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The martyrdom of Burma's marching monks

John Dear | Oct. 9, 2007 On the Road to Peace

Imagine this: thousands of priests, nuns, monks, deacons, bishops and cardinals dropping everything and taking to the streets. Around the White House they march, week after week, and then off they head to the Capitol and the Pentagon. They walk with a sharp demand. Stop the war on Iraq. End the occupation of Palestine. Abolish all electric chairs and nuclear weapons. And turn over the vast sums, earmarked for death, to the world's poor and hungry.

Alas, here such a scenario is a fantasy, but not in Burma. Since mid-August something rare has arisen -- a historic and magnificent display of creative nonviolence. Buddhist monks stopping the nation's unjust business as usual, taking to the streets, and facing off with Burma's brutal dictatorship. They're in the midst of a dazzling act of resistance and hope for which many have given their lives. They've forced the world to look at their reality.

Things began when the government in August ruinously raised gas prices by 500 percent. In response there were a few small demonstrations. The dictatorship in turn cracked down -- at which point the monks began to organize.

Burma is home to some 54 million, 90 percent of whom are Buddhist, and monks there command enormous respect. So much so that the dictatorship adopted a policy of trying to buy them off. Public funds have gone toward pagodas and temples during the last 17 years, while for the people tax burdens have skyrocketed and civil rights vanished.

But it turns out, the monks can't be bought. They've formed a national coalition called the All Burma Monks Alliance. And from this alliance, the marches sprang. They began modestly, 2,000 monks at first, all of them with their begging bowls turned upside-down.

The overturned bowl.

Here is a symbolic gesture against the junta and soldiers the power of which eludes American minds. It is akin to a union of Catholic priests denying communion to any U.S. soldier, any federal employee, or any weapons manufacturer. It is akin to workers at Los Alamos being turned away from Catholic altars.

Exponentially the marches in Burma swelled. By late September the number of marchers had grown to hundreds of thousands -- tens of thousands of monks plus 10 times that many civilians. And in two major cities, Yangon and Mandalay, there gathered in the streets, according to some reports, up to a 100,000 monks, with a fervid, silent demand for democracy and justice.

As the days unfolded, I presume, the junta decided to let the leaders emerge. They permitted some 500 monks onto the blockaded street of political prisoner and internationally known peacemaker and hero, 61-year-old Aung San Suu Kyi -- the new Mandela, one of our times' great figures of justice and peace. She stood before the monks, tears in her eyes, her first public appearance in more than four years.

Then the junta cracked down. It appears that the gesture, and the light touch during the first few days, afforded them time for surveillance. Seems the junta let matters take their course in order to document the organizers and their supporters. Then once soundings had been taken, the killings began. Two hundred have died, say various Asian reports. British reports put the figure at 2,000. And they say thousands more find themselves in jail, having been dragged from their homes. Moreover, many monasteries have been raided and ransacked. And communication has been cut off, including the internet, so the repression goes on, as it were, in the cover of darkness The brutality goes on.

Similar marches erupted in 1988, which the military used as a pretext to take control. The melee caused the deaths of some 3,000 and when the dust had settled the junta renamed the country Myanmar. Aung San Suu Kyi quickly found herself under house arrest, the threat of execution hanging over her head. So far her global fame has kept the executioner away, that and the love and reverence of the people.

They voted her head of state in a 1990 election, but the junta threw out the results and imprisoned members of her party. Then in 1991 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. This to the junta was an inconvenient turn of events, but they refused to be moved. And to this day, uttering her name is risky business. (People dart their eyes and lower their voices, and speak only of "the Lady.") Riskier yet is to display her photo or own her writings or recite her words.

"Please use your liberty to promote ours," she tells the world.

One caught transgressing this ban is likely to be trundled off to a Burmese dungeon, more often than not a one-way trip.

My friend Richard Deats of the Fellowship of Reconciliation traveled to Burma in mid-September just before the drama began to unfold. Off he went to lead a series of secret trainings on nonviolence. The junta forbids gatherings of more than five, so Richard hustled from living room to out of the way restaurant. And along with seething unrest, he found broad interest in the way of nonviolence. They were especially eager to hear the story of the People Power movement in the Philippines, and how it nonviolently toppled the Marcos regime.

(On Richard's return, not coincidentally, authorities at the Newark airport singled him out for special attention. He endured a thorough search and inspection, and as he cooled his heels in a remote office, a close reading of

every sentence of his notes on nonviolence.)

The monks' marching resembles epic movements of the last century. In particular, Gandhi's salt march and Dr. King's Civil Rights movement and the nonviolent campaigns in Lithuania and South Africa. And the Burmese crackdown smells of the massacre of Tiananmen Square. But in all their travail, the monks and Burmese marchers teach us a thing or two about how to resist tyranny, what the spiritual life looks like, and for Christians, how to follow the nonviolent Jesus.

Jesus himself formed a procession into Jerusalem -- atop a donkey, a display of street theater that struck a public nerve and mocked imperial power. And then he gave his life nonviolently resisting the occupying empire on behalf of the poor.

The monks are doing the same. Their example calls to us. We too must take a stand, march for peace, and put our spirituality into public action. That too is risky business, but transformation is sure to follow -- social, economic and political. What bears fruit in distant corners of the world will bear fruit in our own imperial regime.

And so what to do? Surely pray for the Burmese monks and civilians behind prison walls. Pray for Burma's liberation and for the return of the noble Aung San Suu Kyi. More, join the growing chorus to pressure China, host of the next Olympics. Demand that China work for an end to Burma's repression. Call for sanctions against U.S. oil companies operating in Burma, beginning with Chevron. Study the situation (see **www.irrawaddy.org [1]** and **www.buddhistnews.tv [2]**). Support solidarity groups (see **www.uscampaignforburma.org [3]** and **www.burmacampaign.org.uk [4]**).

Most of all, take to the streets. March for peace. Put your spirituality of peace on display. Emulate the marching monks and practice creative nonviolence down Main Street, America, and say, like them, No to occupation, No to injustice, No to war. And fund the peace movement, not the war machine. Then turn your begging bowl upside down.

As "the Lady" pleads, let's use our liberty to promote theirs.

John Dear's new book, *Transfiguration*, is available from **www.amazon.com [5]**, and the new DVD about him, "The Narrow Path," is available from **www.sandamianofoundation.org [6]**. He recommends the new book by Justin Wintle, *Perfect Hostage: A Life of Aung San Suu Kyi*, (Random House). In a few weeks, Dear is to be sentenced for his protest against the Iraq war. For info, see: **www.johndear.org [7]**.

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