

## BOOK REVIEW

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**The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying, by Sogyal Rinpoche.**  
San Francisco, CA: Harper Collins, 1992, 425 pp, \$22.00.

Being asked to review Sogyal Rinpoche's *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* is a bit like being asked to review the *Confessions* of St. Augustine or the *Bhagavad Gita*. This is a book so filled with spiritual insight and so grounded in personal experience that to treat it like an ordinary book would at once betray its unique importance and border on blasphemy, if that term could be used in a Tibetan context. The best I can do is to, first, hint at the great implications of this work for our times, and second, try to place it into its historical context.

### A Rare Bridging of East and West

This is a book that for the first time reveals some of the devotional and meditation practices of the Tibetan Buddhists to the average English-speaking reader. Such practices traditionally were confined to oral transmission from master to disciple; in fact, even their discussion or description to "outsiders" was prohibited. While Sogyal Rinpoche (Rinpoche means "Reverend" in Tibetan) continues to stress the importance of having a personal master, he nonetheless breaks new ground in attempting to relate Tibetan spiritual practice to the West.

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Sogyal is himself in many ways the last of an old breed and perhaps the beginning of a new. Born and raised by Tibetan monks in the late 1940s, he left Tibet during the Chinese persecutions of the 1950s to receive an education first in New Delhi and subsequently in Cambridge, in the height of the hippie days. For the past two decades, he has traveled around the world, primarily Western Europe, conveying Tibetan Buddhism to Western practitioners and would-be practitioners. At the same time, he has developed close connections with the hospice and terminal care movements in the West, to which Tibetan Buddhist practice has much to contribute.

Sogyal does incredibly well at bridging the two disparate cultures of the West and traditional Tibet. While logically organized into Western-style chapters and paragraphs, the text contains innumerable anecdotes, illustrations, and traditional stories of the Tibetan raconteur, which help to illuminate more abstract points of Tibetan Buddhist doctrine. Some of the stories, such as of masters dematerializing upon their deaths, of their appearing many miles from their physical bodies, or of other miracle-working, stretch the credulity of Western readers' minds as much as the inhumane and commercialized treatment of the dead and dying in Western society stretches the credulity of sensitive souls from more traditionally civilized cultures.

### **A Tibetan Critique of Death and NDEs in Western Society**

Sogyal's indictment of the Western world is harsh and on the mark: we have become caught up in a glittering materialism, a desert of the spirit, which seduces us further from our spiritual essence and spiritual responsibilities. Echoing the critiques of Ernest Becker, Philippe Aries, and Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, he pleads for a more human treatment of the dying, the dead, and the bereaved, and recognizes the important if not indispensable role that religious ritual can play in elevating death from tragedy to triumph and bringing insight and meaning to the process of grief and bereavement. His chapters on helping the dying particularly are replete with details of compassion and care.

For those of us involved in near-death studies, Sogyal provides a long-awaited analysis from the Tibetan side of the relation between near-death visions and those discussed in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Drawing extensively on the work of Michael Sabom and Mar-

got Grey, with occasional references to Raymond Moody, Kenneth Ring, and Melvin Morse, Sogyal acknowledges many superficial similarities between out-of-body and near-death experiences (NDEs) and aspects of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. At the same time, he stresses that from the Tibetan point of view, the people who return to report NDEs have never really died. They are simply “near death,” on the threshold of a death experience, which begins in full some time *after* the body is judged dead by Western physicians.

Sogyal emphasizes that insofar as most of these experiences are visionary, including images of bodies and landscapes, they are at best provisional realms, projection-realms, parallel to the illusion-realm in which we currently experience things (the *nirmanaloka*, or in his strained Sanskrit, the *nirmanakaya*). In short, NDEs tend to support the expectations of Tibetans that life continues after death. To the extent that NDEs parallel the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, there is nothing to be surprised about — except perhaps that an untrained non-Tibetan might achieve such an adept state of consciousness. On the other hand, the extent to which NDEs do *not* parallel the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is simply an indication of the relatively inferior status of the consciousness of the experiencer, so there is no conflict between rival claims here.

### A Marxist Book of the Dead, Too?

Like many contemporary Hindu teachings, Sogyal’s pretense throughout is that Tibetan Buddhism is compatible with all other serious religious worldviews, and that even Christians can conduct Tibetan-like meditative practices during their lives and deaths. While on one level this is gratuitously obvious, it raises deeper philosophical questions. For example, Sogyal suggests that where Avalokitesvara and Amitabha Buddha may appear to Buddhists at their deathbeds, figures of Jesus or Mary may appear to Christians. But then whom shall he expect to appear at the deathbeds of Marxists, materialists, and nihilists?

If we admit that the figures appearing may depend on the culture, language, and faith of the individual experiencer, then might it not also be important to have ceremonies and practices suited to non-Tibetan non-Buddhists — say, a *Marxist Book of the Dead* or an *Ashkenazi Book of the Dead*? If images and visions are relative to language, culture, and personality, then how about the stages of the

*Bardo* itself? Might it be that the very stages of the *Bardo* itself depend on the perceiver? If Tibetan landscapes of the afterworld traditionally contain hail, ice, tornadoes, and carnivorous beasts, what might the Polynesians experience after death, who have never known hail, ice, tornadoes, nor carnivorous beasts in their earthly lives? This is not to argue that the *Bardo* is in fact culturally dependent as much as to recognize that once cultural relativism is admitted into certain levels of our interpretation of religious experience, it can infect the entire body of religious doctrine, to its possible detriment.

The Tibetan answer, of course, is to admit that each person or culture shapes its own experiences on a limited and relative sphere, but that these are all part of a much larger picture. Moreover, Tibetan Buddhism has the clearest understanding of the whole picture of the *Bardo*, of which individual experiences and aberrations are but a part. On the one hand, this answer seems reassuring, both in its tolerant acceptance of everyone's visionary experiences, and its superficial recognition of the value of each religious tradition. On further observation, however, it is obvious that such traditions exalt themselves as the *most* superior, the *most* overweening, the *most* all-embracing, and therefore above all rivalry, much less refutation.

### More Unfinished Issues

Similar questions can be raised about the status of historical beings and mythical ones, or historical teachings and proverbial ones. In traditional Tibetan fashion, Sogyal treats historical saints such as Jesus and Francis of Assisi in much the same category as figures who are clearly ahistorical, such as Amitabha and Avalokitesvara. From an Eastern perspective, the fact that both Jesus and Amitabha can appear in our meditations and guide us spiritually is the important point, and in this sense, they seem to have equal spiritual status. From a Western perspective, Jesus and Francis were indisputably real people, who faced real crises in their lives and left identifiable bodies of teachings, whereas Amitabha and Avalokitesvara are no more historical than Bullwinkle the Moose.

A Japanese proverb says that faith is still faith, even if in only a fishhead. But would Sogyal want to concede that meditation on fishheads or Bullwinkle were somehow as acceptable as that on Amitabha? Surely not. Then the question arises: Is it the long cultural tradition of worshipping Amitabha that gives this image such power

in the cultures that recognize him? Or rather, is it that in some sense Amitabha exists independently of human beliefs about him, and independently of human history, in which case his spiritual as well as symbolic value is in some way superior to that of a mere mortal like Francis of Assisi?

There seems to be some ambiguity in Sogyal's writings, as in much of the Mahayana and Vajrayana tradition, about birth and rebirth. He writes variously that holy saints remain permanently in an elevated state of *nirvana*, and alternatively that they are perpetually reborn on earth to enlighten us suffering beings. Surely they might be either deified or reborn, but it is not clear how they can be both at once.

Prayers to benefit the dead raise similar issues. Throughout the history of world religions, there have been those religions that believe each person is responsible for his or her own *karma* (actions, mental and physical), and those that believe the merit accumulated by prayers and good deeds can be passed on to others, including the deceased. This is a central difference between various schools of Buddhism, as it was between Catholics and Protestants in the Reformation. It is neither disturbing nor surprising that Sogyal, in the Tibetan tradition, holds that merit can be transferred to the dead by the living, not only in the sense that the deceased can for a short time hear our prayers and follow our instructions after their brainwaves have stopped, but in the deeper sense that even months after their death, our prayers for them will improve their status, for example, elevating them from a cold, dark hell to a not quite so cold and dark one.

However, this teaching of the transference of merit runs into competition with the teaching that one is reborn into another body within 21 to 49 days after death. No matter how much merit I accumulate, if I pray for my grandmother's postmortem well-being after my grandmother is already reborn as a dog, as a different human, or as a god, then the identity of the one for whom I am praying no longer exists in the form I imagine it, and the future of that new being is surely more affected by its own decisions and past *karma* than by the prayers of me still grieving over its long-dead former body.

On a more mundane and less theological level, there also seems to be some dilemma in Sogyal's discussion of medical ethics. On the one hand, he repeatedly urges that the body of the deceased must not be touched, much less punctured, injected, or invasively intruded, for as long as possible (ideally three days) after the death. This Ti-

betan orthodoxy makes sense in terms of the time and place that the soul (*sems*) will ultimately leave the human body. Sogyal suggests that patients should request the disconnection of intravenous lines and monitors and the removal of their own bodies to a private room prior to death. While hard to accomplish in modern medical settings, this is indeed the very least that Tibetan teachings require.

On the other hand, Sogyal also writes that it is morally permissible to donate organs, not only after the body is clinically dead, but even *before*, in order to help other suffering beings. Now if even touching the body is going to affect the course of the soul into the next life, then surely the removal of a beating heart for a transplant will have a major impact on the soul. So the decision of whether to die in traditional style or to donate organs remains a moot one. This is not necessarily a criticism of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*. There is enough deep wisdom and insight in this book that it is worth keeping under one's pillow and reading every day for its compassion and wisdom. It is simply that there remain many ethical dilemmas that Sogyal's cursory treatment does not yet adequately address.

### Historical Context

For all his exposure to Cambridge and Western education, Sogyal remains indelibly a Tibetan. He declines to translate the more central terms of Tibetan Buddhism, forcing the reader to guess at their meanings from context and usage. His praise of his personal masters and his teaching that each adherent must follow a particular living Buddhist master surpass the obligatory paeans of respect found in most Buddhist texts. He writes in the first person; his frankness is ingenuous and occasionally confessional. He also tends to presuppose certain knowledge about Buddhism and meditation that not all Western readers will bring to this book.

In Tibetan Buddhism, there are six traditional sects or schools, perhaps better termed lineages. Largest and most important of the six today are the "Old Order" of the Red Hats, or *Nyingma-pa*, to which Sogyal belongs; and the "Virtuous Reformed Order" of the Yellow Hats, *Gelug-pa*, to which the Dalai Lama belongs. Sogyal downplays the rivalry of these sects throughout his writing, which may be fine for ecumenical readers, but at the same time fails to locate his textual and liturgical tradition within its historicocultural context. It is indeed tragic that Buddhism has been largely driven from

Tibet and that nearly a million Tibetans have been displaced or murdered by the Chinese in the past generation. At the same time, this history of bloodshed is not new; Tibetan monks have been feuding with and killing their religious and nonreligious rivals for power for the past millenium in Tibet.

The *Nyingma-pa* line of Tibetan Buddhism, to which Sogyal belongs, claims to be the oldest and most authoritative sect that preserves the "pure" tradition of Padmasambhava. Padmasambhava was born in Udyana in what is now northern Pakistan. He is said to have been born on the tenth day of the tenth lunar month, adopted and taught by King Indrabodhi, whose court he left to study at Nalanda University in north India. He was renowned as a magician or miracle worker (*maha-siddha*) and exorcist, being able to converse with and quell demons as Jesus did.

Padmasambhava was invited to Tibet in 746, and arrived there in 747, to help exorcise the demons thought to be hindering the development of a proposed monastery there; he is credited with converting the local pre-Buddhist Bon-po gods to become the protectors of Buddhism. (The development of the monastery may also have been assisted by the exile and assassination of the anti-Buddhist faction shortly before Padmasambhava's arrival.) His teachings are often called the Dzogchen, a term referring to a body of teaching to which the non-Buddhist Bon-pos also lay claim, showing the commonalities between the mystical pre-Buddhist and Tibetan Buddhist religions.

Padmasambhava is said to have received wisdom from both human and divine teachers, whose teachings he hid in caves, rocks, and temples, for later teachers to discover; this serves as the "authorization" of the "discovery" beginning in the 12th century of revealed texts credited to Padmasambhava. The facts that Padmasambhava emphasized personal transmission and that no texts remain from the 8th century may also be due to the fact that writing had only very recently been invented in Tibet. Most Tibetans could not read, and Padmasambhava himself used mostly varieties of Sanskrit. Late in life, Padmasambhava was forced to leave Tibet under threat of death after displeasing the court. He is virtually deified by most of the *Nyingma-pa* Red Hats today.

The *Nyingma-pa* school, which claims to represent Padmasambhava's tradition most authentically, believes in nine levels of revelation and six types of tantric practice: *kriya*, or ritual; *upayoga*, or convergence of the two truths; *mandala-yoga*, or identifying oneself with depicted gods; *mahayoga*, or meditation on the *skandhas*;

*anuyoga*, or meditation on voidness; and *atiyoga*, or meditation on the union of the god and his consort. Only the last three types of yoga are said to enable Buddhahood without repeated rebirth, and these require special initiation from a master. In *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, it is never completely clear to which of these practices Sogyal is referring, but the emphasis seems close to *mandala-yoga*, *mahayoga*, and *anuyoga*. While Sogyal is to be thanked and complimented for bringing clearer than usual expositions to Western readers, he might have placed the practices within a broader context of the entire teaching and given his reasons for selecting those he has selected.

Similarly, he emphasizes *mantras* (spoken formulas) over *mudras* (hand signs) and *mandalas* (depictions), and emphasizes certain Buddhas or bodhisattvas like Amitabha and Avalokitesvara over other equally central Buddhas whom he ignores, like Vairocana, Akshobhya, and Amoghasiddhi. While there are surely good practical and historicocultural reasons for his choices, this is another case where he gives the impression that he is trying to be both comprehensive and tolerant toward other views, when in fact he is consciously or unconsciously selective and preferential towards certain practices and figures over others. Sogyal is relating just one glimpse of one sect among the six in Tibetan Buddhism, and alludes to only a few of the literally hundreds of sacred texts that even this one sect reveres. This is not by any means to denigrate the great power and wisdom of the practices he provides, but rather to alert the reader to the fact that the Tibetan tradition is indeed far greater and richer than even this massive book would suggest.

Despite the shortcomings of a book having been written by a mere human, the tremendously positive reaction to this book by scholars and lay readers alike attests not only to its eminent readability, but also to its profound spiritual insights and practices. This is a Tibetan book, to be sure, but it is also a book for all humankind. To the extent to which we take Sogyal's messages and instructions to heart, it will immensely enrich our living and our dying.