

Following the Spark

Nandar Matari

Contents

Preface	7
Chapter One – Tracing history	9
Chapter Two – Character Forming & Preparing for Real Life	22
Chapter Three – Going for My Dreams	46
Chapter Four – Discovering the Truth	70
Chapter Five – The Way to Mastership	91
Conclusion	108

Preface

Most of the time, I feel as though I have just shot a double espresso. This fiery energy pumping within me pushes me to go beyond my limits and challenges me to try new things. It is an unusual energy for a girl from Myanmar who grew up in a Buddhist society. Such a girl – it is believed – should simply strive to be polite and honest. She must follow the rules and orders of her parents, taking care of them when they get older. She should only follow the rules and directions of her parents, and vow to take care of them in their old age.

When I was growing up, I often felt guilty for being strong. My mom used to ask me, “Why can’t you be normal like other girls?” I never had an answer, because I really had no idea why I was different. I tried my best to be normal when I was young. But I could not resist my impulses and had to answer them at the cost of being punished by my mother. They called me a rebel because I followed my curiosity and did my own thing. The normal or ordinary way of living never appealed to me.

I was a good student as a young girl. My mantra through high school was, “I must be number one in the class,” and I aspired to go to medical school. But in reality, that was my mother’s plan and expectation.

As you might guess, I did not follow the plan that she had set out for me. It was not until I was sixteen years old that I had any idea what I wanted to do with my life. It was then that I found my vision while I had a chance to visit the border with Thailand. I decided then and there that I wanted to travel the world.

I have a constant curiosity about life and its meaning. I was seven years old when I first asked my grandmother, “Why am I here in this life?” Her explanation about karma and reincarnation fascinated me. My thirst to understand things inspired me to meditate, read many books about psychology and the success stories of others, study English literature instead of going to medical school due to my fascination with Hollywood movies, study meta-physics, and go through extreme experiences, like walking on fire and jumping out of a plane from 4,000 meters.

The strict upbringing and forceful expectation to take responsibility for my parents and younger siblings from a young age gave me many traumatic experiences. To heal the pain in my heart was always my first

priority in life. However, I did not abstain from my responsibilities, and I was always finding ways to become financially successful in order to take care of my family.

I have experienced many ups and downs in the past nearly four decades of my life. Though I grew up under a military regime without a proper education, I always looked for ways to expand my knowledge and keep up with the events of the world. Soon after my graduation from college, I became a freelance English teacher at twenty-three years old through dedicated self-study. In spite of my humble beginning of arriving in Germany with one suitcase, only ten euros in my pocket, and no language skills or cultural understanding, I became a sales manager after six years in a financial services company. Through my regular meditations, my consciousness expands day-by-day; I have come to understand my real purpose for this life.

I have refused to accept a mediocre way of living – earning money, enjoying luxuries, going to bed, and getting up to do it all over again. In 2012, I decided to leave everything behind that I had been working on to have my own financial freedom. After facing my deepest fears, difficulties, and ambiguities on my way to sculpting my own destiny, I am now free. I have found peace and happiness in my heart. I now understand why I had to face all those difficulties and pain in my life. I have forgiven myself and everyone around me during my journey. I love, respect, and accept myself as I am, and that extends to everyone around me. I want to share with the entire world my meditations, methods, and information which have helped me to get in touch with the strongest and innermost part of my being, heal my emotional pain, clear my mental blockage, expand my consciousness, and find my own peace and self-love. I have discovered the three missions that I was born with, and I am now determined to fulfill them in this lifetime:

1. To create seminars, books, songs, and stories to inspire people and bring a higher consciousness to the world;
2. To teach meditation and healing methods for our golden era;
3. To bring up and educate children in a peaceful way of living to bring real-world peace and maintain my legacy.

May you all be happy!

Chapter One

Tracing history

Blood Cocktail

Being the product of many ethnic backgrounds might be the reason for my high levels of energy and curiosity. At just four feet and eleven inches tall, my mother is quite short for a woman from Myanmar. She has the ability to scold someone in one minute, and smile and laugh in the next.

My maternal great-grandfather originally came from India. At the time, both Myanmar and India were colonies of Great Britain, and it allowed colonial peoples free travel throughout the empire. As a result, many people emigrated from India to Myanmar because of the abundance of opportunities there. After they emigrated, my maternal grandfather was born in Pyinmana, which is a very dry and hot region of Myanmar. He later married my grandmother, and they decided to move to a cooler region and start their own family.

My mother was born in Kalaw, one of the most beautiful resort towns in the Shan province of Myanmar. She has an elder brother, two younger sisters, and two younger brothers. Later on, they moved to Taunggyi. My grandfather was a teacher at a public school. With six children to feed, they had to live paycheck-to-paycheck. My grandmother needed to work at a sewing job to earn extra money to support the family. My mother also helped my grandmother from a young age. When she was in the ninth grade, she began nursing school and started working at the age of nineteen. She told us that she was really anxious when she needed to learn lessons at school. She was always afraid to make mistakes. She regretted the fact that she could not continue learning and be able to study at university. Her childhood struggles made her determined to be rich when she got older. She promised herself to give her children a better childhood, free from worry. Additionally, she wanted her children to have a great education.

My father's family also consisted of immigrants to Myanmar. My maternal grandfather was a Chinese refugee who escaped the Chinese

Civil War from 1927 to 1949. He met my grandmother, one of the most beautiful girls in her village, in the lower part of Myanmar. The region is very close to Thailand's border. She belonged to a specific ethnic group in our country which closely resembles the Thai people. Due to the revolutions that were ongoing at the time, she had to marry at the age of sixteen because her mother could not take care of her. Unfortunately, her husband – my grandfather – passed away due to a serious illness. She was left alone with two sons and one daughter. She never remarried.

My father was just two years old at that time. He was the youngest son in his family. He could not even recall what his father looked like. He continued his father's legacy out of respect by following the Chinese traditions of his ancestors. My grandmother was only twenty-five years old when her husband died. However, she never remarried and supported her children by herself.

My grandmother was strict with my father, and he also needed to work from a young age. Growing up with a strong mother, my father was always looking for freedom and needed to find his own way to success. My grandmother wanted her children to be educated and tried her best to send them to university. My father went to Taunggyi College to study biology. He had a fearless personality. He practiced martial arts and took part in many other activities during his time in university. He tried many things out of curiosity. He had a cheerful personality that allowed him to build up trust and friendship with people in a short period of time.

My parents met each other in Taunggyi. My father became severely sick one day, requiring hospitalization. It was there that he met my mother, falling in love with her gentle kindness. They got married three years later.

Birth

I was born during the rainy season. My native town of Taunggyi is a bit colder than other parts of Myanmar, and it lies 1,430 meters above sea level. Being surrounded by mountains, it has beautiful scenery and is considered a resort town. People from Taunggyi take pride in where they come from.

My mom was very excited and happy to have her first child at the age of thirty, a later age for most Asian women at the time. She was full of hopes, ambitions, and expectations that I would outperform my

peers. She was ready to give me everything that she lacked when she was young – attention, good food, and a good education.

My father's expectation was to have an eldest son. He wanted to teach his son and do the things that with him that he never had a chance to do with his own father. Unfortunately for him, I was a girl. He could not hide his sorrow and often reminded me of it when I was young. Yes, I did do many things with him, like repairing his car and motorbike together, and accompanying him when he had to go to a remote place alone. Yet, I could not change my gender. I felt guilty that I could not fulfill my father's expectation and that I had let him down in some way. It was one of the many reasons why I was angry with myself that I was born as a girl. In Burmese society, there is no gender equality; men are simply superior to women and have greater advantages. Buddha was a man, so a man can be anything. However, a woman is restricted. She has a weaker body; she needs to get pregnant and give birth to children. She requires protection from a man. She must follow the rules of the family and stay at home.

Growing up under this mindset, I spent many years feeling insecure as a woman. I overcompensated by constantly seeking independence as a man would, without showing my feelings and emotions, and being overly competitive with men. I wanted to show my father that I was better than a man even though I was a woman. It took me years to accept and feel good about my own femininity.

Competition

I was a happy, healthy child. I was a big child compared to other babies in the hospital. The living standard in Myanmar was very low. Most of the women did not know how to eat healthy, or even if they did know, they could not afford to eat enough vitamins and nutrients. As a result, most babies were born small and lean. My mother was really proud because she could feed me enough to eat. When I was one, I won first prize in a competition for being the heaviest baby. My competitive nature began at a young age.

My mother wanted me to be the top student in my class. She was only satisfied if I had the highest points in all subjects when compared to my classmates. It was really difficult for me. I was interested in learning, but I did not necessarily need or want to be the best in the class. I just wanted to play with my friends without constantly worrying about my grades. I wanted to have friends and be happy. I was good at math, and

it was rare for me to score less than 90% on any examination. It was only because of my curiosity, not because of some motivation to succeed or make my mother happy. My mom was always proud of me and wanted me to have better marks on the next exam. She pushed me to outperform and have better marks in every subject, whether I liked it or not. As a result, “I must,” and “I must be more,” become mantras for me.

To go through these pressure-filled experiences made me really disciplined as I got older. It also instilled a ‘never-give-up’ mentality, and I almost always overcame any difficulties in my life as a result of it.

The Beginning of Leadership

The first of my siblings was born as a healthy baby girl when I was three years three months old. At that time, we were in Yangon, the capital city of Myanmar because my father had to work there. My mother was alone in the city and she had no one to turn to after giving birth to my sister. She was quite overloaded with household chores and a newborn baby. I had to help her in doing errands and looking for a seat in the crowded buses of Yangon. This created a sense of independence within me and a knowledge that I needed to take care of my family

The Question

My father joined the military after he completed his university studies, allowing us to live in military housing. My younger sister was born while we were in the military housing. I liked playing with my neighbors – boys and girls whose fathers also served in the army. I went to kindergarten there. My mother had to work at the hospital every day, while my grandmother and aunt stayed at home and took care of us. My father was away most of the time. He stayed busy long after getting home each day. Because of my parents’ hectic schedules, I became close with my grandmother, and she was the one I turned to when my curiosities began to pique.

One question and her subsequent answer stand out in my mind to this day. It was summer, and I had a long holiday after finishing my first grade exams. I was about seven years old. My grandmother told me about karma and reincarnation while she was sewing. She told me that we should be kind and helpful to everyone around us because everything we do – good or bad – will come back to us in an amount relative to our intentions. She also told me that we can be reborn or reincarnated again

as a man, woman, animals, angels, and many other different forms of being until we reached nirvana, or the enlightenment. She went on to say that most people do not remember their past lives.

These words really struck my young psyche. I sat alone behind the house most of the time and thought of who or what I could have been in a past life. This question of, “Who am I?” has roamed in my head since then.

Learning to Go the Extra Mile

Because my father was an army captain, we received a spacious house in the army’s quarter of the city. My mother continued to work as a nurse in the hospital. However, we were still financially restricted with their normal salaries alone. My parents did odd jobs to earn extra money in order to provide us with a good standard of living. My father traded goods in his spare time by traveling to nearby areas. My mother worked extra hours, taking care of private patients after her shift at the hospital. I took careful note of their hard work. Through their endeavors, we could enjoy good food and better clothes compared to other children in my school.

They are good examples for me, and they taught me to remain focused on my goals and work extra hours to achieve them.

Three Generations in One House

After my second sibling was born – another girl – my father decided to leave the army and to become a beekeeper in the civil service. He told us that he could get better career prospects and better facilities from the government in the long run.

We first had to move from the army quarters to my grandparents’ house. The new position where he worked provided us with no house. He had just started his new career and had to work first. Later on, he was told, he could get a better position and better benefits. At that time, my grandfather built a two-story house by himself. He gave us half of the downstairs. We created a living room, a study room, and a big bedroom for all five of our family members to live. My father built a big bed for us and we all slept together. The walls of the house were not particularly stable, and we could feel the wind in the winter. It helped to sleep together with my sisters because we could warm each other in the bed. Later on, my younger brother was born, and I had to leave

the big bed and sleep alone in a separate bed. I was nine years old and becoming more independent.

In our grandparents' house, we lived with two other families, including my aunt and uncle. I had a lot of fun living in a big family house with my siblings and cousins. We were ten kids altogether, coming from three families. Since my father was traveling most of the time and my mother had to go to work every day, we were taken care of by our aunts and grandparents. Our aunts had a home-based business of ironing clothes and wrapping cigars. We all cooked together, and the children ate together. We also played together after school and our homework was finished.

Way of Living in a Poor Society

The weather in Taunggyi was relatively cold in the winter. The town had very poor infrastructure. We did not have regular electricity at night or even during the day. At that time, there was no water system in the entire country. Everyone had to find a way to provide themselves with water. Our house was on top of the valley, and we had to wake up extra early in the morning to bring water from the well at the bottom of the valley. Sometimes, the adults in the neighborhood had to wake up at four o'clock in the early morning so that they could find clear water to carry back to our home. Otherwise, the wells would run out of water before they could get there. Fortunately, my parents had enough money to buy water for us, and we did not have to carry water down the hill.

To clean ourselves, we had to go to a lake near our home and bathe there. We also needed to get up early; otherwise, the whole lake would become very dirty, as many people jumped into it and swam there. We normally took a bath every other day. The water was ice-cold in the early morning. It was quite a challenge for me to take off my clothes and jump into the lake to swim. The temperature was about 15 degrees Celsius in the winter.

In the summer, all the children in our neighborhood gathered, and we played softball together. Running, tossing, playing, and striking things with the balls made me really strong and healthy. Living as one of many in a big family taught me to be considerate for other family members and to share generously with each other. It also gave me emotional security. I adopted the attitude that there will always be someone out there for me when I need them.

Learning Karma & Buddhist Ethics

People in Myanmar strongly believe in karma, and we talk about it every day. If someone misbehaves or acts out, we say that he or she is collecting bad karma for his or her next life. If someone makes us angry or cheats us, we should take responsibility for that bad situation, because it may be a result of our past's negative karma. Even though he or she hurts us, we should try to forgive him or her instead of taking revenge or retaliating.

Karma is the law of cause and effect. This is the universal law which was taught to us by Buddha. We were born into a certain family, with a certain living standard, physical condition, or appearance according to the actions of our previous lives. We cannot change what we have done, but we are in total control of our own reactions to our past karma. We can correct our past karma by treating people well, forgiving, helping, donating, and serving others without self-interests.

Some tribes in our Taunggyi region worked really hard the entire year to be able to donate a lot of money in a particular period of time. Most Buddhists celebrate our donation ceremony very grandly and take pride in that. We believe that by donating, we can build good karma for our future lives.

My grandfather was my ideal person for righteousness and service. He always encouraged us to tell the truth. He said, "The truth may hurt the other person sometimes. But if you always tell the truth, even the grass can turn into medicine, because people will listen to your words." He also told us that, "If someone always tells the truth, he can win respect from his peers and bring miracles upon them." He was well respected by his students until even after he retired from his profession as a high school teacher. He also served his society unconditionally by building a street in front of our house. He did not ask for help, nor did he seek recognition. He served voluntarily with his own labor.

My grandmother was my ideal person for kindness and compassion. Most of the people in our society were very poor, and they had to struggle to survive. When someone came to visit our home, she always gave food and sometimes clothes whenever she saw that they were in need. She always did it out of love and empathy.

Both of my grandparents from my mother's side were really pleasant, and they never scolded me or shouted at me. They always took time to explain things to me and they were always ready to listen when I had

something to say. What I learned from them was to live righteously, be good, be honest, forgive quickly, and to serve without expectations.

Government Embargo

Our country achieved freedom from British colonial rule on January 4, 1948. However, we could not build up a stable and strong political and economic system afterward. Although the leaders continued to change over time, they almost always used their power for their own benefit. They were greedy, cruel, and corrupt. They cut off any official trading or diplomatic relationships with other countries. They wanted to keep their power by shutting down the nation's access to the outside world. As a result, the entire infrastructure within the country deteriorated, and people had to struggle for their own survival. They were forced to complain in secret; doing so openly met certain imprisonment and torture.

We saw the advanced world only in the movies. On television, we watched people in other countries live in nice homes, drive modern cars, and work well-paying jobs. There was no official trading with other countries. But we could consume foreign goods, including movies, which were brought across the borders with Thailand and China. People yearned to leave the country, earn good money, and experience all of these great things. However, most people were afraid to leave their own comfort zone. The idea of surviving in a foreign country without friends or relatives for support was intimidating.

My father had a chance to visit to Israel for three months for his beekeeping-training program. I was about eleven years old at the time. My entire family and I were very excited for him. When he came back from Israel, he brought many beautiful cups, electronic equipment, and many other things which we had never seen before. It was an astonishing experience for us. It was from this that I began to dream about the chance of visiting a foreign country like my father when I got older.

The Revolution

It was 1988. People were suffocating from the conditions in the county. Like so many of that era, the revolution started with the university students who demanded change to the political and economic situations. They began a strike which quickly spread throughout the country in a short period of time. The whole country was in a critical situation. At

that time, Aung San Su Kyi, the daughter of our former leader, Aung San, was in the country to take care of her mother. People turned to Aung San Su Kyi for leadership, who is now famous as “The Lady” to lead the country. She is an Oxford graduate and has studied political science. She was married to an English man, living with her two sons in London at that time. Seeing the oppression of the Burmese people by the hands of its government, she could not ignore the situation. She became an opposition leader for the revolution.

Many people were brought to prison or summarily executed. Political activists had to run away from the government or go into hiding in order to avoid imprisonment. The military government took control of the situation, vowing that they would hold a democratic election once the situation calmed down.

Long Holiday & Dreaming of a Better Life

Things were quiet and still in the year following the revolution. The military government controlled the country and shut down all the schools and universities throughout the country. An election was held in 1989, and the party of Aung San Su Kyi won. However, the military government did not want to give power over to her. Instead, she was put under house arrest and cut off from all communication with the outside world. The people knew of the unfair situation but were afraid to stand up again and take action.

Because the schools were closed, I did not have to attend for the entire year. The universities were closed for three years. During that time, my father sent my younger sisters and I to live with his mother in the southern part of Myanmar. Before then, we didn't have much contact with our grandmother and our aunts from his side of the family.

My paternal grandmother had a home-based noodle business. My aunt was not yet married, and she was living with my grandmother. My grandmother and aunt often scolded the people who worked for them. Staying at their home was awful and unpleasant, as I usually woke up to hear shouting and nervous voices in the early morning. I tried my best to help in her business, even though she did not ask me to. I just wanted to help people – I wanted to be useful and also wanted to learn how to make and sell noodles. Later on, when she demanded help from me, she did so without even thanking me. I was patient with them and tried my best to help in their business. As a result, I know how to make good

noodles from scratch. Both of my sisters were still very young, and they were busy playing at home.

Although they may have treated others unfairly, they also donated food to the local monks every morning to build up good karma for their next life. It was two-story family house and they sold the noodles at the market in the early morning and at home during the day. It was a busy home business, yet they never failed to donate food to the monks. They had to get up 4AM sometime even 2AM to make noddles so that they can go to market at 6AM and sell them. After early morning busy business hours, my grandmother used to go to a certain monastery where she practiced meditation in her spare time. She had her teacher monk with whom she discussed Dharma and worshiped. My two sisters and I went along with her and sat beside her while she was meditating. My grandmother introduced me to the monks, and she wanted us to learn about the basics of Buddhism – Buddha, Dharma, and Sanga – to have a deeper understanding about our religion.

I didn't know much about Buddha's teachings, how to pray, or how to mediate. I was curious and asked the monks many questions about Buddha's teachings. I asked him why we need to recite Buddha's teaching, why we need to pray, and why I need to meditate. He explained these things to me in his own way, but I barely understood. What I kept in my heart is that I needed to pray and meditate in order to calm my mind and to build up good deeds or good karma for the future and my next life. I committed to learning these things.

My grandmother wanted us to learn to recite Buddha's summons by heart, and so we joined a group in which Buddha's teachings were recited together regularly. We were invited by various people to recite at their homes. My sisters and I were really happy to be members of the groups because the people who hosted us always provided us with great food. Honestly, however, I didn't understand what I was reciting, although I could pronounce Pali words very well. It was somehow normal for most of the people in our country to recite the words of Buddha's teaching without understanding them. They believed that reciting gave them good karma. Most of the people had a ritual that included reciting Pali words of Buddha's teaching every day, and donating food, water, fire, and sweet-fragrance sticks to Buddha's statues at their home. Afterward, they prayed for the protection from good angels and blessings for their lives. Buddhists take pride in this, and people who are devout are looked upon favorably in society.

My grandmother prayed and recited very loudly every morning and evening. But I could never take her as a good person because she did not treat the people around her well. On the other hand, she was the one who showed me and provided me with a deeper understanding of Buddha's teachings. Through her, I could read many books about Buddha and his past 500 lives, with which he passed through to collect wisdom to reach enlightenment as Buddha. Buddha's stories inspired me. They taught me how to live my life righteously and keep my principles under any circumstance.

It was a long holiday. We were together with our grandmother for more than three months. After that, we were able to recite Buddha's summons by heart. Though we didn't really understand the meaning, we impressed even the adult Buddhists with our recitations, because most of the common people could not recite the complicated and advanced Buddhist teachings in the Pali language.

Moving to A New Town

After the revolution, the government made many changes throughout the country, most of them involving the civil service staff. My father had to move to Magway, situated in the middle part of Myanmar. The region was totally different from our home in Taunggyi. The weather is very dry and hot. People spoke with different accents, and they looked at me and my family like aliens because of our mixed race. But they were always ready to help whenever we asked for it.

When we first moved to the region, we had to live at a monastery. My father received a big plot and money from the government to build a house and an office on the land. It took some time to build all these, so we sought a temporary home with the local monk who gave us one of his tents to live in. We lived in the monastery for about two months until our new home was finished construction.

It was somehow difficult for me to adapt to the new school. I was in seventh grade when we first moved to Magway. I was no longer ranked at the top of my class with my grades at a mere seventh among my peers. It was hard for me. My mother did not like these new results one bit. I needed to learn more. The students in this region were more hardworking, and it took me a while to get adapted to our new surroundings. As time went by, my performance increased, and I eventually made better grades, becoming one of the best students in my class.

As I learned to pray and recite, I paid worship every evening before I went to bed. My prayers were always the same – to have good marks in every subject and to be the best person I can be. My prayers were answered most of the time. It gave me the habit of praying anytime I faced difficulties in my life.

My Parents' Crisis

We settled into our new hometown, finding good neighbors and acquaintances. On the other hand, my parents were arguing more frequently. My father had a bad habit of womanizing, and my mother was extremely jealous when my father looked at another woman in front of her. She also found out about a few of my father's past affairs, and this led to huge fights. My mother could neither forgive him nor divorce him, instead deciding to be with him in the hope of having a better relationship with him for her four children's sakes.

My father became more powerful in Magway, having more facilities and being able to earn more money through his hard work. Yet, he could not change his bad habits, and he needed to have girlfriends and affairs outside of his marriage to my mother. He went so far as to demand to have an official girlfriend. It hurt my mother a lot and resulted her being hospitalized for high hyper-tension and diabetes.

I had just finished high school, and I was waiting to attend university. I became really worried about my mother. My father did not even come and visit her, choosing instead to go on a holiday with his new girlfriend. Watching my father cause my mother such pain at his betrayal had a lasting impact on me that would affect my future relationships with men. I thought that I could not trust a man and had to depend on myself to be happy. I vowed to myself not to love a man since I was very young, and I decided not to get married and have a family because I did not want to experience the same betrayal as my mother.

From witnessing my own parents' failed relationship, I passed through my formative years without a romantic or loving relationship until my late twenties. I felt lonely most of the time, even though I was somehow popular and surrounded by many people because I was genuinely well-liked and took part in many social activities when I was in university. When a man tried to approach me and confess his love for me, I was left indifferent, despite his sincerity. From my fear of getting hurt, my heart was sealed as I guarded myself from love and attachment.

Fortunately, I had a chance to attend a seminar in Germany, which helped me to notice the harsh decisions which I had made in my childhood. I learned that we form our lives through our conscious or unconscious decisions in the past. It made me see my past negative beliefs and decisions, and understand the consequences which I was experiencing as a result. I consciously decided again to love a man and build up a loving relationship because it was what I wanted and needed like everyone does in this world. Afterward, I could build up a strong relationship with a loving partner, and I was together with him for five years.