

If you would like to learn more about this *Bayanihan* spirit and the Sambayanihan Foundation, e-mail Marietta Goco at [mariettagoco@yahoo.com](mailto:mariettagoco@yahoo.com).

## REVOLUTION OF THE SPIRIT

Told by Leslie Kean

It was August 1988, and Aung San Suu Kyi's speech to the massive rally at Rangoon's Shwedagon Pagoda began with a minute of silence. Thousands of people took a moment to honor the students who had recently lost their lives demonstrating for freedom and democracy in Burma.

On March 18 schoolchildren and college students had marched by the hundreds along the bridge on Inya Lake, singing Burma's national anthem, hoping to end the harsh military rule that had been in place since a 1962 military coup. Years of misrule had reduced the once prosperous "golden land" of Burma to one of the world's most destitute nations, whose government now wanted to remake it into the next Asian "tiger." To this end it forced more than 2 million people, many of them children, into slave labor. Human-rights abuses were rampant. On that day in March, riot police arrived in steel helmets and beat many of the protesters to death. Others escaped into the lake and drowned. In the following weeks, demonstrations intensified and thousands fled the country. British television referred to those left behind as "40 million hostages."

Aung San Suu Kyi was returning to Burma from England to nurse her dying mother and arrived in the middle of this bloody chaos. Many a person would have turned right back around and headed for safety, but she was the daughter of Aung San, the independence hero who had won Burma's freedom from the British in 1947, and she thought that she was being called to bring peace to her homeland. She accepted the mission.

As she traveled around the country, sharing her vision of freedom, democracy, personal responsibility, and compassion with huge, electrified crowds, her charisma and brilliance dazzled the world. The Burmese people rallied, challenging the military's claim to absolute power.

When Aung San Suu Kyi's popularity grew large enough to threaten the ruling junta, she was placed under house arrest along with forty other young activists who worked with her. She would not walk freely beneath the sun for six long years, but her countrymen did not forget her.

When the elections finally came, in 1990, Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy, won a landslide victory. Since she was under house arrest, she wasn't officially allowed to run, but the people of Burma voted for her anyway.

The generals not only refused to honor the results of the elections; they threw most of the newly elected parliament into prison, but they couldn't capture Aung San Suu Kyi's spirit. The guards were amazed that she never once regarded them with anger. Instead, she cultivated the Buddhist practice of *metta*, or loving kindness. She sold her furniture to buy food, refusing to take anything from her captors. Following the example of Gandhi, she employed one of the most potent forms of nonviolent protest available: fasting for justice. She meditated every day, and a flame of purpose and dedication burned steadily within her.

In 1991, on International Human Rights Day, Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in absentia. Because she was still in captivity, her son traveled to Oslo and accepted the prize for her, on behalf of "all the people of Burma." He said, "I know if she were free today, my mother would, in thanking you, also ask you to pray that the oppressors and the oppressed should throw down their weapons and join together to build a nation founded on humanity in the spirit of peace."

The international press has recognized Aung San Suu Kyi as the world's most famous political prisoner since Nelson Mandela and has called the human-rights disaster in Burma "the new South Africa." After six years in detention, Aung San Suu Kyi was finally released in July of 1995. Still the indefatigable leader of

Burma's struggling democracy movement, she began to encourage dialogue and reconciliation between her country's military rulers and its populace. She believes a very different Burma will emerge within her lifetime, for she has "come to the conclusion that the human race is not divided into two opposing camps of good and evil. It is made up of those who are capable of learning and those who are not. Learning is a process of absorbing those lessons of life that enable us to increase peace and happiness in our world. As we strive to teach others, we must have the humility to acknowledge that we, too, still have much to learn. The quintessential revolution is the revolution of the spirit." For the thousands of citizens, young and old, who gather outside her home in Rangoon to learn what they can do, sitting on plastic bags and newspapers, enduring both sweltering heat and torrential downpours to hear about what she is doing and plans to do, Aung San Suu Kyi's message is simple and direct: "We're in this together. If you want freedom and democracy, you must work for it. It will not be given to you. I can only point the way." For over a decade, she has been pointing with her life, with her spirit.

She achieved a victory when her military oppressors agreed to begin a dialogue in the fall of 2000 and then freed some political prisoners. In May 2002, Aung San Suu Kyi was released from house arrest after nineteen months of confinement with no telephone. While she continues to work for political reform so desperately needed in Burma, she never loses sight of the underlying spiritual aims of the struggle. "The quintessential revolution is a revolution of the spirit," she says.

*The nonviolent approach does not immediately change the heart of the oppressor. It first does something to the hearts and souls of those committed to it. It gives them a new self-respect: it calls up resources of strength and courage that they did not know they had. Finally, it reaches the opponent and so stirs his conscience that reconciliation becomes reality.*

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Join Aung San Suu Kyi's revolution of the spirit and help support human rights and democracy in Burma. **The Burma Project USA**, California, can be reached at [burmausa@ix.netcom.com](mailto:burmausa@ix.netcom.com). For more information about the struggle and what you can do, visit [www.freeburmacoalition.org](http://www.freeburmacoalition.org).