

THE SNOW LION NEWSLETTER
CHRISTIAN BUDDHIST EXPLORATIONS
The Rainbow Body

by Gail Holland

[This article appeared in IONS Review, No. 59, March-May 2002. Reprinted with permission of the author and the Institute of Noetic Sciences (www.noetic.org).] When David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, proposed investigating the "rainbow body," a phenomenon in which the corpses of highly developed spiritual individuals reputedly vanish within days of death, he received an enthusiastic response from Marilyn Schlitz, IONS's director of research.

In a new joint initiative with the Esalen Institute, IONS is expanding its research on "metanormal capacities"- behaviors, experiences, and bodily changes that challenge our understanding of ordinary human functioning- because they raise crucial questions about the developmental potential of human beings.

"Brother David told us that he had taken this project to various institutions and foundations looking for support," recalls Schlitz. His intention was to corroborate these claims, and accumulate data that would not only help us understand more about the rainbow body, but also look at its broader implications. He had been told that this type of research is unacceptable within mainstream science. But, I said, "This is exactly the kind of project we're interested in at IONS. As long as the research can be conceptualized within a rigorous critical frame, we are open to examining any and all questions that can expand our idea of what is possible as humans."

Steindl-Rast's own curiosity about the rainbow body began when he heard various stories of Tibetan masters who had, through their practices, reached a high degree of wisdom and compassion. It was reported to him that when they died, rainbows suddenly appeared in the sky. "And I was told that after several days their bodies disappeared. Sometimes fingernails and hair were left. Sometimes nothing was left."

These stories made him reflect upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is central to his own faith. "We know that Jesus was a very compassionate, selfless person. When he died, according to the gospels, his body was no longer there.

In today's world, Steindl-Rast points out, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is interpreted differently, depending upon one's spiritual leanings. For fundamentalists, the resurrection- the act of rising from the dead- happened only to Jesus, and couldn't happen to any other human. The minimalists, on the other hand, says Steindl-Rast, focus on Jesus's spirit living on, and believe that the resurrection of Jesus had nothing to do with his body.

Yet, a large number of people (including himself) are open to the concept that the body, too, is significant in the spiritual realm, and that certain spiritual experiences are universal.

In 1999, he decided to explore the strange phenomenon of the rainbow body and a possible connection to the resurrection of Jesus. "I sent a fax to a friend in Switzerland, who is a Zen Buddhist teacher. I knew that many Tibetans live there, and so I asked him if he could inquire about the rainbow body. Two days later, I received a fax back stating that a Tibetan had unexpectedly approached him, and when the rainbow body was mentioned, the Tibetan said, 'It happened to one of my teachers just recently, and a famous lama who witnessed the events wrote an account about them.' " At this point,

Steindl-Rast contacted Father Francis Tiso, an ordained Roman Catholic priest who has not only studied ten languages, including Tibetan, but is also familiar with Tibetan culture. (Francis Tiso holds the office of Canon in the Cathedral of St Peter, Isernia, Italy, and is assigned to the Archdiocese of San Francisco, where he is parochial vicar in Mill Valley.)

"I was aware," says Steindl-Rast, "that Father Tiso occasionally went to Tibet, so I asked him if he was planning to travel there in the near future. He told me he was leaving that very day."

Steindl-Rast asked if he would stop in Switzerland and interview the Tibetan. Despite the short notice, Tiso took a detour to Switzerland, and thus the research journey began.

The rainbow body is a complex phenomenon that will probably take years of study. "If we can establish as an anthropological fact," says Steindl-Rast, "that what is described in the resurrection of Jesus has not only happened to others, but is happening today, it would put our view of human potential in a completely different light."

Recent Rainbow Body Experiences

Through his Swiss contact, Tiso received the name of the monk whose body had vanished after his death: Khenpo A-chos, a Gelugpa monk from Kham, Tibet, who died in 1998. Tiso was able to locate the village, situated in a remote area where Khenpo A-chos had his hermitage. He then went to the village and conducted taped interviews with eyewitnesses to Khenpo A-chos' death. He also spoke to many people who had known him.

"This was a very interesting man, aside from the way he died," observes Tiso. "Everyone mentioned his faithfulness to his vows, his purity of life, and how he often spoke of the importance of cultivating compassion. He had the ability to teach even the roughest and toughest of types how to be a little gentler, a little more mindful. To be in the man's presence changed people."

Tiso interviewed Lama Norta, a nephew of Khenpo Achos; Lama Sonam Gyamtso, a young disciple; and Lama A-chos, a dharma friend of the late Khenpo A-chos. They described the following:

A few days before Khenpo A-chos died, a rainbow appeared directly above his hut. After he died, there were dozens of rainbows in the sky. Khenpo A-chos died lying on his right side. He wasn't sick; there appeared to be nothing wrong with him, and he was reciting the mantra OM MANI PADME HUM over and over. According to the eyewitnesses, after his breath stopped his flesh became kind of pinkish. One person said it turned brilliant white. All said it started to shine.

Lama A-chos suggested wrapping his friend's body in a yellow robe, the type all Gelug monks wear. As the days passed, they maintained they could see, through the robe, that his bones and his body were shrinking. They also heard beautiful, mysterious music coming from the sky, and they smelled perfume.

After seven days, they removed the yellow cloth, and no body remained. Lama Norta and a few other individuals claimed that after his death Khenpo A-chos appeared to them in visions and dreams.

Other Rainbow Body Manifestations

Francis Tiso remarks that one of his most intriguing interviews was with Lama A-chos. He told Tiso that when he died he too would manifest the rainbow body. "He showed us two photographs taken of him in the dark, and in these photographs his body radiated rays of light."

Because Lama A-chos emphasized that it was possible to manifest the rainbow body while still alive, not just in death, Tiso plans to return to Tibet with professional camera equipment to try to photograph this radiating light.

Other incidents of metanormal occurrences upon death are also being studied. For instance, several of Tiso's colleagues were present for the postmortem process of Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche, who died eight years ago. "This man was a very large-boned individual," says Tiso, "and it was reported that seven weeks after his death the flesh was reduced. That could have been done by chemical substances, however, the bones also shrank."

Shrinkage of the body occurred with another guru, Lama Thubten. His miniature-sized frame is now kept in a monastery in Manali, India. Tiso has ascertained that incidents of bodies shrinking or disappearing shortly after death were documented centuries ago, such as in the classic story of Milarepa, a Buddhist saint from Tibet who lived in the 11th century. Milarepa's biography was translated into French by Jacques Bacot in 1912, and into English by Walter Evans-Wentz in the 1920s.

"In the ninth chapter of this literary classic," explains Tiso, who wrote a dissertation about the Buddhist saint, "It states that his body completely disappeared shortly after his death."

Even the earliest biographies of Milarepa, says Tiso, attest to this phenomenon. In addition, accounts exist about the great eighth-century tantric master Padmasambhava and how his body vanished.

The Significance of Practice and Culture

When conducting this type of research, says Tiso, it is important not only to interview as many people as possible, but also to study biographies and any written explanations of these events. When he arrived in Tibet to investigate the death of Khenpo A-chos, Tiso was fortunate enough to obtain the bulk of his biography by Sonam Phuntsok within an hour of his arrival.

What is at stake, explains Tiso, is not simply verification of a phenomenon, but understanding the values, spiritual practices, and culture in which this phenomenon is embedded. "We need to examine these institutions and practices in a new light in order to recover for humanity some very profound truths about the expansion of the human consciousness and our potential as human beings."

This opportunity is present in the Nyarong region in Tibet, where several incidences of the rainbow body are said to have occurred. The research team is now studying their way of life, especially their spiritual practices.

Tiso has also obtained copies of spiritual retreat manuals, which have been particularly helpful.

Lama A-chos told Tiso that it takes sixty years of intensive practice to achieve the rainbow body. "Whether it always takes that long, I don't know," acknowledges Tiso, "but we would like to be able to incorporate, in a respectful way, some of these practices into our own Western philosophical and religious traditions."

At the same time, continues Tiso, the research team plans to expend the scope of this research beyond the confines of the Tibetan culture, so they can compare the rainbow body phenomenon with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. To our knowledge, says Tiso, the bodies of most Christian saints did not disappear or shrink after their deaths.

"Highly realized saints in Catholic and Orthodox Christianity tend to move in the direction of incorruption, so that the body does not decay after death."

However, he adds, bodily ascensions are mentioned in the Bible and other traditional texts for Enoch, Mary, Elijah, and possibly Moses. And there are numerous stories of saints materializing after their death, similar to the widespread phenomenon known as the "light-body."

"In my church of Saints Cosmas and Damian in Italy, we have a large number of accounts, going back centuries, that indicate that these saints appeared in dreams and visions, rescued people from harm, and cured them of diseases. Even today, people still tell me they have these visions," says Tiso.

In 1984, when Tiso was meditating with his eyes open in a chapel in Italy, he, too, had an extraordinary vision. Jesus Christ, he says, appeared before him in the form of a violet light-body. At that time, Tiso was considering taking a teaching position in the United States, but in this vision Christ indicated he should stay in Italy. "It was important not to make a mistake at that point in my life," reflects Tiso. "I did stay in Italy, where I was eventually ordained, and I lived in a hermitage chapel for almost twelve years."

Tiso has also had several Tibetan teachers appear to him in dreams. When he gives public lectures he speaks frankly about these experiences, because he feels it is important for people to understand that they are more common than we think. "I think that as people mature in their spiritual practice, they begin to have visionary experiences."

Recent Implications

Countries such as China, Tiso notes, and certain political movements in Western Europe have chosen to abandon and even physically destroy anything to do with the contemplative life. "We're now being asked to examine those institutions and their practices in a new light in order to recover for humanity some very profound truths about who we are as human beings."

This research is clearly controversial because it tackles the age-old questions of life after death, the immortal soul, and reincarnation. Furthermore, it suggests that the alleged resurrection of Jesus Christ was not an isolated case, but shines as an example of what may be possible for all human beings.

Both Tiso and Steindl-Rast emphasize that these experiences are said to occur only in highly evolved individuals who are the embodiment of compassion and love. They speculate these qualities- conscience and consciousness- are a driving force of evolution. "It is my great hope that the rainbow body research will make us more aware of this possibility," says Steindl-Rast.

Tiso holds the opinion that in today's world, where consumerism, exploitation, and economic injustice are still out of control, there is an urgent need to reinforce the more loving, altruistic, and spiritual dimensions of the human being. In the future, he says, we should consider establishing new models of monasteries and retreat centers for individuals who wish, with idealistic motivations, to intensify their spiritual practices. He also proposes initiating a "holy" laboratory to document the progress of individuals.

As for the rainbow body, Tiso and his team hope actually witness and scientifically document the entire experience while it is occurring.

"What is important" says Schlitz, "is that we broaden our scope of what we believe is possible. We want to discover if there are ways we can begin to develop spiritual practices that, even though they might not lead us to personally experience the rainbow body, could lead us to some other manifestation of our highest potential."

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