

Interview with Reggie Ray

By Michael Schwagler

Dr. Reginald Ray, writer and Buddhist scholar, presented a lecture at Sakya Monastery on "Buddhism in the West" on January 27th, 2010. At the request of Monastery members, Dr. Ray agreed to this interview. We are very thankful that he was so generous in sharing with us his time, his knowledge and wisdom.

Dr. Reginald "Reggie" Ray brings us four decades of study and intensive meditation practice within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition as well as a special gift for applying it to the unique problems, inspirations, and spiritual imperatives of modern people.

He is President and Spiritual Director of the Dharma Ocean Foundation, a non-profit educational organization dedicated to the practice, study and preservation of the teachings of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and the practice lineage he embodied.

*Dr. Ray received his PhD from the Divinity School of the University of Chicago in 1973 and is a current faculty member of the Buddhist Studies Department at Naropa University. He has written extensively on the history and practice of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism. His most recent work, *Touching Enlightenment*, explores the process of awakening by working directly with the body. Additionally he has authored: *Indestructible Truth*, *Secret of the Vajra World*, *Buddhists Saints in India*, *In the Presence of Masters* and other articles and *Sounds True* audio programs.*

MS. The main thing I gathered from your talk last night is that in order to be Buddhist you have to practice. What further comments can you add to this?

RR. I'm an historian; that's my training. My academic training is the history of religions and one of my special areas is very early Buddhism. And what we learn from the study of the earliest Buddhist tradition is what Buddhism first was and most essentially was: the practice of meditation and what it leads to. And it's that simple.

Over time Buddhism became much, much more complicated and it has a lot of other things going on. And oftentimes in the West people become distracted from the essence of Buddhism which is practice and they may not practice very much at all. They may do other things: study, and go to church and hang around teachers but that's not really the essence of Buddhism. So from my point of view it's kind of a shame if we become distracted from the essence because then we don't change. You don't really change by studying, you don't change by going to church, you don't change by hanging around teachers. The one and only way you change is by meditation practice, so in Dharma Ocean that's what we do. That's what we emphasize.

MS. To go deep within yourself?

RR. Exactly.

MS. One thing I notice at the Sakya monastery, especially as a relatively new member, is all the emphasis on tantric practice. Visualizations. Special mantras and so on. What do you recommend for for someone like me...a lay person? And how much should I meditate every day...or how should I practice?

RR. I can tell you what I was told when I began practicing in 1970. I was told by one of Chogyam Trungpa's students that—number one—do formless practice. Doing formless means sitting and working with your breath... and being. The practice of being. You're not doing anything. You're just paying attention to your breath, following your breath in and out and opening your awareness. That's it. That's the practice of meditation. If you don't do that, and you're just doing mantras and you're just doing visualizations, it doesn't really have any impact. You're not going to change that way...so the basic practice needs to be formless practice and then later you can do some of these other things and their enhancements of formless practice, but not in the beginning.

The other thing I was told is to practice an hour a day and if you do that you will make the journey. You will change. You will transform.

MS. Seven days a week, not taking a break?

RR. Well, you can take a day off once in a while. You don't want to be too heavy about it. But [practice] in a continuous way.

MS. Last night you were discussing the benefits that Buddhism could bring to the masses. How it can bring more love to people. How we can develop the hollow self – and fill that with love and those sorts of things?

RR. Those are more advanced practices though. The base line is just the practice of following the breath. Mindfulness practice – it's the beginning and it's also the highest practice of Buddhism which is interesting. You find that at the very beginning and you find that at the very end... Working with the breath and just opening your awareness.

MS. How do we bring this to the Western mind? I think one Western fear may be that if we meditate the way that a lot of gurus and masters say that we should, we're just going to be a bunch of smiling zombies walking around. We'll be in love with the world but nothing will happen. There will be no MRIs, no airplanes....no creativity, no (technological or scientific) advancements. Everything will just stop.

RR. That isn't what meditation does. Meditation – when you practice the way I'm suggesting – actually opens up your creativity. It opens up your interest in the world. It makes you more available to the world and more engaged with the world.

MS. How does that work?

RR. Well, you're not so preoccupied with yourself all the time. I mean...most of us may be running around... but we constantly have this little tape loop running in our mind about ourselves and our own life and there's no real openness there. You may be engaged in life and you may have a family and you may have a job but it's very narcissistic and the whole point of meditation is to dismantle narcissism so you're actually available to the world and you see the world on its terms, not just on your terms.

MS. From last night's talk, I gathered that almost any contemplative practice would be acceptable...what Buddhists, Trappist monks and others do. Does it really matter?

RR. Well, it depends what they're doing. If you're meditating the way I'm talking about, which is...you're paying attention, you're being mindful, and you're opening your awareness and you're making discoveries about yourself and about life....If that's what they're doing? Very beneficial. I mean, people say, "I'm meditating," but what they're doing is something entirely different. It could be.... So you actually have to find out what people are doing before you [can know.]

MS. What about "centering" meditation? Such as that practiced by Thomas Keating, a Catholic contemplative in Snowmass, Colorado?

RR. From the Buddhist point of view, we'd rather it be more formless, rather than filling up the space with activities. We'd rather just let the awareness be open and see what shows itself when we do that.

MS. Is that the only way we get to where we want to go, is through meditation?

RR. Well, no. There are many ways to get there, but meditation is the most direct route. It's more direct. Meditation is accessible to everybody. Anybody can do it.

MS. Is that the value of it?

RR. Well, that's one value, but another value is that you're working with your own state of being. That's what meditation is. It's opening up to who you are as a person. Most of feel that we're kind of living on the surface and that we really haven't opened all the dimensions of our own "feeling life", our emotions, our sense perceptions. You know, we feel we're a little shut down and meditation is a way of opening that up, which most of us would like to do.

MS. One question in Western philosophy is, "What is our purpose in life." Is that what you're getting at?

RR. Meditation makes us more complete. It makes you see how held back you are and how afraid you are, actually ...of life and how afraid you are to be vulnerable. It shows you that. And then - when you see that - you can open up...

MS. Then you really do have to spend more than 10 minutes a day meditating?

RR. Anything you do is going to help you. Anything you do. What if you found out that you only had a month to live - what would you do? What is the most important thing in your life?

And I think meditation, first of all, makes you more intelligent, more sensitive and more perceptive so it would really help [whatever is the most important thing in your life.] And it also helps you clarify how you feel about life. What your inspiration is.

MS. Does meditation help you love others (unqualified) rather than be angry with their actions, for example when they do something to you like cut you off on the freeway?

RR. Well...more than that. It makes you more flexible as a person. You're not stuck with one response to every single situation. You can hang out with it and see what's really going on. It makes you a little more intelligent that way and more aware.

MS. How does meditating for the benefit of all sentient beings compare to actually doing something for the benefit of beings? For example, what the Sisters of Mercy do in Calcutta or Thich Nhat Hanh's style of engaged Buddhism that he employed during the war in Viet Nam?

RR. Well, it's not like one is good and one is bad. When you're going to meditate...don't just do it for yourself. Do it for other people. Have the intention that it's going to benefit others. But of course you should help other people. [Meditation] doesn't replace helping other people.

MS. Is prayer a form of meditation?

RR. Not in the Buddhist sense; the Buddhist sense is just opening your awareness. Do you know what I mean by that?

MS. Could you explain that?

RR. Follow your breath in and out. When you're thinking, and you catch yourself thinking you just come back to your breath and feel the sensation as it goes in...and as it goes out. Just stay with the breathing right here, at the tip of your nose. Just feel it. If your mind wanders you bring it back. [Again,] if your mind wanders you bring it back. You just stay here. So you're tethering your mind the way you would tether a horse. And over time your mind settles and becomes quiet. And when your mind is quiet you can see things. As long as your mind is going you can't see anything – it's like a muddy pond. And when the mind settles and the mind becomes clear you start to see things more in terms of what they really are. So...it's that simple.

MS. Do you see things in terms of what somebody's action or reaction may be?

RR. Or your own. You can see yourself...if you're being defensive, being egocentric...or you really are being kind. You can see that. You just have more of a clear mirror to see what's going on.

MS. Do you ever get the feeling that you're standing beside yourself, looking down at yourself? For example, in an interview such as this, one may get tense...hands getting sweaty... and then all of a sudden one is relaxed and is feeling changes the whole time they are interviewing the person.

RR. That's right. And when you see that, you bring yourself back. But some people don't even see that. They're gone and they don't even know it. And they're not really here ...they're somewhere else. But meditation helps you see and then you can come back and focus on what you're doing.

MS. For most people; let's say they begin a practice of one hour a day. How long would it take them to get to point where it's of profound benefit?

RR. You'll feel changes right away. Within the first couple weeks you'll feel changes and then you'll change over your whole life. It becomes an ongoing process of change....your whole life. But you'll get benefit right away.

MS. This is a question about the term enlightenment. Apparently it is not a Buddhist concept. How did the word get to be so prevalent in Buddhist writing and even in Buddhist prayers? Even some of your books have the word enlightenment in the title. Is that marketing?

RR. It caught on... probably from the beginning of the 19th century. We'd have to look back and see [exactly] when it was first used. It translates to the term Nirvana, which is Sanskrit. And what Nirvana

means is the near opposite, which is...blowing out the flame of grasping. That's literally what Nirvana means. Blowing out. Extinguishment. That's rather different from enlightenment.

MS. Does Nirvana also mean something like emptiness?

RR. No. it means blowing out. Blowing out the flame of desire....or of clinging, grasping.

People started using [the term, enlightenment] and it caught on. And at this point everybody uses it. You can't really change the whole culture just like that.

MS. Culture has changed the definition of that word?

RR. That's right. It's quite misleading, unfortunately.

MS. Is that just a Western thing, or is it used all over the whole world – that term enlightenment? Does it show up in Zen?

RR. Well, there's no term that corresponds to that in any Buddhist language. The closest thing – I suppose you could say – is this term bodhi, which means to be awake...or it means "awake." That's the closest term. Budh is the Sanskrit root and it means to wake up...to not be asleep anymore. And, so...being awake and enlightenment they have quite different meaning.

And the other thing about enlightenment, of course, is...it connects up with the 18th century – the so called age of enlightenment. That's where the term really comes from in English, which is all about rationality. In the 18th century we have this split between body and mind so, unfortunately, the term enlightenment has the split built into it. So if we're talking about the mind when we're talking about enlightenment and the body doesn't really come in to it, [that notion] is *completely* incorrect. So this is difficult; a difficult situation.

MS. The Sakya Monastery makes a strong effort not to proselytize, that is, not to promote or do any marketing of the Monastery. Is non-proselytizing a universal Buddhist philosophy?

RR. Well, the Buddha, of course, preached his whole life – he preached from the age of 35 until he died at the age of 80. And he wandered around and gave teachings to people. I mean, that's as far as Buddhism will go...then leave it up to people what they're going to do with it.

MS. What about being a missionary? Is that proselytizing?

RR. Well. You need to present the teachings to people, because that can help them, but if you're trying to get people to join *your* group...that's left up to the individual. If they want to join your group, fine. If they want to join another group, fine. If they want to join no group, it's fine. Buddhists do teach the Dharma, but they're not out there actively trying to build their membership. Some Buddhists groups do that, but that's not what the Buddha did. He didn't care if people joined his group but he wanted them to meditate and to become who they are; to develop themselves. So...there's that much proselytizing.

MS. I heard you say the phrase, "Become who you are" several times. Is that the essence of this?

RR. Yes...that's the essence of what Buddhism is. To develop your full capacity as a human being.

MS. I'd like to ask some questions about The Buddha. A lot of westerners are really turned off by the fact that the Buddha abandoned his family. The day his child was born, he took off for the forest to find out about himself. How selfish is that?

RR. He didn't abandon his family. He came back- did you know that? When he left he said, "We're all caught in this small, social, elitist, royal world and it's not healthy for anybody. I'm going to find something bigger and when I find it, I will come back and teach you," and that's exactly what he did. He came back and his son, actually, became one of his foremost students. His wife became a practitioner. And his aunt- the woman who raised him because his mother had died – became the first Buddhist nun. Isn't that interesting?

MS. How long was he out meditating?

RR. Nobody really knows. They say six years, but nobody really knows. What they say is, he actually stayed in touch and there were goings and comings between him and the palace. So people stayed in touch with him. He was out there working.

MS. Let's say the Buddha comes back from the dead and observes the religion that's named after him. He's practically revered as a god; there are all these thousands of deities – intricate rituals, secrets, and people bowing to lamas. What do you think he would say?

RR. He would say you've all gotten a little distracted and need to go back to formless meditation – you need to get back to your meditation cushion.