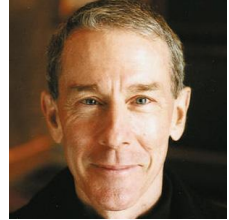


Reggie Ray on Dark Retreat

Tami Simon of Sounds True interviews Reginald Ray 12/6/10



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Tami Simon: You're listening to *Insights at the Edge*. Today my guest is Reggie Ray. Reggie is a teacher and scholar in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition with four decades of experience with the practice of meditation. He's the founder and spiritual director of Dharma Ocean and an author whose writings include *Touching Enlightenment*, *Indestructible Truth*, and *Secret of the Vajra World*, as well as several audio programs including *Your Breathing Body* and *Meditating with the Body*. In the spirit of transparency with our listeners, Reggie is also a teacher with whom I've studied closely for the past eight years.

In this episode, Reggie and I spoke about his recent experiences in dark retreat as well as the true goal of meditation and Reggie's view of the meaning of spiritual practice. Here's my conversation with Reggie Ray:

TS: So Reggie, you've just come back from being on a dark retreat. What does it mean to be on a dark retreat?

Reggie Ray: Darkness practice is something taught in Tibetan Buddhism, but also practiced in other traditions, for example, in Chinese Taoism and some of the more esoteric, forest traditions of Buddhism. But maybe in the beginning, we should talk a little about: What is the ultimate goal of meditation? And within that framework, how does darkness practice really serve us?

I think, within the Buddhist traditions and particularly within the meditative tradition that the purpose of meditation is to help us make a transition in life, beginning, on the one hand, with us being locked up in our habitual patterns, and in the pettiness, really, of our whole self-maintenance project. To be a human in the ordinary sense is to be looking for comfort and survival and to ward off whatever pain there may be

out there. In the service of that project, we do all kinds of things. We construct this idea of a self-identity that we're always trying to promote and protect, we use everything in our environment to try to feed our desire for pleasure, and really, we're fending off an awful lot of what life brings to us, pushing it away and trying to avoid it. The purpose of meditation is to help us dismantle our armor and the self-protection that we put around ourselves so that we can experience our lives in a much more open and naked way—much deeper, much faster, much fuller—so that we can develop in ourselves, really, a sense of freedom from this ego prison, and not only freedom, but love for what is, and joy—joy in being alive.

Now you might say, “Why wouldn't it be enough simply to try to maintain ourselves and try to ward off pain and get pleasure?” The answer is that within us, always the deepest longing of our soul is to experience our life fully and without reservation. We have, within ourselves, a kind of intuition that everything in our life is meaningful, and everything in our life is to be loved, and everything in our life is an opportunity for expansiveness and joy. This very deep longing is not served hardly at all by the modern world, and yet it's still there. So many people that I meet are talking about the tremendous conflicts they have between the way they live and their deepest inspiration and longing as humans.

The purpose of meditation, really, is to help us dismantle the armor so we can live fully. Within that, darkness practice has a very unique role to play, because darkness is the sort of quintessential meditation practice. It's the essence of meditation. It's the highest and most stripped down and most naked form of meditation you could ever do.

TS: What are you doing in the darkness? Are you doing a practice? Are you just sitting in the darkness?

RR: Well, most meditation practice gives you something to do: follow your breath, do your mantra, carry out some kind of visualization, chant something, whatever. A lot of times, we confuse that relative method with the goal of meditation. The goal of meditation is not the practices, themselves, but it's the state of openness that they can lead to. The interesting thing about darkness practice is there's nothing to do. You are simply stuck in a situation—and I say “stuck” because you commit yourself to a certain period of time, (In my case, it's usually a month each year.) and you go in, you turn the lights off, and there you are. It's you and it's the darkness, and there's really nothing to do. If you decide that you want to anaesthetize yourself by going for a walk, it's not available. If you decide you want to pick up a book and read it, or turn on the TV, to distract ourselves from our own experience and our own life, it's not available. So the only

practice in the darkness is simply to sit and open, sit and open and let go, let go, let go of whatever self-protective device you happen to come up with.

In the darkness, what you're doing is: you start thinking, you come back to your body, you come back to the feeling of your body, you come back to the experience of the darkness. And then you start thinking again, and you start spinning out, and then you bring yourself back. This is the practice.

It's interesting that if people are put into solitary confinement without any technique, they go insane over a period of time. On the other hand, a trained meditator, being in a space by themselves for weeks, actually grows hugely as a person. The technique is you don't follow your thinking process. You simply bring yourself back, over and over, to the literal experience of being in your body, breathing, your heart beating, and your experience of the darkness all around you, which is a nonverbal, nonconceptual, totally literal experience.

TS: What, from your experience, happens to your brain, to your mind by being in the darkness for that long?

RR: Well, I would say there are two things that happen. One is that your mind opens in a very unique kind of way. You know, when we meditate, we often discover moments of stillness, of peace, and we may feel a kind of impending sense of freedom. In the darkness, those experiences become much more unconditional, meaning that they become more limitless. Initially, in the darkness, it's as if your mind had walls, and it's as if somebody takes down all the walls. There is no boundary. There's a tremendous sense of joy that almost becomes frantic. You feel such deep happiness that such an experience is possible, and you can discover yourself as truly being a person for whom there are no boundaries and no limits.

TS: You said there were two things. Did you tell me both of them?

RR: No. I was specifically emphasizing the first one because of what I'm about to talk about. (laughs)

Experiencing the kind of freedom I'm talking about is really only step number one in the spiritual process. It's only step number one because, if you experience that (Which you will do in the first few days of darkness practice, or the first week.) if you get up and walk out of the darkness retreat at that point, you're going to come back into your ordinary life, and all of the habitual patterns we've grown up with are going

to be reactivated, and we're going to find ourselves living back in our small world. We're going to have the benefit of knowing that the freedom is there, but we're not going to be tasting.

So the second step on the spiritual journey, at least according to the Tantric tradition, is that we have to dismantle the patterns of pettiness that are activated when we're in our ordinary life. What happens in the darkness is, once the mind really starts opening up, you start meeting some interesting people. These people are what I call undeveloped parts of ourselves. They're what Jung called complexes. They are little bundles of conditioned response, that have developed in relationship to all kinds of situations throughout our whole life going back to probably when we were in the womb.

In my case, I go into dark retreat, and the initial few days are very interesting, but as I stick with it, I begin to encounter emotional responses that are very limited and very petty, and they arise in relationship to specific situations. I'll give you an example. As children, all of us have this experience of being very little and having these big people in our environment. The problem with the big people is, in our estimation, they were supposed to take care of us, and they had the power to resolve things that we couldn't resolve—pain, hunger, fear, whatever—and they often didn't do it. That experience is in us, and amazingly enough, as we discover through darkness practice, that experience of people who are bigger than us, and who could help us, but won't do it, and the resultant response of resentment and anger and even rage, is activated all the time in our lives. It comes up all the time in relation to anybody we perceive as big. The problem with that response coming up is that we shut down. We shut down, and we actually live in the emotional state of that two year old. That's how constricted our world can become.

In my case, I've identified about sixty-five different what I call inferior personalities—inferior not in the sense of being bad, but just limited—and different situations in my life activate them. That's what we call *samsara*: that we live from one limited state to the other, going from one to the other, depending on which external situation is going on out there. Do we feel betrayed? Do we feel undermined? Do we feel undernourished? Do we feel abused? Whatever it may be, we never get out. That's what the prison is: It's the kaleidoscope of these inferior parts of ourselves.

What happens in darkness practice is something will come up, and the interesting thing about darkness is, when they come up, they really come up! They take over the field of consciousness, and I become the two year old. Usually in life when that starts happening, we go call a friend, or turn on TV, or eat some chocolate, or have a drink, or we'll get in the car and go shopping, but in the darkness, there are no

breaks. In other words, when it comes up and takes over the field of consciousness, there's nothing you can do about it. You're stuck! Amazingly enough, that's how you resolve that person: by becoming that person and living through the experience that person had from the beginning to the end, and sometimes it takes a long time—six hours, twelve hours, three days later it comes back—but that's how you resolve karma, by completing the experience that got started, but because of our infantile and weak ego structure, we couldn't do it at that time, and now here we are and that's what we're doing!

Thich Nhat Hanh says that eventually, we become stars, and then we become galaxies. Why stop here? Why not keep going? Why not fulfill the whole thing?

TS: Wonderful. I've been speaking with Reggie Ray. He's the author of the Sounds True book *Touching Enlightenment: Finding Realization in the Body*, as well as a twenty-disc series that we've created called *Your Breathing Body*. There is a set of ten CDs of beginning meditation practices, and then more advanced practices in volume two.