The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying

A Review Article by John Rowan

At a big international conference some years ago one of the young German organisers died in a car crash while the event was in progress. People were shocked and very unsure of how to take this, or what to do about it. Sogyal took over a plenary session and dealt with it all so humanly, so thoughtfully and even with a sense of humour, that we all felt that justice had been done and our feelings had been satisfied. It is hard to do what is right on the hoof like this, and I have had great respect for Sogyal ever since.

It has to be said that this is not one book. It is a number of quite different books all bound together. Some of them speak to us very clearly and accurately as part of the Western culture; others are, well, very Tibetan.

Book One

The first book (Chapters 1-4) is about Buddhism in relation to everyday life. It explains the basic tenets of this religion, in a very personal way, which relates to Sogyal's own life and times. Some of this is very Tibetan, as for example the incident when a lama died, and his master felt he had not died properly. He brought him back to life, and then did the proper practices so that he could go in the right way. There are many stories like this in the book, many of which clearly impart some moral lesson for life. I didn't like these: they seemed to me exactly like the lives of the saints in Christianist mythology. Many of us make a distinction between superstitious stories like this and the higher reaches of mysticism; Sogyal does not. For him it is all one. Chapter 6 is also part of this book.

Book Two

Chapter 5 is a second book in itself, all about meditation, and I have to say that I think it is presented in much too difficult a way, such that anyone who tried it would get an initial experience of failure. Actually I think this is very common, and that most meditation teaching shoots too high too soon, and makes the person feel inadequate. But there are certainly a number of interesting details here for experienced meditators.

Book Three

This book, consisting of Chapters 7-10, is all about the *bardos*: the natural bardo of this life; the painful bardo of dying; the luminous bardo of the dharma; and the karmic bardo of becoming. I have to say that

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this seems to me a complete mish-mash, with all kinds of different levels all mixed up together. Again this is obviously the way Sogyal sees it — no distinctions at all between one level and another. It includes a very unsophisticated and unwise discussion of egolessness. It includes a lot of contradictory statements. It mixes up the subtle, the causal, the rational and the superstitious in an extraordinary way.

Book Four

Then we come to the fourth book (Chapters 11-15). This starts off wonderfully well, and then slides slowly downhill. Chapter 11 is in my opinion the best chapter in the book, and should be copied out and given to anyone who is in contact with dying people. It gives all the hints and tips anyone would need in visiting a dying person. It makes it clear that there is all the difference in the world between a good death and a bad death. A bad death is one of the worst things that can happen to anyone; a good death is one of the best things. And in this chapter we learn what we need to know to help someone to have a good death.

But then we start the downhill ride. It starts with the discussion of the practice of *tonglen*. When Buddhists use the word 'practice' they mean something very close to what Christianists mean by the word 'prayer'. Tonglen is all about compassion. Various versions of how to build up to it are given, so that we can learn better how to get hold of the compassion we need when dealing with dying people. Here again we get, among other things, another of those ridiculous superstitious stories, this time about Buddha himself. Just listen to this.

'[In one of Buddha's previous lives he was a boy prince named Mahasattva.] The princes went off to play in the woods. After a while they came across a tigress who had given birth, and was so exhausted with hunger that she was on the point of eating her little cubs . . . Quietly he crept back to the tigress, went right up to her, and lay down on the ground in front of her, to offer himself to her as food. The tigress looked at him, but was so weak that she could not even open her mouth. So the prince found a sharp stick and cut a deep gash in his body; the blood flowe out, the tigress licked it, and grew stro enough to open her jaws and eat him . . . The tigress and her cubs . . . were reborn, it is said, as the Buddha's first five disciples, the very first to receive his teaching after his enlightenment.' (pp.198-9)

Sogyal loves this story, but to me this sort of thing cheapens the account he is giving: it is pious rubbish.

But it turns out that Tonglen is very much like what Joanna Macy used to teach under the title of 'breathing through'. We breathe in the evil and suffering of others, and breathe out the compassion which transforms it (see especially pages 205-6). This is mostly good, useful stuff.

Chapter 13 is about another practice, this time called *phowa* (pronounced powa) This is a visualisation in which you imagine above the head of the dying person a spiritual figure who means a lot to you: in my case that would be the Great Goddess, but any genuinely felt figure is all right. Imagine that rays of light and love pour down from this figure on to the dying person, purifying his or her whole being, so that he or she dissolves into light

and merges into the spiritual presence. This seems clear enough, and Sogyal says: 'I strongly suggest to doctors and nurses that they can also do phowa for their dying patients . . . I want to emphasise that this is practice that anyone at all can do.' But now come the contradictions. Just a few pages later, Sogyal is saying: 'It would be inappropriate here to explain the details of the traditional phowa practice, which must, always and in all circumstances, be carried out under the guidance of a qualified master. Never try to do this practice on your own without the proper guidance.' We start to get a fearful catalogue of the things that can go wrong if the practice is wrongly performed. If it is done right, the consciousness of the dying person escapes, at the moment of death, through the crown of the head. But listen to this:

'The route through which the consciousness escapes determines the future rebirth. If it escapes through the anus, rebirth will be in the hell realm; if through the genital organ, the animal realm; if through the mouth, the hungry ghost realm; if through the nose, the human and spirit realms; if through the navel, the realm of the "desire gods"; if through the ears, the demigods; if through the eyes, the "form god" realm; and if through the top of the head (four finger-widths back from the hairline), the "formless god" realm. If the consciousness escapes through the crown of the head, the being will be reborn in Dewachen, the western paradise of Amitabha.' (p.400)

Chapter 15 also contains a good deal of dubious stuff. So this book is, like a famous egg, good in parts, but really quite off-putting.

Book Five

The fifth book (Chapters 16-20) is a detailed examination and explication of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, and is the usual mish-mash of good and bad, believable and unbelievable, high and low, deep and shallow. The bit I liked best was this poem of Padmasambhava:

'The self-originated Clear Light, which from the beginning was never born,
Is the child of Rigpa, which is itself without any parents — how amazing!
This self-originated wisdom has not been created by anyone — how amazing!
It has never experienced birth and has nothing in it that could cause it to die — how amazing!
Although it is evidently visible, yet there is no one there who sees it — how amazing!
Although it has wandered through samsara, no harm has come to it — how amazing!
Although it has seen buddhahood itself, no good has come to it — how amazing!
Although it exists in everyone everywhere, it has gone unrecognized — how amazing!
And yet you go on hoping to attain some other fruit than this elsewhere — how amazing!
Even though it is the thing that is most essentially yours, you seek for it elsewhere — how amazing!' (pp.259-60)

This is for once a pure statement of the causal position, and one which I think is very well expressed. *Rigpa*, which is mentioned in it, is one of the most important concepts in this book. Sogyal calls it 'the nature of mind' and says it is what we get

in touch with when we meditate deeply. 'To realise the nature of mind is to realise the nature of all things.' But a great deal of this fifth book is dubious Tibetan stuff, complete with miraculous stories and appeals to fear. A lot of it is quite dogmatic, though expressed with Sogyal's customary humility and humour. There is a good chapter on the Near-Death Experience (NDE) where the author makes it clear that such experience tell us little or nothing about what happens after death, because they all happen while we are still in the natural bardo of this life (the first of the four bardos mentioned above). We can take NDEs seriously, and some of them have great meaning and significance to the people who have them, but they are not really about the after-death realms. So this fifth book again is a mixture of the good, the bad and the offputting. There are two final chapters, in which we come full circle to the beginning again, the implications of all this for daily life. They are perhaps a bit over-optimistic.

'This book is giving you a sacred technology, by which you can transform not only your present life, and not only your dying and your death, but also your future lives, and so the future of humanity. What my masters and I are hoping to inspire here is a major leap forward toward the conscious evolution of humanity. To learn how to die is to learn how to live, to learn how to live is to learn how to act not only in this life, but in the lives to come. To transform yourself truly and learn how to be reborn as a transformed being to help others is really to help the world in the most powerful way of all . . . One of my deepest hopes for this book is that it could be an unfailing, loyal companion to anyone who makes the choice to become a bodhisattva, a source of guidance and inspiration to those who really face the challenge of this time, and undertake the journey of enlightenment out of compassion for all other beings.' (pp.364-5)

To expect one book to do all that is probably too much, but the energy is good, and I cannot help but applaud the motivation behind this. I have to say, however, that this book is not naturalised. There is too much in it which a Western mind cannot accept: the miracle stories, the complicated rituals, the dogmatic beliefs, the emphasis on hierarchy and succession, the superstitious fears — all these counterbalance the wonderful compassion, insight and humour which Sogyal also presents in such rich measure. The title of this book is quite accurate: it is a *Tibetan* book of living and dying, not a Western book of living and dying. As such, it is quite accurate about where Sogyal is coming from, and such honesty is to be commended, but it is not where I am coming from, or where many other readers will be coming from. My own tradition is a pagan one, which shares with Buddhism the belief in reincarnation and in realms beyond death. There is much here which speaks to me very powerfully. But to me, Chapter 11 (*Heart Advice on Helping the Dying*) is the soul of the book, and the chapter which will speak most to those of us who were brought up in the West. It alone is worth the money, and I would like to see it used everywhere.