Letters

Dear *S&S*,

I was sorry to read in the May edition of *Self & Society* that Caroline Arewa found Flossie Crimp's material racist.

The intention of the piece was not to make fun of any of the practices mentioned, nor to belittle other cultures; rather it was to satirise the pretentiousness of those who cobble together such workshops using ill-understood fragments from different traditions. Zen and shamanism in particular have become trendy in this way. The reference to Polynesia was perhaps unfortunate, but the joke should have been against Flossie Crimp and people like her.

As far as I am concerned it is perfectly possible both to take something seriously and to laugh at it. I have a deep respect for all paths of spiritual exploration but reserve the right to be amused by their practitioners, including myself. Flossie Crimp is meant to personify New Age earnestness and a spiritual materialism that refuses to see its own funny side. However, there is sometimes a fine line between the ludicrous and the offensive and I accept that for Ms Arewa that line was crossed.

Susan Jordan

Dear *S&S*,

John Rowan's review of *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, while sympathetic in places, appears to miss the point in many respects. He seems to propose that there is a definitive method of expressing complex spiritual issues without actually stating what these may be. He seems to reject the Tibetan framework and, while accusing Sogyal Rinpoche of confusing categories, does this himself by confusing allegorical stories with superstition. Thus he dismisses the story of the Buddha and the Tigress as 'pious rubbish'. If we were to dismiss the myth of the Garden of Eden in the same way, failing to see the meanings it holds, we would be justly accused of cultural and religious ignorance. Should this book, being published in the West, follow the dictates of materialist thinking and remain within the confines of Western expression?

There would appear to be nothing peculiarly Tibetan about the power to bring a dead person back to life. Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*, for example, includes an account of a Hindu master — also living in modern times — with the same ability. Jesus brought Lazarus back to life. What distinguishes the Tibetan example, perhaps, is that the 'miracle' was brought about not only out of compassion or to engender faith, but for the pragmatic purpose of effecting a necessary adjustment to the way the dying Lama had been negotiating the dying process.

What is John Rowan's problem with miracles anyway? A miracle has been defined as 'an extraordinary event of an apparently inexplicable nature (although in reality every event in our precisely adjusted cosmos is lawfully wrought and lawfully explicable)'. Ordinary miracles are happening all the time — conception, birth, the opening of a flower. It would seem that extraordinary miracles are simply manifestations of a different set of laws.

It is ironic that the reviewer should presume that Sogyal Rinpoche makes no distinction between levels. Tibetan Buddhism, like Buddhism in general, has developed an exhaustive and precise knowledge of different states and levels. Part of the reason for what John Rowan disapprovingly calls 'the emphasis on hierarchy and succession' is so that the level and authenticity of the successor's spiritual realisation can be checked out by his master.

Rowan believes that Sogyal Rinpoche contradicts himself regarding the Phowa practice. First saying it is safe for anyone to practice, and then saying it can only be practised under a qualified master. What the reviewer failed to notice — although it is pointed out clearly (for example on page 234) — is that two distinct forms of Phowa are being described, the Essential Phowa (the safe one) and the Traditional Phowa.

We would agree that there is much in this book that 'a western mind cannot accept'. If we look with our familiar everyday rationale, we will reject much of the thinking and spirituality presented here. Fortunately many people have not been hindered from looking beyond intellectual analysis to find inspiration, hope, and meaning for themselves. The central message of this book is to ask us to look again at how we view death. Contemplating death is not only vital for freeing our own death and that of those close to us, but also that in doing so we enhance our own view of life. 'Death is a mirror in which the entire meaning of life is reflected'. We have met many people who, after reading this book, no longer look at death with the same fear. The inspiration that they have found is surely worth braving the perils of 'dubious Tibetan stuff' to explore. We would not like to see Sogyal Rinpoche's view dismissed because we do not have the time or ability to understand it. As therapists do we must sometimes enter the unchartered world of the spiritual with our clients, attest to the state of not knowing, of mystery, and rest there awe-struck without judgement.

Rosamund Oliver
Michael Pope

Dear *S&S*,

I think you were a little too cavalier in your reply about the absence of references in *Self & Society*. You say 'in common with most magazines, as opposed to academic journals' you prefer not to break up the text with references. But *Self & Society* has the unique and perhaps awkward task of being both a magazine and a journal. It is not the only British magazine in the broad field of humanistic psychology, but it is the only journal. It says so on the cover.

So I do believe that *Self & Society* should have both magazine-type pieces and journal-type articles. And the longer and more serious articles should have whatever references the author has given them. There was an instance in the past where Vivian Milroy dropped all the references from an important article which needed them, and caused a nasty problem thereby. I hope you won't repeat that sort of mistake .

John Rowan