

The Tibetan Book of Living & Dying

A dialogue with Sogyal Rinpoche with Swami Virato

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If there were ever a stereotype of the “laughing saint,” Sogyal Rinpoche would fit it perfectly. It's not that he's a comic, it's just that he makes you want to smile, maybe even laugh. While living at the Rajneesh ashram in India, I remember hearing Rajneesh telling the story of the laughing saints, and Sogyal brought back those memories.

A handsome, jolly man, Sogyal Rinpoche does not seem saddened in any way with the topic he has chosen as his life's work – death and dying. Perhaps it's because he sees death in a different light. In fact, he sees death as a part of life. [*Rinpoche, pronounced rin'-po-shay, is a Tibetan word meaning “precious teacher,” and is a title/function bestowed upon a high teacher of the Buddhist tradition. The first rinpoche, Padma Sambhava, introduced Buddhism to Tibet in 747 A.D.*]

Sogyal Rinpoche's most recent book, *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* (HarperSanFranciso) published this past year, has become one of Harper's best-sellers, so when we heard he was going on a press tour, we were delighted to learn that he would be coming to Philadelphia.

Unfortunately, the television stations and the city's major newspaper, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, which had agreed to interview him, canceled at the last minute. There was no reason for him to make a 200 mile round-trip journey from New York City to Philadelphia for *New Frontier Magazine*. I was amazed when we were notified by his staff, that Sogyal Rinpoche would make the trip just for us. He had agreed, and he would come.

Special thanks to my friend Ruth Green for the use of her beautiful apartment high in the sky overlooking Philadelphia, where I invited a small group of New Frontier Magazine friends to meet the Rinpoche, as I conducted the interview.

When I arrived at Ruth Green's apartment, the rinpoche was sitting in a lotus position on Ruth's overstuffed couch, draped in a beautiful yellow-green silk robe. He was as down-to-earth as anyone you'd meet at a new age party, or for that matter, any party.

Fluent in English (he studied at England's Trinity College, in Cambridge), Sogyal Rinpoche was raised to become a lama (Buddhist priest) from the age of six, when he was brought to live at a monastery run by one of the most revered spiritual masters, Janyang Khyentse Chökyi Lodrö. With his knowledge of English, Sogyal was called upon to be a translator for several Tibetan masters.

He began teaching in America in 1974, and returns to India and other Himalayan countries every year, to study with spiritual masters.

Sogyal Rinpoche is the founder and spiritual director of Rigpa, which has established Buddhist meditation centers in England, France, Ireland, Germany, Switzerland, Holland and Australia, as well as many in America. Over the past decade he has shared ideas and insights with notable leaders in the field of death and dying including Elizabeth Kübler Ross, Raymond Moody, Stanislav Grof, Kenneth Ring, Margot Grey and Charles Garfield.

He is sought around the world to speak on various topics including psychology, the environment, art and the sciences. We have included an excerpt of his book in this issue of New Frontier, which we trust you will enjoy.

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NEW FRONTIER: Now, more than in many years, there is a preoccupation with death. Death seems to predominate most of society's television viewing, reaching people's mass consciousness, there's the AIDS plague and more people dying of catastrophic diseases. You've written a book dealing with death and dying. Much of Buddhism is concerned with death and dying, as is much of Christianity. Isn't it time we stopped talking about dying, and learned how to live more?

SOGYAL RINPOCHE: You will notice from the title of my book, it's not just about dying, it's about living. The problem in Western society is that you don't look at life and death as a whole. You isolate death. That's why there's so much fear. You become attached to life and deny and reject death.

It is important to realize that death is not something to be feared as a tragedy, but rather an opportunity for transformation. Death is like a mirror in which the true meaning of life is reflected. Spiritual traditions, such as the Trappist order in Christianity, often maintain a vow of silence while constantly saying, "Remember dying." If you remember dying, you might understand what life is about.

When we do not understand death, we do not understand life. Even though we know that we will die one day, we think we have an unlimited lease on life. We become trivial and lose perspective. By reflecting on death, realizing you could die at any moment, life becomes very precious. As Buddha said, "Of all mindfulness, and of all awareness, mindfulness of death and impermanence is the most important." Reflecting on death enriches. Death is in many ways our greatest teacher. It enlivens and shows us what life is all about.

NF: When you speak of death, you mean death of the body, of this flesh, but couldn't it be said that there is no such thing as death at all?

SR: On the one level, that is true, there is no death.

NF: But people concern themselves with it.

SR: Exactly, because they don't understand it.

NF: So, what to do?

SR: In all Eastern traditions, it is said that body, soul and mind are the three doors. It is through these doors that we commit negative karma as well as all our positive actions. Mind is the creator of both happiness and suffering. What death is really showing is that we only understand the very superficial aspect of our mind. Dying is the peripheral. The inner essence is the real nature of mind. As a great Tibetan saint and yogi said, "In horror of death, I took to the mountains, and again and again I meditated on the uncertainty in the hour of death. Then capturing the focus of the deathless unending nature of mind, now all fear of death is done and over with." By discovering the deathless unending nature of mind, we come to realize something that is beyond change.

NF: Is that called "no mind?"

SR: You can say "no mind" also, yes.

NF: So why all the sadness and tears?

SR: In this life, we do many things. We drink tea, we do interviews, we talk about death [*laughter*]. These are just some of the things we go through, kind of a ritual. A funeral is another ritual.

NF: One of the main traditions of Buddhism, and you've mentioned it several times in your book, is the "point of preparation." Not only the point of preparation before death, you also suggest there are ways that friends and relatives can help the dearly departed even before they die. What do you do? Say you have a friend

who has AIDS and you know science and medicine say he's going to die. Should you be morose in terms of concentrating on this person's death, or should you be like the ostrich, and put your head in the sand and simply have a good time?

SR: Both are slightly extreme. You need balance, the middle way, which would be that death is neither extraordinarily depressing nor something we can avoid. Death is merely a fact of life. When you begin to understand that death is a fact of life, you begin to accept that someone with AIDS and ourselves are in the same predicament. The person with AIDS may die a little sooner, but we all die, sooner or later.

It is not the quantity of life but the quality. When you begin to realize you don't have too much time to live, you focus on what is most important.

The person facing transition, who is a spiritual practitioner, stable in that practice, will find that the practice itself will aid him or her. When someone does not have the spiritual training, the loving and compassionate support of friends and relatives helps the person go through this transition.

When you help somebody, it helps you also. It's a giving and receiving. Thousands of people who have read my book and who have had near ones dying – even when they got the book as late as one month before their transition – transformed the death experience. It becomes a celebration.

NF: Do you consider yourself a spiritual man or a religious man?

SR: A bit of both, I think.

NF: What is your definition of enlightenment?

SR: Slo-o-o-wly wakening [*laughter*]. In the West there is a dramatic idea of enlightenment. The very word enlightenment suggests

wakening. Because of ignorance, we are imprisoned in ourselves, even though we have the potential. Each of us, regardless of who we are, has as our innermost essence The Buddha.

While it can be instantaneous and dramatic, generally, particularly in my case [*laughter*], it is very gradual.

As one master said, the ultimate point of enlightenment – having purified the great delusion, the heart's darkness – the raging light of the unobscure self continues to rise. That's what enlightenment is.

NF: If we don't achieve that state upon exiting, can we still achieve it?

SR: Yes. Sometimes one life is not sufficient. If you look into our minds, there is such a mess, that it will take many lifetimes to purify. Or you can say it took many lifetimes to get into the mess that we are in. There is a natural justice which is karma. If you live a good life, that will in itself lead you to a better next life. But practitioners often pray that when they die they will meet with the spiritual teachings again to continue on their journey to enlightenment. Even in the case of The Buddha, he had one thousand lifetimes before he became enlightened.

NF: Tell us about crossing over. Do you have recollections of past lives?

SR: One has more recollections of this when one is younger. To be frank, I do not remember events or circumstances of my past lives. I am supposed to be the reincarnation of a great master. His name is also Sogyal. He was the teacher of the thirteenth Dalai Lama and one of the great masters of the 19th Century. But if you would ask what evidence there is that I might be an incarnation, what is interesting is that the wisdom continues. From a very young age, I had a natural grasp of the teachings. Intuitively I began to understand things without learning the deeper philosophies. I

had a natural grasp of them. It was later, when I came to study them, that I realized, "Oh yes, that's all it is, I already knew that."

NF: Buddhism is considered a "religion" in Western society, yet your work seems to be embraced by the New Age community.

SR: Interestingly, Buddhism is both a religion and a way of life. For those that believe in religion, Buddhism is very much a religion; but for those who do not believe in religion, Buddhism is a science of mind, a way of life. There are many who reject institutionalized religions, but accept Buddhist spiritual teachings.

It's a vehicle for realizing the truth of ourselves. When you talk about the Buddhist teachings, ultimately there is the state of non-meditation. In a sense, it transcends all paths.

If you need ritual, ritual is a part of our life; if you seek ceremony, the Tibetan tradition is extraordinarily rich; if you want symbolism, we have it; if you prefer chanting, there is chanting; if you don't want that, we have simple sitting; if you want philosophy, we have philosophy; if you require psychology, we have psychology; if you want non-meditation, we have non-meditation.

Buddha wanted to reveal to everyone his enlightenment, which he saw as the nature of everyone. Unfortunately, he realized with sadness that, even though we have the Buddha nature, it's been somewhat limited by our ordinary mind. To use an example, take an empty vase. The space inside the vase is the same as the space outside it, but the walls of the vase limit it. The space inside the vase is like our nature, limited by ordinary mind. When you become enlightened, it's as if you break the walls of the vase. The space inside becomes one with the space outside. In fact, they were never separated. Buddha wanted to show this, but realized that to convey the profound peace he had realized, he needed different vehicles to suit different needs. That's why in Buddhism

there are many vehicles, because ultimately Buddha did not have a teaching. He did not come to teach a particular dogma.

NF: Where did some of these things come from? I'm curious about the word "bardo."

SR: Bardo is a Tibetan word. After you die, and before you take on a new birth, there is an intermediate state called the bardo. There are other meanings also, because the word "bar" means in between, and the word "do" means suspended. Whenever you are in between two circumstances or situations, you are in the bardo. We are born, we live a little bit, and we die. The time/experience between birth and death is a bardo. In fact, all life is a bardo – every moment, every thought. It is constantly occurring, and what the bardo teaching is showing is that in the transition – even though we are confused – there is always the gap and in the gap there is the possibility of enlightenment. It shows the different methods we can use to recognize our internal nature.

NF: Did you have a specific purpose in writing *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*?

SR: When I came to the West, I realized there was much hunger for spiritual teachings, but no environment for spirituality. There is religion, but no spirituality, so I felt a need to write one book explaining everything from A to Z, to give a complete picture. Initially, I wanted to write a small book, a kind of a pocket guide for helping the dying. But when you start talking about death, you cannot help talking about life. And when you talk about life, you talk about karma, the nature of mind, and so forth. It is not in the form of the written tradition, but of the oral tradition as my masters have transmitted it to me. People in the West are not able to follow the spiritual teachings, go to the Himalayas, or follow the masters. Therefore, we must give them something authentic and accessible, which can perhaps transform their lives and help

them connect with the spiritual dimension to find meaning and happiness in life.

So, if you read the book over and over, your understanding becomes deeper and begins to flower. And like a flower blossoming, the layers drop off and you slowly awaken to understanding the true meaning – the meaning behind the meaning.

This book has come as a result of ten years of reflection, and three and a half years of writing. Much suffering could be removed if people have the knowledge, so I've written this book with that aim in mind. This is for the larger public, a larger audience.

As my master used to say, the more you listen (or the more you read), the more you hear, and the deeper your understanding becomes.

NF: Do you have a favorite meditation?

SR: I have many favorite meditations.

NF: If you were to pick one for us, what would it be?

SR: Be spacious.

NF: Do you think it possible that the people who are “exiting” now, because of all the lessons being offered, have a better chance of getting off the wheel of samsara?

SR: It is up to them. As Buddha said, “What we are is what we have been, what we will be is what we do now.” The master who established Buddhism in Tibet further clarified this by saying, “If you want to know your past, look into your present condition. If you want to know your future, look into your present actions.”

Just because we go through a difficult situation, it doesn't mean that the future is predetermined. The future is very much in our hands, in our actions.

NF: Some Western religions contend Buddhists are atheists. How would you reply to this?

SR: Buddhism does not deny the nature of God, but rather the concept of God. As one great Buddhist master said, "Absolute is beyond mind." That which is within the realm of mind is called relative. Since God is absolute, how can mind understand? We have to transcend mind to realize its true nature. The problem is that we conceptualize, and so we worship a kind of cliché, a concept. A concept, however good is, as the saying goes, like a patch - one day it will come off. That's one of the reasons Buddhism is really personally realized. We can even find the "Buddha Nature" in Christianity. In his moment of enlightenment, St. Thomas Aquinas threw most of the Catholic teachings into the fire saying, "This is all rubbish, because this is all concept." Buddhism does not deny the nature of God, or what God represents, which is goodness, the heart of spirituality. That it does not deny.

NF: We always seem to want to personalize God. Even the Buddhists say "Do not make an image," yet have statues of Buddha.

SR: What is interesting about Buddhism, is that it always works with two truths: an absolute and a relative. They are like the two wings of a bird. On the absolute level, there is no God as "other." God is not outside, but within the nature of our mind. On the relative level, just as there are beings like us, there are also Buddhists who come in human form to help the beings on that level.

If you understand the union and indivisibility of absolute and relative, you can understand and appreciate the absolute and the

relative. There is a famous Buddhist saying, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." That is to say, when you examine things, break them down, you find they are insubstantial, empty, inherently non-existent. Yet, the appearance of things is in no way a contradiction, because the truth of the absolute appears in the form of form. In Christianity, if you look at the trinity, the absolute - God the Father - is, through the medium of the Holy Ghost, manifest as the incarnate, as the Son. The Son is the appearance. God is no-form, the absolute. The medium is the Holy Ghost, the energy. This is the trinity, or the three kayas I mention in the Chapter called "The Universal Process," in which I attempt to connect Christianity, Buddhism, and Hinduism.

NF: Some say we can achieve instant enlightenment. The Buddha also said that enlightenment doesn't have to take many lifetimes, and can happen in a flash. At the same time, others say there has to be deep study. How can there be both the need for deep study, and instant enlightenment?

SR: It depends on the person. If you have already been purified of your past karma, then it is possible. There have been few individuals in history who have gained enlightenment instantaneously. There are cases, but that is because in the past they've done the work, so to speak. Enlightenment is not difficult. It's removing the obstacles that is difficult.

NF: So enlightenment is always there, but we just can't see it?

SR: Yes. For example, when you meditate you can get certain glimpses of it, but then your old habits come back to obscure it. After awhile we've almost no memory of it. The main thing is to stabilize our nature. One glimpse is not enough.

In Buddhism, we talk about three things - the wisdom of listening and hearing, the wisdom of contemplation and reflection, and the wisdom of meditation and application. Through these three wisdom tools we awaken our real nature.

Sometimes I compare samsara to an accident in which we lost our mind with amnesia. Through this teaching, and the wisdom of listening and hearing, the wisdom of contemplation and reflection, and the wisdom of meditation and application, we gradually come to realize our real nature. Then, through practice, we stabilize it. That's what takes so long, to purify and stabilize. Then enlightenment is possible.

Sometimes it is said that very high teachings are able to bring realization very directly, but that is of course from the ground of the teaching. When you actually apply it to individuals it is a different story.

NF: Can one ever know for sure if someone else is enlightened?

SR: We can never judge.

NF: Can we tell if we're enlightened?

SR: For that we need to have the knowledge in order to know. The thing is, it can be a deception.

NF: How so?

SR: That's one of the reasons I've written this book. Even though this book is accessible, I've just shown you that there's no quick fix. Enlightenment requires discipline and effort. Sometimes people mistake little glimpses for enlightenment. There is a saying, "Understanding should not be mistaken for realization, and realization should not be mistaken for liberation." Ordinary people cannot act like yogis, yogis cannot act like siddhas, and siddhas cannot act like Buddha. For example, if you have an experience and you feel you really can fly, and you jump out the window, you get a strong message that you can't. You have an experience, and get wrapped up in it, and the ego gets involved.

NF: Some, such as psychologists and people who work with the mind, do not believe in this process, might say that this is a bunch of rubbish. Earlier you said we have to work with the mind. Isn't this really a paradox?

SR: No. We can work with mind to transcend mind. Use mind as a vehicle to transcend mind.

NF: I also know many people who use mantras to transcend mind, but it seems like another co-dependency, another drug.

SR: It depends on how you do it. The mantra itself is not a co-dependency. It's a method, a way of freeing. The practice may not be co-dependent, but if you have a co-dependent attitude, then it could be.

You see, as long as we are in samsara, we grasp at everything, including spiritual things. That's why teaching is important in order to decipher what is, or to bring about the wisdom of discernment. We really need the wisdom of discernment.

NF: Do you see the world becoming more spiritual or less spiritual as we enter the 21st century?

SR: I don't have the vision to answer that, but the Dalai Lama feels that the 1990's are more spiritual, because people have learned a little lesson from the confusion they've met.

NF: What do you see as the one biggest obstacle facing humanity?

SR: The biggest problem for humanity, not only on a global level, but even for individuals, is misunderstanding. We misunderstand. Two people are saying the same thing, but they don't think they are saying the same thing, and they begin to argue even though they are saying the same thing! I remember two students of mine, both wonderful people, who were in conflict with each other because they were both holding a particular work or something

and each was always thinking the other was against him. I tried many methods, which didn't work, and finally I took them and banged their head together. And it worked, because they both saw how they are each wonderful, that they were not against each other, and they became very good friends. My frustration, like in Bosnia, and with other peoples, is that they don't see that, and they just go on so stupidly.

NF: Do you have a Zen stick?

SR: *[Laughter]* That works only in certain situations! What we need to do is create understanding and communication. Communication is very important. Communicate. If you know how to communicate and listen, you'll begin to understand. Compassion is listening. Compassion is communicating.

NF: Thank you so very much for driving all this way, and sharing your knowledge with us.

SR: I enjoyed it very much.

Swami Virato is the Founder & Executive Editor of NEW FRONTIER Magazine.