

Urgyen Sangharakshita

'in conversation' with Ratnachuda

about Death and Grief

Preface

I have produced this booklet in gratitude to Sangharakshita who kindly agreed to give me an interview in April 2007, when I was engaged in research for a doctorate with the thesis of 'grief and bereavement from a Buddhist perspective.' Sadly, the supervisors weren't interested in what had been communicated by Bhante as the interview didn't meet the 'norm' for interviews undertaken in some academic environments. "It was too personal and conversational.' This was one of the reasons why I discontinued the doctorate. However, I have continued with my research in the hopes of one day producing a book.

Meanwhile, I have been aware that the interview with Bhante contains rich material that could be of interest to the Order. Prior to the interview, thanks to a suggestion from Ratnaghosha, I reread Bhante's account of the death of Terry Delamere, in 'Moving Against the Stream.' That caused me to reread the whole memoir from which I drew quotations that formed some of the questions and the schema I adopted for the interview. I have attempted to edit out the parts where I feel I am 'too present,' as I want Bhante's life and his thoughts to be the main content albeit in the form of a conversation with me. As ever, Bhante's extraordinary memory comes through in the conversation. Bhante has reviewed the content of the interview and given its publication his blessing.

I hope those Order Members who have not been fortunate enough to be present when Bhante has communicated himself in an informal style, quite different from his public talks, will obtain a different sense of the many hued 'Sangharakshita Rainbow.'

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Ratnachuda June 2011

Note: I have not included the quotations in full from Moving Against the Stream as I strongly recommend reading the memoir to gain a sense of the context in which Bhante writes, particularly as he has often been quoted out context or worse misquoted! In the following pages, for brevity I have used the initials 'R' and 'S'.

Ratachuda: This is a conversation, you'll be pleased to hear. What I want to do, first, is ask about your understanding of grief and bereavement from a Buddhist perspective. To assist me in this, I've got some quotes from 'Moving Against the Stream.'

Second, I'd like to venture into how you've come to terms with your own grief, about people in your own life, family and others who have died.

I'd like to start by asking about loss in the context of attachment, from a Buddhist perspective. There was a phrase that struck me in 'Moving Against the Stream,' which I hadn't come across before about detachment - 'it was lack of self-interest.'¹ What I would understand from that, is attachment in the mundane world seems to be very much about self-interest, would you agree with that?

Bhante Sangharakshita: Oh yes, and of course the greater the attachment, the stronger the feeling of loss. So, I have to say, as a Buddhist, that over so many years I've always tried to be unattached. So I think I can say, when I have experienced loss as bereavement, I've probably not been so affected by it as someone not practising Buddhism might be.

R: Further in the same section of the book you wrote, "Detachment in the sense of freedom, self interest... Indifference, in the sense of lack of concern for other people, is quite another. While the former was perfectly compatible with true friendship, the latter made any sort of friendship impossible."² (that is, attachment made it difficult). "Did my not feeling sorry for leaving my friends in Poona and my not missing Indian friends after my return to England, mean I was detached? Or, did it mean I was indifferent? Was there, I even wondered, a general lack of emotion in my makeup? In the end, I came to the conclusion that I was neither without concern for other people, nor lacking in emotion generally; however, my feelings were to a great extent buried. They were buried beneath layers of reticence and reserve, through which it was difficult to break."³

R: For me, this contextualised it. You are, for me, an archetypal Englishman!

S: I think I am. I have to admit, I haven't experienced grief in that intense sense that some of our friends have. Sometimes, grief at the loss of pets, a cat or a dog - sometimes for me seems quite disproportionate.

If I have experienced grief, my strongest experience of grief was when my friend Terry Delamere died. I don't know whether I've said it in writing; however, I think I had a sense not so much of personal loss, because in some ways his death was a relief.

R: That's what you've written in the memoir and added, 'Inevitable'.

S: The world, so to speak, had lost such a fine person, with so much potential. That was my strongest feeling. I was just saying that now, as it's come to me; however we can talk more at the end of the interview.

R: I found that rereading that part of the memoir, had a very strong effect on me, the nature of your friendship with him, and what you wrote so eloquently after the death. Quite early on in the book, you were talking about Kantipalo, speaking in Poona. You wrote, "Awareness of the inevitability of death had played no part in my becoming a Buddhist monk. I knew that I would die, but the knowledge did not go very deep till that day. On this occasion the words took on a vital new meaning and sank deep into my heart. I knew I would die." ⁴ You continued, "The reason we refuse to accept the fact of death is that we cling to self, and see death as signifying the loss of selfhood. We therefore fear death." ⁵

S: Yes, some people come to Buddhism because they suddenly become aware of the fact of death, and they become afraid of the fact of death, and that leads them to the Dharma. However that was not my experience.

R: Continuing with the quote, "The reason we cling to death is we cling to self and saw death as signifying the loss of selfhood, we therefore fear death." ⁶

S: Well, there is death and there is dying. Because dying can be a very long, protracted experience. R: And then the Buddhist gets drawn in to the difficult dilemma, "Can I ease this pain?" In a way ethically, you don't want to do this. It's very difficult sometimes, if it appears - if you can help the person. Are you helping yourself in this?

R: Turning to your family? Again rereading your memoir, I realized something I'd forgotten: The very significant way you reconnected with your family when you first came back to England. Obviously, with your mother, and also your father - with two journeys, where he was living in South London. What struck me was how, on that first visit, the sadness you felt, that the poetry books you'd left with him when you left for India, had gone. There seemed to me, to be two experiences for you, in that meeting, in a way - the sadness, and the happiness of reconnecting, after your 20 years in India.

S: However, there is another element to the sadness, which I've mentioned; this was hearing about the death of my grandmother. The fact that she had committed suicide, and I did feel that quite deeply. I have written in earlier memoirs⁷, that when I saw her when I was still in the army, before I went to India, when I went to say goodbye to her, we both knew that we wouldn't meet again. Quite definitely, we both knew it. When I heard from my father that she had committed suicide, that did affect me quite deeply.

R: How did you know you wouldn't meet with her again?

S: I just knew. One can't explain it, one just knows. In the case of my grandmother, it was mutual. We both knew. I knew then quite definitely.

R: And then you go off to India?

S: Yes. I did feel that, and of course, I would have liked to have talked more about it (my grandmother's suicide) with my father. However, after the second of my meetings with him, he'd moved down to the South coast. Although we corresponded, I didn't visit him there and he died not so long afterwards.

R: And did you go to the funeral?

S: No - there's another story there. Because I was living then in Muswell Hill, and one day one of my nephews came to see me - one of my sister's sons, her younger son and he said, "Did you know that granddad is dead?" At first I didn't know who he meant by 'granddad.' It could have been my father. It could have been his father's father. It could have been his stepfather. So I said, 'Who do you mean?' He said, 'Your dad.' I hadn't known about it. That was very strange. I'd been in correspondence with him, as I said, and I think I must have received a letter from him just a few weeks earlier. However, for some reason, I'd not been informed of his death by my stepmother.

R: So she was alive, and hadn't told you?

S: Presumably. So I was in two minds, whether to go down to Lymington. "Why have I not been informed of my father's death?" or whether just to leave it? So I thought, maybe there is a can of worms here, so I thought it might be better just to leave it. So I left it.

R: So presumably, your sister had known about it, as that's how her son knew.

S: My sister, I gathered, knew about it later but hadn't attended the funeral. Of course, my sister was not on very good terms with my father. He rather disapproved of some of the things that she had been doing. So I was quite sad that I hadn't known of my father's death, as I certainly would have gone to the funeral had I known. However, I was puzzled, rather than sad, why I hadn't been informed.

R: Just left with the gratitude of all the books he had provided while you were bedridden in your young days?

S: Plus, I had a very good relationship with my father, and that continued after I had come back from India, for those two meetings. They were very good, positive meetings on the whole.

R: I remember last time we talked in this room, when I was requesting this interview and introducing the subject, we talked about when you were a trainee soldier, you received a message, that your family home, had just been hit by a flying bomb. You kindly 'walked' me

through the journey you made up the road to the house. You said you remember your father was standing at the kerb. The first thing you saw was just him, and then his bicycle; and then the next thing you saw was the house. It was very moving to hear that two years ago. I remember after you finished, you said, "that memory of 60 years ago was as vivid as if was just yesterday".⁸

S: Then there was my mother's death. I was in contact with my mother quite regularly, especially during the last years of her life. I visited her regularly. She came up to Padmaloka more than once. She visited me at Sukhavati. She was very struck by the image in the shrine room. Very struck. I remember that very well. Her death didn't come as a great surprise. She was 92.

R: So - you have inherited the genetics of longevity!

S: Who knows! My mother's two youngest brothers, they lived into their 90s. Anyway, concerning my mother, there's a little story I will tell you. She was in hospital, suffering from old age. She had had a fall, two years earlier, when she had broken her arm. I was due to see her in two weeks' time, again.

One morning at breakfast I suddenly felt, "I've got to go and see my mother. I can't wait for two weeks. I've got to go and see her." Very strong. So I said to Paramartha, who was with me, "Let's go and see my mother."

So we went to the hospital, and saw the nurse, and she asked me who I was, and I said I wanted to see Mrs Wiltshire, and that I was her son. She said, "I'm sorry to have to tell you, she died at two o'clock in the morning."

R: That was the first you heard? Again, you hadn't been informed? There had been no 'phone call to tell you?

S: That was the first I'd heard, yes. I can't quite remember, I think they may have phoned my nephew, because he lived around the corner from my mother, and he and his wife quite regularly looked after her and visited her. Of course the hospital didn't have my phone number. They would have had my nephew's number. So that was a bit of a shock, because even though my mother was so old, and I wasn't expecting her to live much longer, it comes as a bit of a shock.

So the nurse made me a cup of tea, and I asked, if I could see the body, and she said she'd arrange it. After half an hour, we went to the Chapel of Rest. I just sat with my mother's body for half an hour and we chanted the Vajrasattva mantra⁹ and of course I went to the funeral. Straight from the hospital I went to my nephew's place and saw him and his wife. However, I didn't feel any real sorrow till about three days later.

R: Was there a trigger for that sorrow three days later?

S: I don't think there was. Of course I had the same experience when I heard of the death of Dhardo Rimpoche. I didn't feel it emotionally, at the time, it didn't register emotionally, till three days later. 'It,' as it were, hit me.

R: It's like getting through these layers of reticence?

S: It could be.

R: There is something - and you can put me right as you are often misquoted, however I can't find a reference - I'm told that in a seminar before your mother died, you were asked whether you would feel grief, and your response at the time was "not grief, but sadness". I don't know if that's correct or not, but that seems to have accorded with your experience of sorrow.

S: Yes. I can't remember saying that. However, I certainly wasn't grief stricken.

R: So what you're saying is that Buddhist practice allows one to be like that?

S: When I hear of people being almost immobilized, unable to do anything, for a whole year, because they are so grief stricken, to me this really seems extraordinary.

R: In the Mahaparinibbana sutta, in the description of the Buddha's passing, the villagers 'were tearing their hair out, and the Arhats were sitting, unmoved by grief'. So it seems to me there is a spectrum of grief in the human condition. Is grief the right translation of the Pali here?

S: Yes, (soka), it is grief. That reminds me of something else, because I think in our family we were emotionally self-controlled, because a couple of years before my mother died I took her to see her best friend, who was in hospital. That best friend was someone my mother had known since my birth. This friend had had a daughter about the same time that my mother had me, and they'd been companions ever since, on and off, and been in contact right down to the present.

So I took my mother to see this friend, Margaret, in hospital. She was dying of cancer. I think she was 92, then. I took my mother to see her, and it was a goodbye visit really. She knew she was going to die. My mother was affected by that. She was very quiet, and she shed a few tears; however, there was no excessive grief. She was still quite self-controlled - she didn't break down or anything like that. So that seems to have been the family style.

R: The reticence! Feeling it, however it is under layers and it is undoubtedly felt.

S: It seems to me - for Buddhists have an opportunity at Buddhist funeral when rejoicing in the merits of the deceased - it is an opportunity to say something quite Dharmic, maybe even about the gift of the death as a reminder of our impermanence?

Why not? In India, especially, I've always thought at funerals, it's an extremely appropriate situation, with a deeply receptive audience. I spoke at my mother's funeral, rather to the surprise of the clergyman! I didn't express any grief. I simply spoke of some of my mother's positive qualities, and left it at that. Of course, I hadn't much time, anyway, however I certainly didn't feel like expressing any grief. Well, I didn't feel it in that sort of way. The funeral took place a week after my mother's death.

One thing I've also noticed, as I've officiated at and attended quite a few funerals, in this country, I've noticed that the point at which people's emotions are sparked off is when the coffin disappears in the crematorium, behind the curtain. Then sometimes people break down.

R: It's goodbye.

S: That is the time of goodbye. I remember at my mother's funeral, my sister and my niece, they broke down at that point. My sister, by nature, was pretty stoical.

R: Your sister didn't die too many years ago, did she?

S: Yes, and I was with my sister just a few hours before she died.

R: Quite a difference then, in comparison with the other deaths in your family.

S: Yes. She was in hospital and she was unconsciousness. However, when I went to see her, there were quite a few other people there. Her husband was there, her elder son was there with his wife, and two or three others. Her daughter and daughter's husband. They were all talking about where they would send her to convalesce; and I was thinking to myself, that's unreal, she's not going to recover.

And they were talking happily about where she would go to convalesce. So after a while, they all felt like having a coffee. So I said, "You all go off, and I'll just stay here with my sister." She had been unconscious, apparently, all this time. So they all went, and I just spoke to her softly, and she responded. She said no-one should worry about her - she was all right. So I said a few words, and that was that. They all came back and I left, and of course a few hours later, she died.

I was sorry. I was a bit more sorry, I think, about my sister's death than about my mother's.

Because I think my sister was a quite intelligent woman, but hadn't made much of her life; in a way she'd made a bit of a mess of her life, with several marriages and that sort of thing. So yes, I was a bit sorry. There was a lot of unfulfilled potential.

R: Again, that loss of potential, unfulfilled potential. That's sad. Again, you've referred to it with the world's loss of Terry Delamere. You've written, "He had so much to give."¹⁰ In the Tibetan tradition, from my knowledge of it, they recommend that the family and grieving relatives are removed before the actual death, to allow the person about to die, to be able to have the freedom to die, because the relatives are clinging. It seems a bit like your describing your sister's family; they were planning the future without facing the reality that she was dying, and there was some sort of clinging going on with that, to get a future for her.

S: That reminds me of something else. The last time I saw my mother alive she was in hospital and we had a little chat, and I said goodbye. As I left I got the distinct impression that she had let go. My mother, naturally, was quite attached to me; however, I could see then she'd let go; she was content, as it were, to die. She wasn't clinging on to me. That was quite marked. Of course, in the case of my sister, she was, more or less oblivious to the fact the relatives were there. She was in and out of consciousness, however it is perhaps significant that, when they'd all gone, and I just quietly spoke to her, she came out of it, and said she was all right, no-one should worry about her.

R: Are you happy now if we talk about Terry?

S: I'd just like to think whether there are any other relations who have died. I can't say that I've thought much about any of them. My mother's two younger brothers were still alive when I came back to England, and I saw something of them. I went to my uncle Jack's funeral. I visited my other uncle before he died. No, there wasn't even any sadness. I just remembered them quite affectionately. My uncle Jack especially, had been associated with my childhood. I'd seen quite a lot of him then.

R: So, again, it's flavoured with gratitude, as it was when you talked about Dhardo when he died, you were moved, but also very grateful for the friendship and what you'd learnt from him.

S: I can't say I was very moved in the case of my uncle Jack, however certainly the affection was there.

R: Sure. I think for me it's about being grateful for knowing these people, who have had an influence on our lives in one way or another.

S: I remembered him as a very kindly man. He was my sister's godfather.

R: Are there any other deaths in India other than Dhardo's, that you can remember?

S: Oh yes – I’ve written about some of them.

R: Dr Ambedkar obviously.

S: There was no personal connection. There is the old Raja, St. T. Dorji; I’ve written about his death I think, in 'Sign of the Golden Wheel'.¹¹

R: Other friends who have died?

S: Yes, among the Order Members. There's the death of Mahadhammaveera, who set fire to himself. That did move me. However, not because I knew him in recent years, although I'd ordained him. That did move me quite deeply. More it was the thought, "How heroic his action had been," that was the stronger feeling than the grief. I didn't really feel much grief, but such a strong feeling of how heroic he had been, not wanting to be a trouble to others, as he was old and infirm. That quite affected me.

R: That was, because normally for a Buddhist, to hear about another Buddhist who has committed suicide (or, as someone has suggested to me, 'self-murder,' which changes the language quite significantly), it strikes at the first precept of ahimsa, so I find it fascinating, the way you've described it, the 'heroic' nature of what he did.

S: I wrote that long poem about him, celebrating his death.¹²

R: There is a friend in England, who died two years ago, Shraddhavati, a longstanding friend. She hadn't been ordained very long, however you had known her many years.

S: Yes, many years.

R: So, how did her death affect you?

S: Yes, I was sorry; mainly because she had been ordained only two years before and she was doing so much for the Dharma, and she could have done so much more.

R: And again, it's unfulfilled potential.

S: And she wasn't very old – she was 60, which is not so old these days. She died from cancer.

R: What I'd like to do is contextualise your friendship with Terry, before we talk about the death itself. I've found a some quotations in Moving Against the Stream:

“The key to the nature of that friendship was perhaps to be found in the word affinity. The affinity was a spiritual, even a transcendental, one.” and, “He brings out what is best and

deepest in me”.¹³

Then, finally, right at the end of this beautiful memoir: “For two and a half days after Terry’s death I heard him calling me and felt him pulling me. I subsequently wrote in a notebook. ‘I could not bear the thought of his suffering under the wheels of the underground train, alone. Strong wish to follow. Kept seeing him standing on the edge of the platform. Waiting. Sense of waste.’”¹⁴

S: Yes, sense of waste.

R: Continuing with the quote, “Perhaps it was of my wish to follow Terry that at some point during those two and a half days I went to Kentish Town Underground Station, stood on the edge of the platform as Terry had done, and tried to imagine what it had been like for him as he waited for the train”.¹⁵

S: And of course I wrote a poem about it.

R: You attempted to describe Terry’s last hours in the poem, entitled, ‘For the record,’ and was addressed to him. The last line, “found what you have been seeking all your life.”¹⁶

S: That was his belief, or at least his hope. At the moment of death he would catch the experience that he’d had before, of the white light; which of course he had identified with the white light one may experience in the bardo according to the Tibetan texts. That was his hope. Whether he did or not, I don’t know.

R: Again continuing the quote in the Moving Against the Stream:

“Though I missed Terry and wept every day for six months, what he had called ‘this event’ was not an unrelieved tragedy. The day after his death I took the (meditation) class at Sukura as usual, and while meditating I heard these words. ‘Pain shall be transmuted into joy, suffering into ecstasy, when to the eternal life of Buddhahood we all awake.’”¹⁷

S: Yes, I did hear those words.

R: I find this extraordinary. Because often you have written about visionary things, however I can’t recall in anything else I’ve read where the words came to you like this.

S: Yes, that’s true. There was only once when I heard a voice, and I’ve written about that. (Note: reference not found.)

R: So, it’s unfulfilled potential.

S: That was my predominant feeling with Terry. So you've probably already realized, I've never shed so many tears for anybody as I did for him.

R: Yes; that's why I've picked that quote out. Again, it is flavoured, by this unfulfilled potential and the loss of this very deep friendship. It was extraordinarily special for you, this affinity?

S: Yes, affinity is the word. There's a bit of a tailpiece to this story of Terry. About three years ago I was contacted by his daughter.

R: I'd heard, and you were able to provide facts about his life she'd been denied by her mother. You get a great sense of his life from your writing, and so she will look back in gratitude that she has had this from your writing.

S: And that no doubt was my major experience of bereavement in my life, quite definitely.

R: I thought it might be. It is interesting how you were just able to carry on the day after and that it isn't stoicism.

S: To be quite frank, I rather despise those people who, because of something in their personal life, they just can't carry on doing their duty. I really believe in this. When I was still an adolescent, at the time of the abdication, in 1936 - do you remember? I was eleven: Even at that, time I quite consciously felt, "This is shameful, that the King can't get on with doing his duty as King; that he has to give up for the sake of this woman." I thought that a dreadful weakness. So, that has always been a strong feeling of mine, maybe influenced by my upbringing. My parents did have a strong sense of duty.

R: And I think in your lifetime it's become increasingly eroded, and increasingly rights have come in.

S: It's become an extreme.

R: This is a personal curiosity, this penultimate line in the poem, "When to the eternal life of Buddhahood, we will awake." How are you using the word 'eternal'? I am fascinated how you are using the word 'eternal' in Buddhism.

S: Well, it's not me who is using it - it came to me.

R: I remember! That is interesting. How do you see the use of it?

S: It's something out of time.

R: Ah! That's clarified it for me.

End of Interview

Notes:

1, 2 Moving Against the Stream pp 49-50

3, 4, 5, 6, ibid p78

7 Learning to Walk pp 143-146 or Thousand Petalled Lotus

8 I have reflected on Bhante's statement and wondered if his father being in the memory there was a sense that his whole childhood had gone, with the destruction of the family home?

9 When I discussed this with Paramatha sometime after the interview he vividly remembered that day when he sat with Bhante and his dead mother and was aware of a white light hovering over her as they chanted the Vajrasattva mantra.

10 Moving Against the Stream 'Epilogue'

11 Sign of the Golden Wheel pp 29-31

12 Caves of Bhaja, Sangharakshita, Complete Poems, 1941/94

13, 14, 15, 16, 17, Moving Against the Stream, 'Epilogue'