

BOOK REVIEWS

The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying

by Sogyal Rinpoche

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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 death. Parts of you may not want to read it, and your mind can come up with good reasons for skipping on to something else. There are so many 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. As this book says,

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

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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 during ordinary life. That's the high leverage. By the same token, unskilled, maladaptive actions can make things worse. Thus there is a great deal of practical as well as "spiritual"—we can't really separate these two categories—advice in the book on preparing for death, helping others prepare, and acting skillfully during the dying process.

I cannot "review" *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* in a comprehensive way. There is too much in it to summarize, such as the gentle yet profound instructions on dzogchen meditation. And much of the material is of a kind my heart responds to and wants to understand and practice, without being able to yet. But here are a few comments and excerpts.

While the word "death" in the title strongly attracts (and repels) our attention, the way we live our life has enormous effects on how we die and what goes on afterwards. The best preparation for death is to become more and more enlightened in this life. You do not have to accept everything in this book—I don't—but it calls to and supports something deep in our nature.

Whatever label we put on ourselves—Buddhist, Christian, agnostic, etc.—there is a spiritual reality that is our common heritage, simply by virtue of being human.

Despite this massive and nearly all-pervasive denial of their existence, we still sometimes have fleeting glimpses of the nature of mind. . . . I think we do, sometimes, half understand these glimpses, but modern culture gives us no context or framework in which to comprehend them. Worse still, rather than encouraging us to explore these glimpses more deeply and discover where they spring from, we are told in both obvious and subtle ways to shut them out. This is perhaps the darkest and most disturbing aspect of modern civilization—its ignorance and repression of who we really are.

Sogyal Rinpoche frankly amazes me in the way he has distilled the essence of years of his teachings on how to live and recognize one's inner essence, one's rigpa, in this book.

Reflecting on the social and planetary consequences of our rejection of death, for example, Sogyal Rinpoche notes:

I have come to realize that the disastrous effects of the denial of death go far beyond the individual: They affect the whole planet. Believing fundamentally that this life is the only one, modern people have developed no long-term vision. So there is nothing to restrain them from plundering the planet for their own immediate ends and from living in a selfish way that could prove fatal for the future.

This book is also unique in giving many glimpses into the life of a person who was raised to be a spiritual teacher in a now endangered culture. 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 then 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. . . .