslims I knew who shared our spirit of peace and knew our dream of political as well as intrinsic democracy. The issue I felt, was ensuring that common sense and consideration prevailed and in that, we knew the dangers in Britain just as much.

Feeling more confident in my understanding of his English and appreciating that he was no fool, I ventured to inquire about Burmese monks' involvement in the democracy movement. He explained how because the laity gave alms to the Sangha (the around 600,000 strong Burmese priesthood), it in turn bore a responsibility for the

spiritual welfare of the nation. When in 2007 the government put life-threatening hardship on the people with its fiscal changes, he said it was the Sangha's duty to rise up to form the extraordinary long blood-red lines of protesting monks known to the world as the Saffron Revolution. This they did while turning their begging bowls upside down, so as to symbolically deny the regime the blessings earned from giving alms. I asked him if, as representing a faith committed to order through loving kindness, he had contemplated how threatening this must have appeared to the authorities. I asked if denying sections of society their blessing wasn't an act of formidable aggression and what's more, a termination of the spirit of unconditional love. This notion came as a surprise to him and he thought carefully before generously declaring with a finger in the air, "*ah, you may be right!*" He acknowledged that not all monks were fully committed to the highest Buddhist principles and that some had been led astray by political incentives and had even been involved in the rousing of sectarian hatred against the Rohingya Muslims.



While it was not surprising if this vast state-endorsed body should have frayed a little at the edges, I hoped that now of all times, this powerful force for good in the land could make the vital difference. I proposed to him that in an ideal sense, the roughly equal numbered *Sangha* and the *Tatmadaw* (the Burmese army) should fulfil similar roles. Soldiers are most acceptable when they are policeman and policeman when they are safeguarding the nation from disruption and violence. As I had been walking the streets of Rangoon, I perceived the monks to be a force for peace and calm and that equally, that was how I recognised a perfect

policeman. While the policeman upholds the people's agreed laws, the 'priest' safeguards the people's shared spirit and culture. If this was indeed the case, then the Sangha, as much as Suu Kyi or Ko Jimmy, was part of a positive, stabilising influence that could help nudge the country towards maturity.

As I remembered the famous Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh declaring, *"It is difficult if not impossible to practice the way of understanding and love without a sangha, a community of friends who practice the same way."* But all this needed managing and that meant from the Sangha and Suu Kyi, right down to me, pushing for higher diversity, culture and 'nuance'. As I had argued at the YSPS, only a clearer idea of what the nation meant and stood for would result in the cohesion that was never more pressing and we certainly knew this from Britain. It would be necessary to provide a positive 'mythology' that wasn't duplicitous, nor forged in the heat of war and based on the hate of someone else. This would recognise a shared identity for all Burmese and not just the so-called ethnic 'Burmans' of the central plains, though I wasn't sure if this was happening.

It is well understood in business that the entrepreneurial inspiration with all its charisma, is rarely contained within the same individual as the ideal manager. These characters are usually different and require a distinct personality. For all her tremendous authority, noble convictions and enormous charisma, did Suu Kyi really understand that below her, there must be a descending structure to implement and perpetuate the spirit? There are and have been internationally, legions of experts in different disciplines, who even if they couldn't communicate with her, could bring invaluable support if involved and incorporated into the movement. It would be possible to construct a virtual 'Pentagon', helping to coordinate and proliferate the ideas of healthy democracy. Yes, democracy takes time - no way round that - but the sophistication of the West has found ways to shorten the process. We have learned the hard way, that this is definitely not achieved by *"Dropping it from 10,000 feet"*. Modern media technologies, particularly the internet, have created a revolution and caught many of us failing to appreciate its true implications. The digital age allows understanding and learning to spread faster and can save on the expensive resources of schools, teachers and books, though of course not replace them.

But it appears that few can get to the door of the Burmese democratic movement and there is not much sign of cooperation between the different democratic elements. There really needs to be teamwork, to both counteract the negative forces within, as well as those at the nation's gates. There are two names that could be used as evidence to support this argument; *Sharp* and *Soros*. Dr Gene Sharp, in his book 'From Dictatorship to Democracy' listed 198 'Methods' - as he termed them - for



changing a regime non-violently. Sharp and his supporters see the democratic movement in Burma as lacking the rigour and cooperation essential to counteract the extremist political tendencies. Admittedly, Sharp's approach is more confrontational than is considered appropriate, not just for an Asian culture that holds the greatest value in harmony but because Suu Kyi has moved on to a time of cooperation with the government. She always said that she did not wish to see the regime change but *"become heroes."* In this she shares the spirit of

the Dalai Lama in his relationship with China; the same spirit sees no enemies, no one to defeat and therefore no one to fight.

While Suu Kyi may have moved on, there is still an argument for that cooperation and clarification of shared values that can now be merged with the government. This is admittedly as much about perception and marketing but these values must be clarified and implemented through dialogue and understanding. Again, George Soros has given \$8 billion towards nonviolent and human rights causes. He has for sometime been a major benefactor of organisations such as the Burma Campaign. So why did it take so long for Suu Kyi to meet with him and discuss ways in which he and his organisation can help to provide that badly needed managerial expertise as articulated by so many? This is after all, the all-important time to build that *culture* in the gut of Burma. For many, it requires first for Suu Kyi to do what might feel unnatural to her. She would need to pull out of the political minefield into which some believe, the government is inadvertently nudging her. It could be a difficult adjustment because she grew up inspired by her father's political achievements, studied PPE at Oxford and worked at the UN and then locked away for years, was never able to flex her political muscles.

It is perhaps time for Suu Kyi to consider that *less* can be *more*. As Alan Clements had said "*The gene is out of the bottle*", she has in fact reached her goal, she has inspired her country and provided it a clear and noble model. The imperative now is to pass on that torch far and



wide among her contemporaries and the succeeding generation. This requires a formal structure and it requires for her to alter her role. When the constitution is finally amended, it will be the opportunity to consider a role for her as a constitutional head of state. Although Suu Kyi would no doubt not wish to be an actual monarch, it is not generally appreciated the degree to which the Queen of England fulfils the role of a Buddhist spiritual leader. This is not as fanciful a suggestion as it might at first appear, when one considers how close and natural is the relationship

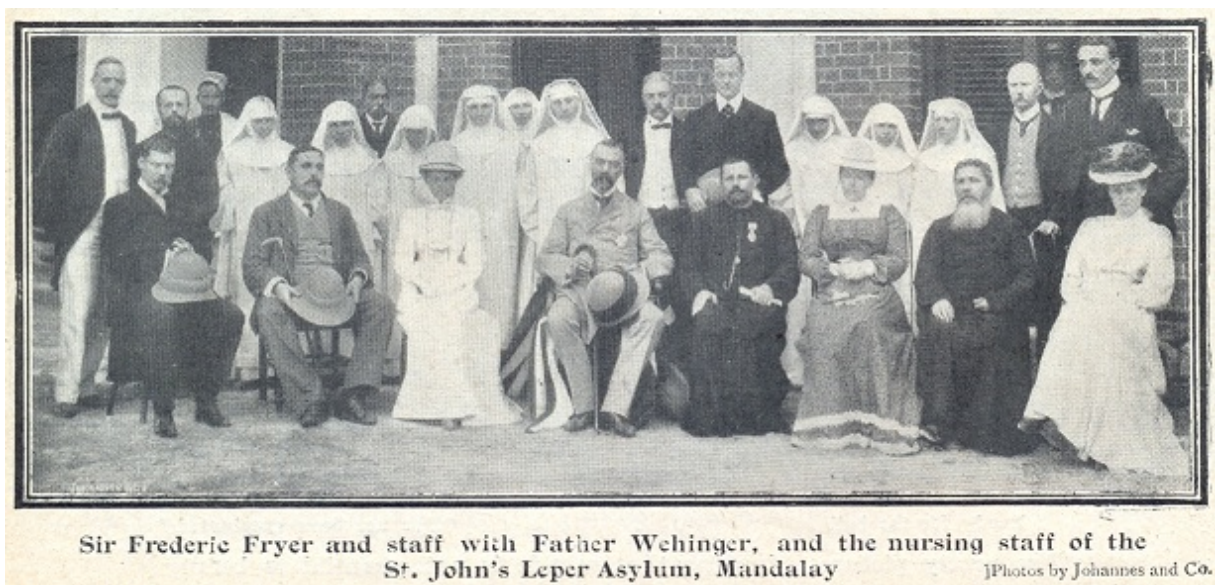
between the Dalai Lama and Prince Charles. In the Queen's case, consider for example; how she personifies the virtues of dedication; is not partisan; exhibits unconditional devotion to all and most importantly; is respected even more for what she *is* than for what she *does*.

The principle of 'zipping it' may well already have occurred to Suu Kyi, though at this stage, the message does not seem to have been widely understood in the country or abroad, where I am told even in Hong Kong and China, her standing has suffered badly. But it is a very helpful principle here, and to get there you must first clarify the ground-rules. It is important to simplify the basic principles around which the most remote group in the country can unite and that might require her withdrawing from party alignment. It will be vital to recognise these principles not just as Western democratic values, as she well knows, but enshrined in the spirit of Buddhism, as they are at the heart of all the great religions.

What are these principles? They are surely that; all have the right to respect; all must work for peaceful unity through dialogue and compromise; love for your family and immediate community, must be matched by a respect for all sentient beings; we all have the right to privacy under the law; under the law we should not judge others and should forgive without condition and love without measure. While these principles may appear idealistic, the situation in Burma has shown that they are at least possible to reach, providing enough people are prepared to tip the balance towards good sense. But this can inevitably only be achieved

through the much-repeated words of dialogue, understanding, cooperation and compromise. Now, more than ever, this requires bringing the conflicting elements around the table and forging a common understanding. It means developing a human resources mechanism, to promote 'civility' and it requires the calling on all the international good will now available to help. By this method only can Suu Kyi hold the vision as Nelson Mandela has attempted in South Africa and before the all-important elections in 2015. Then, the people of Burma themselves will be able to hold that torch of freedom up against not only the darker forces within but just as urgently, against the phenomenal forces both positive and negative that constitute the ever more complex international world of the 21st Century.

Finally, we have to appreciate that the word *civilisation* infers a process of becoming civil and is necessarily therefore on-going. Burma will need to give time to all this, while the so-called democratic world must ensure that it too is continuing that process. For without vigilance, the true spirit of democracy can slip quietly out into the night's darkness. The process will involve the gradual seeping of that spirit up from the people and simultaneously down from the formal channels of influence, where Suu Kyi at the pinnacle can be supported by the Sangha. With this in mind, everyone plays their part however small in helping to stabilise the tension and edge the country towards democratic maturity. During my time in Burma, I have been conscious that I too could daily play my part in this process. As I walked the streets with my umbrella for shade, I have been a constant curiosity, in a land that still only welcomes tourists in the thousands per year. But I am nevertheless an ambassador, as we are all for our



different communities. In my case, not just for Britain and perhaps the returning spirit of Sir Frederic but for the very ideas I am so keen to expound. If I can remain genuinely confident, smiling, polite and attentive to all, from the youngest beggar to any soldier or government minister, then I am a walking testament and a potential beacon where the dark threatens. Arrogant it might sound and I would not judge my own success in this endeavour, but no religion would deny the part we each play in allowing positive change to occur. Otherwise, the great unspoken risk here is that unless we all share and spread this spirit, not only will the necessary changes be impossible for Suu Kyi and anyone else to implement, but that precious flame could be extinguished by what is sometimes chillingly termed the Benazia Bhutto Scenario.

As the pen scurries across the page in my hotel room, darkness descends on Kalaw and what is the last night of the Burmese calendar. Tomorrow brings a new year and new opportunities and I believe a better future for this brave country. And as I hear the last revellers from the water festival that marks the passing of another year, slowly leave the streets to the sound of the crickets, life's great irony becomes apparent. For all my desire to give to this land what little I have, in the end it is I who have been the obvious recipient. The genuine warmth and the simple kindness of this nation's people have touched me deeply. I will leave it not only impressed by its bravery and fortitude but changed by their love. I wish Burma not just my blessing but that of so many throughout the world, who will it to show us a better way through this great opportunity. *"Bless you Suu, bless you Burma"*.

16th April 2013

*"Democracy is not merely a form of government
but an integrated social and ideological system based on respect for the individual"*

Aung San Suu Kyi



Villager in ethnic dress for the New Year - near Kalaw, Southern Shan State