The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying
by Sogyal Rinpoche
HarperSanFrancisco; 416 pages; cloth
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What is it I hope for from this book? To inspire a quiet revolution in the whole way we look at death and care for the dying, and the whole way we look at life, and care for the living.

—Sogyal Rinpoche

This is the most important book I have reviewed for IONS members, but I must start with some words of warning. First, this review is about more important things to do, aren’t there? But it’s also about the quality of your life, for if you won’t deal with your mortality, you cannot have more than a partial life, a shadow of a life.

If we look into our lives we will see clearly how many unimportant tasks, so-called “responsibilities”, accumulate to fill them up. One master compares them to “housekeeping in a dream”. We tell ourselves we want to spend time on the important things of life, but there never is any time. Even simply to get up in the morning, there is so much to do: Open the window, make the bed, take a shower, brush your teeth, feed the dog or cat, do last night’s washing up, discover you’re out of sugar or coffee, go and buy them, make breakfast—the list is endless. Then there are clothes to sort out, choose, iron and fold up again. And what about your hair, or your make-up? Helpless, we watch our days fill up with telephone calls and petty projects, with so many responsibilities—or shouldn’t we call them “irresponsibilities”?

A second warning: I cannot be completely objective about this book as I have my personal fears of and problems with death—and life. Like most of us, I have a “theoretical” interest in death and what might happen after death. My interest is theoretical in that I seldom reflect on death with all my faculties, especially my emotions, but just with my intellect. Intellect is cool and distancing. Why not be cool and distant? Despite knowing better, I tend automatically to think of death as something that happens to others, not to me personally. I also know that tuning out reality is costly. But I can put off thinking about death to some vague future time, can’t I?

My final warning: I cannot write here in a completely “objective” manner. I am a scientist who has studied areas relevant to this book, but since hearing Sogyal Rinpoche lecture almost a decade ago, I have regularly attended retreats of his, for I felt what he was teaching and embodying was important to my (and others’) spiritual development. So I am not detached from the book and its author. On the other hand, no friend has ever suggested that I tend to become a mindless devotee of anyone. I maintain my independence of thought and belief. This is important in the role I see for myself of trying to bridge spiritual traditions and the scientific world. So I may be biased in ways I’m not aware of, but it would be quite remiss of me not to bring The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying to your attention.

Sogyal Rinpoche is what Tibetan Buddhists call a tulku, a being so highly enlightened and evolved that, at her or his death, instead of passing beyond our ordinary worlds with their suffering to realms of ultimate bliss, a tulku deliberately chooses to reincarnate here in order to continue helping others find the way to enlightenment. This tulku idea is what the pragmatic and scientific parts of my mind call “fancy stuff” or “mythological gloss”, that I am not too comfortable with. I have no way of verifying the truth or falsity of this.

On a more realistic level, Sogyal Rinpoche is a man I have known and studied with, a teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, particularly a teacher of dzogchen, a tradition of developing a deep mindfulness that leads to ultimate enlightenment. I can’t say much about enlightenment from personal experience, but I can say that Rinpoche is very intelligent, knowledgeable, dedicated, and compassionate—a pioneer in attempting to bring the essence of Tibetan Buddhist understandings to us in a way Westerners can understand and use. I have learned a great deal from studying with him, and I can say that The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying is one of the most important books ever published. If you want a better death—and, just as importantly, a better life—I cannot recommend this book too highly. Let’s sample some of the book.

Most IONS members are well aware of how lopsided the development of our culture has been, of the dominance of materialism and scientism at the expense of the human spirit. As Rinpoche points out,

Sometimes I think that the greatest achievement of modern culture is its brilliant selling of samsara (living in a state of illusion) and its barren distractions. Modern society seems to me a celebration of all the things that lead away from the truth, make truth hard to live for, and discourage people from even believing that it exists. And to think that all this springs from a civilization that claims to adore life, but actually starves it of any real meaning; that endlessly speaks of making people “happy”, but in fact blocks their way to the source of real joy.

Now let’s look more specifically at death. In the Tibetan Buddhist cosmology, the time of death is what we might call one of “high leverage”. Normally we identify our consciousness with our body, which patterns and constrains it. As the body and brain break down and
consciousness goes through various stages of freeing itself from the body (discussed in detail in the book), deliberate and healthy actions of consciousness can have a much greater effect in moving you toward liberation and/or a much better new incarnation than similar actions describing Sogyal consciousness can have a much greater effect in moving you toward I will end this review by quoting the beginning of the first chapter describing Sogyal Rinpoche’s introduction to death:

My own first experience of death came when I was about seven. We were preparing to leave the eastern highlands to travel to central Tibet. Samten, one of the personal attendants of my master, was a wonderful monk who was kind to me during my childhood. He had a bright, round, chubby face, always ready to break into a smile. He was everyone’s favorite in the monastery because he was so good-natured. . . .

Then suddenly Samten fell ill, and it was clear he was not going to live. We had to postpone our departure. I will never forget the two weeks that followed. The rank smell of death hung like a cloud over everything, and whenever I think of that time, the smell comes back to me. The monastery was saturated with an intense awareness of death. This was not at all morbid or frightening, however; in the presence of my master, Samten’s death took on a special significance. It became a teaching for us all. . . .

Samten’s death was not an easy one. The sound of his labored breathing followed us everywhere, and we could smell his body decaying. The monastery was overwhelmingly silent except for this breathing. Everything focused on Samten.

Yet although there was much suffering in Samten’s prolonged dying, we could all see that deep down he had a peace and inner confidence about him. At first I could not explain this, but then I realized what it came from: his faith and his training, and the presence of our master. And though I felt sad, I knew that if our master was there, everything would turn out all right, because he would be able to help Samten toward liberation . . . .

As Jamyang Khyentse guided Samten calmly through his dying, he introduced him to all the stages of the process he was going through, one by one. I was astonished by the precision of my master’s knowledge, and by his confidence and peace. When my master was there, his peaceful confidence would reassure even the most anxious person. Now Jamyang Khyentse was revealing to us his fearlessness of death. Not that he ever treated death lightly: He often told us that he was afraid of it, and warned us against taking it naively or complacently. Yet what was it that allowed my master to face death in a way that was at once so sober and so lighthearted, so practical yet so mysteriously carefree? That question fascinated and absorbed me. . . .

Samten’s death shook me. At the age of seven, I had my first glimpse of the vast power of the tradition I was being made part of, and I began to understand the purpose of spiritual practice. . . .