31. AUNG SAN SUU KYI

*Pedagogue of Pacifism and Human Rights*

Ultimately our aim should be to create a world free from the displaced, the homeless and the hopeless, a world of which each and every corner is a true sanctuary where the inhabitants will have the freedom and the capacity to live in peace.

Suu Kyi, 2012

INTRODUCTION

Aung San Suu Kyi, a practitioner of peaceful mediation, received the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize while under house arrest in Burma, now present Myanmar. The story of her life is intertwined with the lives of the Burmese people and their struggles for freedom and human rights. A brief glimpse into the life of Aung San Suu Kyi reveals the path of a peaceful leader in the making. She was born on June 19, 1945 in British Burma. Her father, General Aung San, was an advocate of democracy and freedom. Assassinated when Suu Kyi was only two years old, General Aung San was a national hero in Burma. Suu Kyi’s mother was an active member of a political group known as Women’s Freedom League.

Suu Kyi grew up surrounded by various leaders and generals, taking in all the stories of the many heroic deeds of her father. Her mother, Ma Khin Kyi, joined the Burmese Parliament after her husband’s death and later became the country’s first minister of Social Welfare, later appointed as ambassador to India. Naturally moving with her mother to India, it was there that Suu Kyi studied the writings and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. In 1964 Suu Kyi went on to study at Oxford University, and later went on to work at the United Nations.

It was in 1988 while Suu Kyi was visiting Burma to nurse her mother who suffered a stroke that she became painfully aware of the socio-political situation the people of Burma were enduring. Ne Win’s Burma Socialist Program Party (BSPP) was in power at that time. The majority Burmese people did not have enough food to eat and were devoid of other facilities like plumbing, electricity, and the use of telephones. When Burmese students rebelled against Ne Win, he not only ordered the closing of universities and enacted night curfews, but also silenced their call for freedom by placing them in prison. The Burmese people lived in fear, repression, and were tortured. And while peaceful protesters were arrested and troops fired
at the unarmed activists, leading to many deaths, Ne Win could not suppress the movement. Protestors became more energized and widespread; building so much pressure that Ne Win was forced to call for an election to decide Burma’s future. However, Ne Win’s overture to hold an election was predictably wrought with fraud as the process was not fair and free. In short, BSPP was not willing to give up power, leading the people of Burma to suffer through years of military repression under the military rule. On August 8th, 1988, known as the massacre 8–8-88, 3,000 Burmese people were slaughtered while holding a peaceful demonstration.

TURNING POINT

Suu Kyi could not remain silent. She sent a letter to the Ne Win’s BSPP party suggesting to form a government to usher an era of free multi-party elections. She urged non-violence, and suggested the government to release all prisoners who were held during the demonstration. While Suu Kyi’s proposals were accepted by political activists, BSPP remained silent, prompting Suu Kyi to join a protest where she addressed a massive crowd in front of Shwedagon Pagoda, a sacred Buddhist temple of Burma. Addressing the rally Suu Kyi proclaimed, “I could not as my father’s daughter remain indifferent to all that was going on. This national crisis could in fact be called the second struggle for national independence” (Suu Kyi, 1991, page 193). Continuing on, she urged the people to remain focused on their goal of success through discipline and unity, clearly arousing the mass gathering.

The electrifying speech clearly had an inspirational effect on the people, thrusting Suu Kyi as the unofficial leader of their resistance movement. As a consequence, the people’s opposition grew stronger resisting military repression that eventually the BSBP party was abolished and a new council—the State Law Order Restoration Council (SLORC) was created. While this council ordered curfew, banned public gatherings, and suggested a temporary period of military control, it promised free fair elections will be held after the establishment of law and order in the country. Suu Kyi had her doubts about SLORC’s promises and began collaborating with other freedom movement leaders in order to create a political party. With Suu Kyi as the general secretary, the National League for Democracy (NLD) was created. As Suu Kyi toured the country setting up units of the NLD party, tens of thousands of people were inspired to join. As general secretary, she spoke against military killings, imprisonments, and violations of human rights. She not only appealed to the United Nations and international human right organizations, but she also urged ambassadors of other countries and heads of states to condemn military violence against the peaceful unarmed people of Burma.

In May, 1989, the government announced a date for general election and Suu Kyi’s name appeared on the ballot of NLD party. Even though universities were reopened after the killing of students in 1988, the restrictions on public gatherings and meetings were still enforced. Yet, under Suu Kyi’s determined leadership, the people and the political parties raised their voices against the suppression of human rights and decided to hold protest marches to honor leaders including Suu Kyi’s
father, the deceased General Aung San through a Martyr’s Day event. However, fearing the killing of innocent people, Suu Kyi took the decision to cancel the event. Despite her house arrest and intimidation by military junta, Suu Kyi continued her struggle for the cause of the people and human rights.

In July 1991, Suu Kyi was awarded Sakharov prize for Freedom of Thought, and in October of that same year, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. However, she did not leave Burma to receive the award fearing that the SLORC government will not allow her to return to Burma. The publication of Suu Kyi’s book Freedom from Fear (1991), during her house arrest, served as a powerful voice against oppression to the rest of the world. The writings poignantly depicted the course of the country’s struggles from the days of Suu Kyi’s illustrious father, to the mass killings of innocent people, including university students of the 1988 massacre; and finally her house arrest that resulted in an international outcry of protest against the suppression of human rights. Suu Kyi was released from house arrest in 2010 and in April 2012 she was elected to Parliament in a landslide victory.

CONCLUSION

Suu Kyi was painfully aware of the actions of powerful leaders that subjected innocent people of Burma through torture, genocide and inhuman treatments. Yet, throughout the course of the freedom struggle, never was she tempted by the provocations and intimidation of the military junta. Instead, she remained resilient only to prove that non-violence is not cowardice; rather, it is the courage of grace and peace. In the changing context of the life and the pursuit of liberty of all oppressed peoples, Suu Kyi’s critical pedagogical approach transcends geographic boundaries and touches the core value of humanity where violence has no place. As is in the case of Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., and others, Suu Kyi serves as a sterling example for peace educators around the world. She can be characterized as a non-traditional critical pedagogue who, through her unwavering commitment to the cause of human rights, paved the path of liberation for the Burmese people. Indeed, Suu Kyi demonstrated genuine leadership through her courage, determination, and personal sacrifice, reaffirming the belief that peaceful means of resistance is a powerful force against oppression, injustice, and inequality.

REFERENCES

Amnesty International (http://www.amnesty.org)
Free Burma Organization (http://www.FreeBurma.org)
Human Rights Watch (http://www.hrw.org)