Book Review of Jim Lowrey *Taming Untameable Beings*

Review by Robert Alan Paul, Ph.D.

"There's a Tibetan lama coming to town, would you like to see him?"

Zanto barely knew what a lama was, but he said "Sure, why not?"

Remember—or imagine—a time before Buddhism and Buddhist monks were commonplace in our Western world. Now they are in the news, on TV, at universities, giving talks, meditation programs. Remember—or imagine—a time when meditation was weird, when yogi referred to a bear or a Berra. Now it is being taught in elementary schools under the name of mindfulness. Or a time when you might be lucky to see one or two books on Buddhism at the bookstore, perhaps an Alan Watts or D.T. Suzuki. Now there are dozens, or more.

Recall a time when it was unusual to see bearded, long-haired and drugged-out hippies roaming the earth—confused, neurotic, seeking spirituality, making free love, living in communes. A time when off the grid was easy—unless it was winter in Colorado.

This is the story about the author—Jim Lowrey—his friends, acquaintances and their lama—their guru Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche. Rinpoche was one of the first Tibetan lamas to arrive in America. He was renowned as a mahasidda—a great accomplished one—by his Tibetan teachers and lineage holders, including the Dalai Lama. He was also known as an alcoholic womanizer—somewhat bizarre for our understanding of what a great accomplished Buddhist guru might be. He wore no robes and didn't look the part of a monk that we expected. That is a central part of the story.

It starts with background on the author's life in 1968, and focuses mostly on the time from then until 1973, with occasional flash-forwards. The first part of the book—up until my opening quote—is Lowrey's life of running away—away from his southern 'normalcy', away from his university ROTC, and away from the first draft lottery in 1969. I remember my number was 327, so I was safe. Jim's was 87 so he decided to run. Karma. And where did he go? Why, San Francisco, of course!

There he connected with several people, and with others from his past and future they formed a commune that became 'the pygmies'. It was so-named when one of them was high on dope or LSD and thought that everything and everybody was really small. The name stuck. The pygmies became the first to live on 'the land' in Colorado that started as the Rocky Mountain Dharma Centre (RMDC) and later became Shambhala Mountain Centre. It is a couple hours into the mountains outside Boulder, Colorado where Rinpoche had his central headquarters for most of the first years, before moving to Halifax, Nova Scotia.

The book is a good read. It is short, 233 pages of 30 short chapters, each with a somewhat self-contained story within the context of this autobiography-history. There is the usual sex and drugs, but it is not glorified. Rather, it is seen for what it was (as far as I remember, at least)—a symptom and manifestation of confusion, openness, spiritual seeking and psychological angst. Rinpoche spent a considerable amount of his time and teachings trying to get his male students to clean up their act—to get a shave, haircut and three-piece suit—and all his students to stop smoking dope and dropping acid. He tried to

transform the neuroses of his students to a semblance of sanity and awakeness. It worked for many of us.

But the book is not a rambling autobiography of the author's hippie days. It is a meticulously researched journalistic triumph that recreates the conversations, stories, personal perspectives, and very personal experiences of Rinpoche's first American students—including his first personal meditation instructions to them. Many of the first interviews were felt by the students as lightning bolts from the blue. Their minds stopped. They experienced the first glimpse of open space in their previously claustrophobic lives. This is their very intimate story, told by them to the author, who culled and edited hundreds of hours of recorded recollections.

The first half of the book is largely without extensive and explicit Buddhist dharma teachings, but there is much more in the second half, and implicit teachings throughout the book. As the book progresses, the opening chapter quotes get longer, and selections from talks and readings are integrated into the storyline. But first, we must become familiar with the students, the settings, and Rinpoche. There is tragedy, disappointment, joy, love, sadness. And always seeking. That is something that apparently Rinpoche thoroughly appreciated in these early students: no matter how messed up they were, no matter how they underappreciated decorum and personal hygiene, they were always curious about anything that could help them clean their minds—even as they clung to their hippie, counterculture identities.

According to Buddhism, we need to know what the world is really like so that we can adapt our attitude to accept it. In that way, we can avoid psychological suffering that comes over and above any real pain that may happen. Thus, truth sets us free. The Buddhist three marks of existence—what things are like—is impermanence, pain and egolessness. The first two of these are self-descriptive, while the last indicates that our cranked-up identity, our storyline of who we think we are or want to be, has no substance. Freedom comes from recognizing that and allowing ourselves to be who we really are. One of the major themes of the book, as far as I can see, is a demonstration of the three marks in the lives of the pygmies and other early students of Rinpoche during this time, as Rinpoche teaches those and other basic views.

At some point, after the pygmies and others connected with Rinpoche as their teacher, their devotion to him expanded. He was seen as someone who exemplified sanity in all his actions—no matter how bizarre they may seem. He cut through their own trips with his own simple, ordinary being. The last part of the book oozes devotion.

There are several books about Rinpoche, who also wrote many, but this has a unique perspective. This is not a book only for those who knew him—although I certainly recommend it for them. It is not a book about the drug culture of the late 60s and early 70s—although it has some of that. It is not a Buddhist dharma book—although it has many significant teachings, both direct from the teacher and as experiences by his students. I would not recommend it for someone who knows nothing about Buddhism and wants to find out. Its not that kind of book.

I also imagine that responses to this book might vary—it may be very personal, because the book is a very personal, heartfelt and endearing self-examination of the author's and other students' states of mind over a very tumultuous period and journey. It is somewhat of a coming of age story for a generation, with all the heartache and cleansing that entails. I wholeheartedly recommend it.