

FIGHTING THE SERPENT

Leadership Training

Free Burma Rangers

About This Document

The material in this pamphlet was developed inside Burma at a Free Burma Ranger (FBR) relief team training camp. FBR's mission is to provide hope, help and love to internally displaced persons (IDPs) inside Burma, regardless of ethnicity or religion. Using a network of indigenous field teams, FBR reports on human rights abuses, casualties and the humanitarian needs of people who are under the oppression of the Burma Army. FBR provides medical, spiritual and educational resources for IDP communities as they struggle to survive Burmese military attacks. For more information see www.FreeBurmaRangers.org.



The sculpture in the image above is called "Fighting the Snake." It honors Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved the lives of thousands of Jews in Hungary during World War II. Pal Patzay was the sculptor. It stands in Budapest. The sculpture shows how Wallenberg's quiet acts of courage and cunning in the name of compassion strike heavy blows against the evils of Nazism. It also honors all those who have fought the serpent in the past, and inspires those who fight it in the present and who will fight it in the future. (The theme and title of the FBR leadership training manual was developed before we were aware of the sculpture.)

Introduction

Leadership in the Free Burma Rangers stems from physical courage, moral courage, and spiritual insight.

This training material focuses on spiritual components. In their work, FBR teams come face-to-face with severe damage done to the bodies and lives of human beings. How we understand these injuries determines our response to them. It determines to what end our physical strength will be used and what forces our moral courage will resist.

The Free Burma Rangers believe that evil is active in the world, and that every person chooses to either cooperate with this evil or resist it. The line dividing good and evil does not run cleanly between nations, ethnic groups, or religions, or between people divided into any form of "us" and "them." The choice between good and evil faces each one of us every day. Evil is equally to be combated when it finds expression in the hands of those who shed the blood of the innocent, and when we are tempted ourselves to behave in ways that are selfish or lazy.

This material uses the figure of the serpent to explore ways of understanding the nature of evil and its power in the world. Those who suffer most at the hands of evil bear witness to a power that is shrewd, intelligent, and personally malevolent. To fight it we must be knowing in the ways of this serpent and strong in the power of love.

Session 1. The Serpent is at War With People

1. The serpent is a symbol for the powerful enemy of humankind that wants to destroy the image of God in the world. The serpent wants to see you and I hurt and destroyed in our bodies, in our hearts, in our minds, and in our spirits.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created humankind, male and female he created them.

Now the serpent was more crafty (clever, shrewd) than any of the wild animals God made.

When the serpent lied to the first man and woman, God cursed the serpent and said, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your children and hers. He will crush your head and you will strike his foot."

2. The serpent is active wherever there are people.

The serpent is active in those who cause great harm. It is active in every country. Although in Burma the SPDC is the focus of FBR's work, our biggest enemy is not the SPDC. It is the serpent.

3. To fight the serpent we need to learn how to think like the serpent but not to act like one.

A wise man taught, "Be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."

a. If we do not know how to think like serpents we may get bit by them.

If we trust too easily we will be easily deceived and betrayed. Much of this training will look at ways the serpent thinks.

b. If we do not know how to act like doves we may turn into serpents ourselves.

If we have been damaged by the world we can come to trust no one. Many people confuse growing up with turning into a serpent. Much of this training will speak of fighting the serpent by means of clean hands and a clean heart.

4. People who follow the way of the serpent have an ugly future.

Some people believe the serpent is good because it is strong and clever. Why not follow the serpent if it makes us powerful? Here are some reasons.

a. People who follow the serpent when they live will be swallowed by it when they die.

If I follow the way of the serpent I will take advantage of those weaker than myself. I will swallow them up. But I am weaker than the serpent myself, and when I die it will swallow me up.

b. People who follow the serpent die inside even while they live.

They become cold and empty inside. Their hearts fill with calculation instead of compassion. They have no understanding of the cries of the suffering. They become less and less human and more and more like the serpent.

Session 2. Love-Power is Stronger Than Serpent-Power

1. Stalin was an expert in following the serpent, so his ideas of good and bad help us understand serpent-power.

a. Stalin's idea of "bad": (i) weakness, (ii) laziness, (iii) stupidity

These are the only bad things for Stalin. So he does not think it is bad to kill, murder, rape, steal, and destroy people, unless to do these things would be weak, lazy, or stupid.

b. Stalin's idea of "good": (i) (spiritual) strength [this is exactly how he writes it], (ii) activity, (iii) cleverness.

These are the only good things for Stalin. So he does not think it is good to tell the truth or to help others, unless he can do this cleverly for his own purposes.

2. Serpent-power uses others for myself.

a. It either uses or destroys the weaknesses of other people.

By Stalin's thinking, weak people are bad and should be destroyed – unless they can be controlled and used for other purposes.

b. It has a taste for human blood.

Military commanders of the Burmese Army and have been known to eat the hearts and livers of their human victims. In human sacrifice the serpent feeds and grows strong on the blood of human beings.

3. Love-power uses myself for others.

a. It does not seek its own gain or to honor its own name.

It is an easy trap, to begin by caring mostly about the IDPs and end by caring mostly about the prestige and reputation of the Free Burma Rangers and its leaders.

b. It is willing to die for the sake of others.

Love-power means being willing, if it becomes necessary, to lay down your own life for the sake of your friends -- for the sake of the IDP. If the IDP are attacked and you run to save yourself at their expense, you are not walking in the way of love. This is why the Free Burma Rangers asks you not to do this.

4. Love-power is stronger than serpent-power.

On our own this is not always true, because we humans are often weak in love. But when we draw strength from the loving God who made us in his image, we become strong in love, stronger than the serpent.

a. Love outmaneuvers the serpent.

The serpent does not understand love-power because it plays by different rules.

b. The way of the serpent is emptiness, the way of love is fullness.

Love is enduring, it lasts through time. Serpent-power is here today, gone tomorrow.

Session 3. Loving the Truth

1. The serpent loves lies.

a. The serpent lies to control people.

Machiavelli was an adviser to a ruler. He recommended that "a prince never lacks good reasons to break a promise. But it is necessary to know how to hide this and be a great liar." A ruler "should appear to be full of mercy, loyalty, integrity, kindness, and religion. The last quality is

the most important." In this way the ruler (who is really none of these things) can deceive and control his people.

b. The serpent lies to cover up its ugly face.

A man who suffered much (Solzhenitsyn) said that lies and violence work together. The serpent uses violence against people to keep its hold on power, but it wants others to believe it has a good heart. So it tells lies. The SPDC does not want the world to know what it does to the IDPs. So it tells lies. The serpent's lies require the support of violence since they do not have the support of truth.

2. The serpent fears truth.

a. The power of truth is independent of the serpent.

The power of truth is a power the serpent cannot control. The best it can do is bend the truth, or tell a half-truth, or not tell the whole truth. But the truth is still the truth, and the serpent is very much afraid of it in strong forms.

b. Truth unmasks the serpent.

Even people who follow the serpent want to believe good things about themselves. Truth shows the face of the serpent. This makes controlling people more difficult. It also makes it less easy to believe that those who follow the serpent will find themselves in a place that is good and happy.

3. We are tempted to tell lies in many ways and places.

a. In our public lives we can lie about what we have done and who we are.

I might do this to achieve a position, or honor, or prestige.

b. In our personal lives we can lie to our families and friends.

It is easy for husbands and wives to tell each other lies, small or big.

c. In our most private lives we can lie to ourselves.

It is easy for us to pretend to ourselves that we are better than we really are.

4. Lies make us weak to fight the serpent.

a. Lies in our personal lives make us weak to do the work of FBR..

If I tell a lie in the village, that lie will follow me with FBR into other villages and weaken me.

b. Truth is strong and enduring, lies are temporary and weak.

Lies live in fear they will be found out. Then they are gone forever.

Session 4. Strengthening the Weak

1. The serpent uses weakness to control people.

a. A weakness for drugs can lead me to do bad things.

If I am addicted to drugs I might do many bad things. I can lie, steal, even kill people because of my addiction. This weakness makes me a prisoner in my heart.

b. A love for money will lead me to do many bad things.

If I love money I will sell truth cheaply. I will not care if people suffer as long as I make money. If I love money too much I may sell my body for it.

2. The serpent targets and destroys weakness.

a. IDPs are a target because they are weak.

Serpent-power likes to feel that it is strong by attacking people who are weakened. This is cowardly. Serpent-power is happy to do this if it thinks no one is looking.

b. Women and children are especially attractive targets for the serpent.

Women and children suffer more in war zones because they are physically weaker and easy to take advantage of. They are easy targets for those under serpent-power.

3. Love strengthens weakness and leads to freedom.

a. Everybody is weak some time, so we need to have compassion when others are weak.

Even the pilot of a fighter airplane is weak when he parachutes out of his plane or when he gets badly sick. The most powerful rulers are weak on the day they die. It is normal and human to be weak, a sign of humanity to help others when they are weak.

b. Love works to free people caught in weakness.

When I am weak to say "no" to bad things and am caught by them, love will work to set me free.

Session 5. Love is Stronger than Fear

1. The serpent believes fear is stronger than love.

a. It believes it is safer for a king if his people fear him rather than love him.

Machiavelli says "it is much safer to be feared than to be loved" because "love is broken whenever men's interests are concerned" but that "fear is kept in place by a dread of punishment" that will never leave a king.

b. Fear makes it difficult to challenge the serpent's power.

If I am afraid of serpent-power I will not think of standing up against it. This is one way of making me weak.

2. Serpent-power fears many things.

a. It fears truth.

It loves lies because it fears the truth. It fears being unmasked.

b. It fears the future.

It knows its form of power is not permanent.

c. It fears other serpents.

It is afraid of serpents that are better liars, or who are more tricky, or stronger.

3. The power of love is stronger than the power of fear.

a. A mother will put her life at risk to rescue her child.

If a mother sees her child in great danger the mother will rescue the child, even at the cost of her own life. Her love for her child is stronger than fear for herself.

b. When we think of others first, fear for ourselves weakens.

It is natural to be afraid in frightening situations, but if we are strong in love fear will not conquer us.

4. The serpent can kill my body but not my soul.

a. If I live in love I will die in love and with nothing to fear.

Love cannot be stopped with a bullet. The fruits of a life of love will continue long after I am alive.

b. If I live with the serpent I will die with the serpent and with much to fear.

We will be dead much longer than we are alive. It is not worth living a little while in serpent-power, to die with the serpent swallowing me up. This is how serpent-power works. Those who use it forget that they will one day become its victim.

Session 6. The World Will Change When Hate is Met With Love

1. When people hate each other the power of hate grows stronger.

a. Hate grows strong from hate.

If I hate you and you hate me, our hate makes each other's hate grow stronger. This is the law of the serpent. If I hate you and you do not hate me, maybe I will have room to think that there is a different way.

b. Only the serpent is happy to see hate grow.

If I hate you and you hate me, neither of us is happy. The serpent is happy, because hate-power wants to destroy human beings.

2. Hating others makes us blind.

a. "Hate distorts the personality of the hater."

Martin Luther King, Jr. goes on to say that "You can't see straight when you hate, you can't stand upright. Your vision is distorted. For the person who hates, the beautiful becomes ugly and the ugly becomes beautiful. For the person who hates, the good becomes bad and the bad becomes good. For the person who hates, the true becomes false and the false becomes true. That's what hate does, you can't see right. Hate destroys the very structure of the personality of the hater."

b. When we hate others we walk in darkness.

An ancient teaching declares that "whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him."

3. The way of love hates evil deeds, not people.

a. Bad actions and attitudes should be hated.

The God of love hates hands that shed innocent blood; proud eyes and a lying tongue; a heart that makes wicked plans; feet quick to rush into evil; false witnesses; and the stirring up of disagreement.

b. When we meet other people's hate with love, the world will change.

Many people hated Martin Luther King, Jr. in his struggle against racism. His life ended with a bullet. But now, this black man's birthday is celebrated as a national holiday in the United States. To meet hate with hate is not worthy of celebration. It is the usual way of the world. To meet hate with love, this is something else -- this is Martin Luther King, Jr.

Those who know the God of love know that God loves us. There is nothing stronger in this world or outside of it than the love of God.

Session 8. Oppressors and the Serpent are Not the Same Thing

1. Oppressors are not the serpent.

a. Pharaoh's daughter saved Moses.

At one point the King of Egypt enslaved an immigrant population and commanded that its newborn boys be killed. The life of one baby boy was saved by a member of the Egyptian aristocracy. She took him home and paid for his nurse from among the slave population. This just and compassionate woman was the King's own daughter. Her father oppressed these immigrants, but she did not. Even among the immediate family of SPDC generals there may be individuals like the king's daughter.

b. Hearts of oppressors can soften.

Beria was the most accomplished head of Stalin's secret police. He was responsible for the deaths of millions. He personally tortured and killed many people. But when Stalin died, Beria put a stop to most of this in a short time. If Beria can change anybody can change. Even Than Shwe can change. (Of course he might not.)

2. The serpent is active not only in oppression.

a. It is active among all ethnic groups.

Wherever you see people caring more about themselves than others, or using others for their own purposes, or telling lies for their own benefit, or exploiting weakness or seeking to destroy it, or caring more about the credit they receive than the work they do – wherever you see this, you see the serpent at work and people's cooperation with it.

b. It is active in the West and in the world.

Not all journalists care mostly about the truth. Some care mostly about selling a story to an editor, or about seeing their name in a byline, or about being recognized as a good journalist, or being seen as a risk-taking hero of the truth. None of this is the same as caring mostly about the

truth. Even so, when the truth is known the world can be indifferent or complacent. Everybody knew that terrible things were going on in Rwanda, but everybody just stood by when people killed each other in the hundreds of thousands. It would not have been very hard for the world to stop this killing (people were using machetes, not machine guns) but the world did nothing. The same forces that encouraged people to cut each other to pieces in Africa encouraged people to look the other way in Europe and America. We can hope and pray this will not happen with Burma, but we should not confuse the care of the world for its inhabitants with the care of a loving God for his children.

3. Oppressors sometimes begin as victims of oppression.

In one area a tatmadaw commander ordered more than 20 of his soldiers to rape a woman from a village. He said they would be shot if they disobeyed this order. What will happen to these soldiers? Either they will die, or they will participate in a great evil. Compassion will be destroyed in the soldiers' hearts. This is why the commander gives such an order. He wants to turn ordinary people into oppressors. One way of doing this is to brutalize his soldiers, to make them both victims of evil and its agents.

Session 9. Forgiveness is an Antidote

1. Injuries from the past can poison the present and the future.

a. Memories keep past hurts alive.

Memories are very important for people. We remember our parents. We remember special times with happiness and celebration. If we see very bad things happen or if these things happen to us, the memories of these things becomes part of who we are. A young girl who sees her father murdered by the SPDC will have to live with this for the rest of her life. Even if this is so terrible that her mind helps her block this out, the power of this bad memory is only buried. It is not gone.

b. Past hurts can make our hearts bitter or our spirits weak.

Being hurt in our bodies or in our souls can lead us to mistrust everyone or to do our best to hurt others before they hurt us. This is one way of turning into a serpent. Being hurt can also leave us without joy, or make us weak and afraid. It can make us unwilling to be bold or to take risks. This can poison our spirits and reduce our freedom.

2. Forgiveness is an antidote to the hurts caused by people.

a. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting.

If someone cheats me in a business deal I am foolish to forget this. I will remember this for the future so that the next time I will be less likely to be cheated either by this person or someone like him.

b. Forgiveness is a sign of strength, not weakness.

It is easy to take revenge if you have the chance. It is much harder to take a step back from this gut reaction. Taking revenge only looks like strength. It is a sign really of spiritual weakness.

c. Forgiveness means giving up our desire to take revenge.

If somebody hurts me without good reason there is a sense of justice that says I should pay this person back. But we need to remember that we also have hurt others without good reason. If we have hope in a loving God that will forgive the bad things we have done, we will be able to forgive bad things that are done to us. We will give up our desire to hurt the person who has hurt us.

d. Forgiveness removes the poison caused by hurt and leads us into freedom.

Forgiveness allows us to escape from the bitterness, weakness, hate, or fear that results from injuries to us in the past. It is a way that our bad memories can be healed. If we forgive those who have hurt us, our present and future will no longer be controlled by the actions of others in the past. Forgiveness gives us freedom from the hurts caused by other people.

Session 10. Daniel and Stefania

1. The story of Daniel.

This story is found in the second chapter of the Book of Daniel.

Daniel was a young nobleman whose country was conquered by Babylon and whose people were taken captive. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon was the most powerful king in the ancient world at the time. Daniel became one of the king's advisers.

One night King Nebuchadnezzar had a troubling dream. He called his advisers together and asked them to let him know this dream. He gave them a hard job. He said that if they could not tell him what his dream was and then interpret it for him, they would all be killed. When Daniel found out about this he and his three friends prayed for help to the God of Heaven. That same evening, the secret of the king's dream and its interpretation were given to Daniel in a vision in the night.

The dream was of a huge image made of four metals and with feet of iron and clay. When these feet were struck by a rock the image came crashing down and turned into dust. Daniel explained that the image stands for human kingdoms like Nebuchadnezzar's, and that the rock is the Kingdom of God. Even the strongest forms of human power will come crashing down someday. They will disappear like dust in the wind.

Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom does not exist any more. Neither do the empires of Stalin, Hitler, and Pol Pot. One day the SPDC also will no longer exist. All human kingdoms are weak in comparison to the kingdom of God. This is the only kingdom that will last forever. One day it will completely destroy the kingdom of the serpent.

2. The story of Stefania.

Stefania's story is told by Eva Fogelman in *Conscience and Courage* (pp. 100-102), a book about those who, like Raoul Wallenberg, rescued Jews during World War II. Jews who were not forced into ghettos became IDPs.

Stefania Podgorska was a young Polish woman in her late teens who hid 13 Jewish people in a house she rented. One day the SS came and told her they planned to make use of her house, and ordered her to leave it within two hours or be shot. "For the next hour and a half Stefania ran through every street in town-but she could find nothing that would shelter all fifteen of them. After three years of looting and deprivation, the buildings were in worse shape than ever." Here is the story of what happened, in Stefania's own words.

"Just ruins, nothing more. Almost two hours had gone already. So I came home. I started to cry. I said, "How can I leave thirteen people to certain death? I can run out, but these people will be dead There was nothing available, nothing. Only twenty minutes left. I came home. I said nothing. All my thirteen came down to me, with the three children. They pressed against me, so tightly, they looked at me. My decision. Will I leave? My decision. Will I leave them or not?"

"All thirteen of them said to me, 'Run away. You don't have to die with us. We have to, but you don't have to die with us. You cannot help us anymore. Save your life and your little sister and run away, because you still have ten minutes.' Joseph pushed me. They said, 'Run away. Don't die with us. You cannot help us anymore. What you could do you did, but not now. Save your life and Helena. Go. Run away.'

"And all these people watched me, the children pressed so close I could hear their breathing, my sister too. So I really, I didn't know what to do. I said to them, "Well, first of all, come on. We will pray. We will ask God.' You see, I had a picture which I bought as a little girl, of Jesus and his mother, and it always hung on my wall. And I said, "Come one-we will pray. We will ask God.' First I knelt, then my sister and all the thirteen after, behind me. And I prayed, and I turned to look. All thirteen were in deep, deep prayer. And I asked God not to let us be killed. Help, somehow. I cannot leave this apartment. I cannot leave thirteen people for a certain death. I will be alive if I go, but thirteen lives will be finished-children too, and young people. I asked God, "Help, somehow.'

"And again I heard a voice, a woman's voice. It was so beautiful, so nice, so quiet. She said to me, "Don't worry. Everything will be all right. You will not leave your apartment. You will stay here, and they will take only one room. Everything will be all right. I am with you.' And she told me, "Be quiet. I'll tell you what to do.' She said, "Send your people to the bunker. Open the windows. Clean your apartment and sing.'

"I was like hypnotized. My head was bent down, and I was listening, I was listening, and the voice said again, "Everything will be all right.' Then it disappeared. I listened a few minutes more, but nothing more came. So I got up and said to my people, "Go to the attic,' exactly like the lady told me. I said, "I will not move from my apartment. I will stay here, so go to the attic and be quiet, very quiet.'

"And you see, I was completely different. My people looked at me, all my thirteen, and they thought something was wrong with my mind. But I said, "Okay now, go out, go to the bunker. Everything will be all right if you stay quiet over there.' And I opened the window and the doors, and I cleaned. I started to sing. I don't know how I became so happy. And all the neighbors came, and they said, "Miss Podgorska, what happened? Why haven't you moved? The Gestapo, the SS will come. They will kill you. This is war, this is the military. They have no mercy for an enemy-and they are our enemy. Go out. We don't want to see you killed. You're too nice, too young to be dead.' I said, "I have no place to go.' They said, "Don't you have a friend? Go stay with her.' I said, "No, I will not leave my apartment.' And they also thought something was wrong with me.

"The janitor's husband came, and he said, "Miss Podgorska, I will throw you out. Go out. I don't want to see you killed-I have no place to bury you.' And he was serious. ... I said, "No, I am sorry. I will not move from my apartment.' And he said, "Something is wrong with you,' but he left.

"I kept singing and cleaning my apartment, and exactly ten minutes past the two hours an SS man came. He was so friendly. He was laughing to me from a few yards away. He came closer to the window and he said-he spoke a little Polish, very broken but he spoke-and he said it was good that I hadn't moved from my apartment because they would take only one room. This last room, they would take. He said, "Very well, you can stay."

Two nurses from the hospital, along with the German soldier boyfriends, slept every night for eight months directly underneath the attic and never discovered the Jews hiding there. Every morning Stefania would watch the Germans collect their rifles and wonder if today would be the day they would shoot her. There were some very narrow escapes, but all of her Jewish IDPs

survived the war with Stefania. Today Stefania's name stands on the Yad Veshem monument in Israel, dedicated to all those who helped Jewish people, the IDPs in the heart of Europe, during the Second World War.

Raoul Wallenberg's name is also on Yad Veshem. Imre Varga said that Wallenberg "did his best, with an audacity rare at the time. He showed the way of honesty, the way of real heroes. There were very few at the time." Raoul Wallenberg and Stefania show us the way today of warriors against the serpent: audacity, courage, love, honesty, and prayer.

3. Daniel, Stefania, and the Free Burma Rangers.

In both these stories, people's lives are under an immediate threat in which there appears to be no human way out. It seems certain that Daniel and his companions will die. It seems certain that the Jewish IDPs will die, with or without Stefania. Daniel and Stefania were brave, strong, gallant, and intelligent people, but they did not have any answers in their situations because there were no human answers to be had. Nobody knows what other people dream. Nobody knows what to do to save thirteen Jews in a Nazi-controlled city in Poland on two hours' notice in broad daylight.

Daniel and Stefania recognized that their situation was desperate. But they did not give into despair, and they did not give up. They got down on their knees and asked for help from the God of Heaven. And they each received an answer in a surprising way that saved their lives and the lives of their companions. If things like this happened in Babylon 2,500 years ago and in Poland 50 years ago, they can happen in Burma today.

Stefania especially was in a situation very similar to FBR relief teams accompanying IDPs. If you find yourself in a desperate situation when you are on an FBR relief team, do what Stefania did. Do not give in to fear or despair even if there is no human way out. Even if it looks for sure like you and the IDPs with you will die in a matter of hours or in minutes, do not give in to fear and do not give up. Pray together. Ask God for help, and be ready to act on an answer if and when it comes. And if you do die, know that you die for love and that you die in love and that the serpent has not won and will not.