

The Irrawaddy Online Edition

Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright

by Kay Latt

July 1, 2007

After 18 Years Behind Bars, Journalist Win Tin's Fiery Spirit is Far from Broken



Like the English poet William Blake, who wrote the immortal line “Tiger, tiger, burning bright,” Burma’s long-serving political prisoner, writer and journalist Win Tin used the image of the proud jungle predator as a metaphor in one of his own works.

“As long as the black stripes on the yellow background are vividly painted, the tiger is still a tiger,” Win Tin wrote—a line that embraces a metaphor for himself and his caged existence. After 18 years behind bars, Win Tin is defiantly saying that caging a tiger doesn’t change the animal into a docile cat. The tiger remains a tiger.

Win Tin actually befriended a cat in prison, and the animal repaid him by contributing some of its hair to bind a paste from which he made crayons. The inventive and determined writer crushed bits of red brick, mixing them with water and then binding the mixture with cat’s hair. After two days in the sun, the dried mixture provided serviceable red crayons.

I first met Win Tin when he was transferred to cell block 3 of Insein prison, where I was also incarcerated. He had just been sentenced to serve a further 11 years shortly before completing his first term of imprisonment—a flagrant act of calculated cruelty by the regime.

At first, we were able to meet and exchange a few words daily during the 15 minutes when we were allowed out of our cells to shower and empty slop pails. But I also found opportunities to visit his cell, when he invariably asked: “Any news today?”

A senior jailer who overheard these exchanges even gave Win Tin the nickname “Mr Any News.” News and books were indispensable to Win Tin—he called them a kalikaw, which means “timeless need” in Pali.

Admitted once to the prison’s hospital block for hernia treatment, he couldn’t wait to exchange the relative comfort of his sick room for his dank and filthy cell because he missed his reading matter and his “news.”

He told me after his discharge from hospital that although the facilities and standard of comfort were “three star,” he wasn’t happy there. He had nobody to talk to, no news, no reading material, no paper to write—and he missed the singing of political prisoners from neighboring cells.

His political engagement remains undampened in prison, and he has paid dearly for his defiance of authority, seeing his sentence willfully increased despite his age and failing health.

I lived in the same cell block as Win Tin for four years, until I was transferred to another prison. He talked to me and other prisoners on every topic except his personal life and family, admitting only that it was difficult to live alone. The news from outside that was so important to him never disclosed anything about any family members, although friends visited and engaged him in debate.

He never asked any favor from anybody apart from news and books. If he was given a treat he gave it away to somebody more in need. Once, on my birthday, I asked him to let me wash his blanket. He refused, but I told him I wanted to perform a kuthoel (a good deed) on my birthday, and then he handed his blanket over. And it certainly needed washing!

Win Tin told me he’d like to see me become a journalist, and he set about teaching me the trade. He entrusted me with completing his unfinished works. Whatever I achieve as a journalist I shall owe to him.

His strict routine extends to his eating habits—just one daily meal and some gruel in the evening. He has his preferences, though: sausages, fried eel and peanuts. But his teeth give him problems, and he can’t manage hard food. He has other health problems, which restrict what comfort he has in prison. He has to wear a neck collar because of a spinal problem and a hernia belt.

Despite failing health and the rigors of life in one of the world’s most notorious prisons, Win Tin’s spirit remains unbroken. He is truly a tiger—and will remain one.

Kay Latt is a former political prisoner living in exile

This month marks the 18th anniversary of the arrest and incarceration of the 78-year-old Burmese writer and journalist Win Tin, a former leader of the opposition National League for Democracy. He was sentenced to a total of 20 years imprisonment because of his pro-democracy writings and his attempts to alert the UN to human rights abuses in Burmese prisons—the official charge against him was producing “anti-government propaganda.”

In 2001, he was awarded the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize for his efforts to defend and promote freedom of expression. In the same year, he was awarded the World Association of Newspapers’ Golden Pen of Freedom.

Repeated international calls for his release have been ignored by Burma’s military regime.

Learning with the Irrawaddy, No. 20

To accompany the July 2007 Issue of The Irrawaddy magazine.

Selected article: *Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright*, pages 26-27

A. Activities before reading

Activity 1 Brainstorm

This article is called *Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright*. It is about a political prisoner in Burma.

Think about and discuss the questions that your teacher asks you.

Activity 2 Running Dictation

Follow the instructions given to you by your teacher.

Activity 3 Gap-fill

Fill in the gaps in the text that you wrote down during the Running Dictation activity using the words that your teacher gives you.

B. Activities during reading

Activity 4 Match the vocabulary

a) Go through the article and underline the words you don't understand.

b) Match these words or phrases with their definitions.

- | | |
|-----------------|--|
| 1. predator | a. imprisoned |
| 2. defiantly | b. something that you like a lot but you don't often receive |
| 3. docile | c. of the spine (backbone) |
| 4. inventive | d. boldly, with strong resistance |
| 5. incarcerated | e. an animal that hunts other animals |
| 6. dank | f. famous for bad reasons |
| 7. existence | g. nasty smelling, unpleasantly damp |
| 8. treat | h. quiet, not aggressive, obedient |
| 9. spinal | i. full of ideas |
| 10. notorious | j. life |

Activity 5 Gap-fill

Fill the gaps with the words from exercise b.

1. She is always thinking of new ideas. She is very _____.
2. Global warming will threaten the _____ of some animals on the planet.
3. Last week my roof leaked badly during a storm. Now my house is a bit _____.
4. The Burmese army is _____ for forcing people to become porters.
5. A snake is a _____. It hunts rats, birds and insects.
6. The Burmese soldiers demanded that the villagers give them another sack of rice but the villagers _____ refused and told the soldiers to leave.
7. The police arrested my brother two years ago. He is still _____ in Mandalay prison.
8. Some dogs are aggressive and dangerous, but others are friendly and _____.
9. A woman came to the clinic today with a painful back. She had a _____ injury after she fell down the stairs in her house.
10. As a child, when I got good marks at school, my mother would give me a _____.

Activity 6 Phrases in context

Choose the word or phrase that means the same as the **underlined** phrase from the article.

1. "Tiger, Tiger, **burning bright**." (Title)
 - a. on fire
 - b. with bright colours like fire
 - c. very intelligent
 - d. being cooked
2. At first, we were able to meet and **exchange a few words**... (paragraph 5)
 - a. give each other gifts
 - b. play 'Spendy' game
 - c. have a short conversation
 - d. tell secrets
3. News and books were **indispensable to** Win Tin... (paragraph 6)
 - a. very expensive for
 - b. difficult to find for
 - c. not interesting for
 - d. very important to
4. ...although the facilities and standards of comfort were "**three star**," he wasn't happy there. (paragraph 7)
 - a. quite good
 - b. very bad
 - c. very expensive
 - d. very cheap

5. ... *he has **paid dearly** for his defiance of authority..* (paragraph 15)
- made a lot of money
 - suffered a lot
 - lost a lot of money
 - become famous

Activity 7 Comprehension

a) Answer these questions. Write a short answer.

- What animal does Win Tin compare himself to?
- Where did the author of the article first meet Win Tin?
- What nickname did a senior jailer give to Win Tin?
- What did the author do for Win Tin on his birthday?
- How many times a day does Win Tin eat in prison?

b) Answer these questions. Write a longer answer.

- Why does Win Tin compare himself to a 'proud jungle predator'?
- How did a cat help Win Tin in prison?
- What was Win Tin most interested in when he was in prison?
- Why didn't Win Tin want to stay in the hospital?
- What topic did Win Tin never discuss in prison?
- How did Win Tin's health problems affect his life in prison?

Activity 8 The difficulties of living in prison in Burma

In pairs, read through the article. Make a list of the difficulties faced by Win Tin in prison. Which of these would you find the most difficult to live with?

C. Activities after reading

Activity 9 Prison Diary

Imagine that you are a political prisoner in Burma. Write a diary about one day of your life in prison.

Activity 10 Rights of prisoners

Imagine that you are members of the Government Prisons Committee in a democratic Burma. Make a list of the rights that prisoners should have.
Should there be political prisoners in a democratic state? Why/Why not?

Activity 11 Play

In groups, Write a short play about political prisoners and perform it to the class.

Activity 12 Poster

You are activists working to make the world aware of the suffering of political prisoners in Burma. Your task is to design a poster that will tell the world what is going on. You can use words and/or pictures.

Further information

There are about 1200 political prisoners in Burma today incarcerated in many of the country's 39 prisons. The most famous political prisoner is Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who has spent 11 years under house arrest.

Political prisoners in Burma face many problems. They are never sure how long they will remain in prison as the government often extends their sentences arbitrarily.

Living conditions are difficult. Prisoners live in small, dirty and often crowded cells. Food is often inadequate and unpleasant.

Many are tortured and face frequent violence from guards. Some are placed in solitary confinement for long periods of time. They must live alone in a tiny cell with little or no sunlight and no contact with other people.

Political prisoners are only allowed out of their cells for short periods of time each day. At the same time, it is very difficult for them to find things to do when they are locked up. Reading materials are difficult to find or banned by the prison authorities.

Healthcare services for prisoners are very limited. Due to the difficult conditions and torture, many political prisoners have died in jail without proper healthcare.

It is difficult for political prisoners to see their family and friends, or to receive news from the outside world. Many are transferred to prisons far from their homes, so they are even more isolated.

Political prisoners often have to pay bribes to prison authorities. If they can't pay the bribes they are likely to receive even worse treatment.

Even when they are released they face difficulties. They are often kept under surveillance and harassed by the government, denied jobs or opportunities to study, and face the constant threat of re-arrest and imprisonment.



Map of prisons in Burma