

Surfing the Waves of Samsara

The temporal and spiritual director of the Shambhala community says it can be done – the mixing of your spiritual practice and your work, in a fast-paced city such as Singapore

■ JASON CHIEW Photos: NICKY LOH

SAKYONG MIPHAM is the head of the Shambhala Buddhist lineage, a spiritual and family lineage that descends through his family, the Mukpo clan. This tradition emphasizes the basic goodness of all beings and teaches the art of courageous 'warriorship' based on wisdom and compassion. The Sakyong (a Tibetan honorific meaning "earth protector"; protecting the earth of our innate sanity) is the dharma heir of his father, the late Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who was instrumental in bringing Buddhism and Shambhala to the West.

Shambhala Buddhism is a mix of ancient Tibetan Buddhist traditions and Western culture and mentality. At about three decades old, it's a relatively new movement. But it has grown in popularity, with 150 Shambhala centres worldwide, including its international headquarters in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Shambhala Buddhism, with its view that enlightenment isn't tied to any religion or doctrine, has attracted followers of all ages, from every culture, faith and background.

When the Sakyong was in Singapore for public teachings and talks recently, I caught up with him where he shared his thoughts on his latest book, *Ruling Your World*, his relationship with his father and the new chapter of his life as a married man.





Vaidurya: Your most recent book *Ruling Your World* basically says that spiritual development and pursuing worldly success is a false dichotomy. It may seem like a radical statement to people who have given up worldly life to join the Sangha community. What do you say to that?

Saykong Mipham Rinpoche: I think that enlightenment is inherent in everyone and it is a matter of how you bring that out. And how you bring that out is according to your view of meditation practice. So really when we talk about the two ideal ways to behave and one is like stepping into the world. I think one of the principles about stepping back and being a monastic is simplification; you can focus on what's more important. Because for some people it's difficult; there's the family and the job. And then there's another aspect which is an individual who is engaged in the world. Within the lineage of Shambhala, the first king of Shambhala, Dewa Jampa asked the Buddha, "I am the ruler of a country and have a family, how do I engage in the world and still practice your teachings?" Am I excluded from your teachings?" The Buddha replied, "Not at all, you can include them."

But the person has to be strong in terms of their views, in how they regard things and not to be overly taken away by desire, jealousy and all these aspects. So I don't think it is necessarily

a dichotomy. In certain cultures, you have a secular tradition that protects the spiritual tradition. As you know in Tibet, there have been rulers that have been both. Obviously, there's the Dalai Lama and rulers in Eastern Tibet. Can the system become corrupt? Of course, in any case that depends on the person and what they are able to do. And I think one thing that I'm thinking now is that in this particular time, we don't have that much choice to remove ourselves from the world. And even myself, having been to Tibet and to India, I've talked to lamas and rinpoches on keeping the purity of the monastic tradition, they all say it is very difficult. So the Dharma has to be 'of the now'. And there used to be a tradition of how the dharma was incorporated into family life. Spiritual success and secular success depends upon these Buddhist principles. And that is what we have to understand and I think it has become a little bit hidden in that people think that they are two different things. Because I have the opportunity to meet different people — whether they are nomads in Tibet or very successful business people and leaders, what I've discovered is that fundamentally it comes down to the people's spirit. If the mind is happy, the spirit is happy, then they feel that they are living a good life. If they are not, no matter how much material stuff they have, they are still not going to be happy.

Vaidurya: Do you see your book as a kind of bait targeted mainly to a Western audience leading materialistic lives that would eventually lead them to a more spiritual path?

Saykong Mipham Rinpoche: You can look at it from that point of view, because I think people like the title of the book. People have told me the title 'Ruling Your World' does not sound very Buddhist; it sounds aggressive etc., and actually the way you can rule your world and be engaged in your world is by using compassion, because compassion is very strong. Most people do it (ruling your own world) through aggression. What I am saying is that I know Buddhist practitioners leaders who are very successful, very engaged but they do it through engaging in these very positive methods. They are happier people than people who do it through aggression. And you need examples like that, because nobody wants to be unsuccessful. The thing is that how are you successful? And if you say that you are successful through aggression, do you really consider that successful because you are not happy, what you are doing is unstable. So if you are aggressive with other people, they don't really want to be around you, they don't want to work for you. You become unhappy with yourself, you create negative thoughts in your mind. So really it is not that much of a

success. Maybe on the one hand you could say this person is making lots of money, but for what? And if he looks at the other point of view, I think that's the catch. When they do that then they do go deeper in terms of the spiritual path.

When I told the publishers that this is going to be the title of the book, they said they like that and thought that it will be some secret Buddhist teaching for success; well to a certain degree, but relying on the same Buddhist principles.

Vaidurya: The word 'confidence' appears in your book very often — "confidence of contentment, confidence of equanimity, confidence of wisdom". Do you see practitioners lacking in confidence?

Saykong Mipham Rinpoche: This is confidence as opposed to fear. When people get up, they are fearful of what is going to happen. They are fearful of dealing with their own mind; they are fearful that their compassion is not going to work; they are fearful of all kinds of things and confidence is the action. It is the result; it can also be the root. After you study a long text about compassion, you obtain the view of why compassion and selflessness is a good idea then you meditate on it to get used to the idea. But you still need courage and confidence to do it. And most people get stuck right there. They intellectually understand



and they think that it is a good idea but they never act on it. And what people want to know is transformation. They want to see result and I am saying you can sit as long as you want but unless you get confident and internalize it and do it, there is not going to be much of a result. So it takes confidence and it takes courage and I think that courage then can overcome the fear. And I think we're living in a fear-dominated, stressful culture.

Vaidurya: *Your book and many of your talks speak about discovering one's basic goodness to bring forth wisdom and compassion to become a "Sakyong" – a Tibetan honorific meaning "earth protector". Here you may not be referring literally to Planet Earth. But if we were to interpret this in the literal sense, how do you relate this in the face of today's ever increasing natural calamities on Planet Earth?*

Saykong Mipham Rinpoche: Now, the way the climate is coming about is because people believe that aggression is going to solve something. And then really if you think about it, in any kind of

war, any kind of disaster, any kind of bad choice starts from an executive position who has fear or a political leader who is not sure and then you know, bad things happen; things are interdependent. It is like Al Gore's movie with the environment. There are things physically we can do but right now I feel it is a leadership issue and then it comes to individual's building of their own confidence.

In Buddhist sayings, one of the aspects in the human realms is that there is going to be war. There is going to be disasters and experiences of the karmic situation of living together on the surface of this floating thing in space that's got volcanoes underneath it and they are unstable. So that's the quality of what our natural environment is but that does not mean we cannot practise compassion on it. If we are goal-oriented, it also means that it is a journey. It does not mean that if you practise Buddhism and meditation, you are going to get better parking spots and everything. But what it means is that as you go along, what approach are you going to take? If you are coming from a fatalistic viewpoint, then you think nothing is going to work out. It makes living life right now very difficult. But if you say, "it is actually part of the spiritual journey and part of being a Buddhist and so forth", it is actually saying, "right now we do what we can". And our actions right now have the ability to change the course of our future. There are certain karmic situations, what we call latent karma — where the actions have happened before and the results of those actions are going to show up right now. And you have karma right now which is undecided and how you decide right now will affect the future. And just as the avian flu is caused by a collective latent karma, if you promote an individual who wants to do good things for the environment, you will also come up with an individual who is nurtured to come up with a cure. That effectively means another less illness.

Vaidurya: *In Shambhala training, there are activities such as Japanese archery, calligraphy, flower arrangement and tea ceremonies which are beyond the traditional Buddhist activities. What*

are the benefits and the purpose of having such training?

Saykong Mipham Rinpoche: I think it's the ability to put mindfulness and awareness into action. And if you put mindfulness and awareness into action, it has a process of developing the individual. I would think it makes you more self-aware and aware of what others are doing and what their own actions are. A lot of people are unaware of their own actions. And at this particular time, I noticed in modern culture, we don't have a lot of activities that we can really learn those things. It is like some kind of a bridge or a mindfulness culture, because right now we are studying Buddhism and meditation, but there are very few activities that you can engage. And right now you have the busy work world, so I think we need some sort of interim activities. From what I see personally, some people are very busy, so sometimes they go from work right to meditation, sometimes it is too extreme. They need some intermediate kind of environment and also I think it makes people's lives richer and makes them appreciate. We live in a world where people want to do things quicker and faster to appreciate but sometimes if you just slow them down a little bit and they would appreciate more.

Vaidurya: *You've mentioned that of the real experienced masters that you studied with, foremost in your mind is your father, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Can you tell us more about your father-son relationship and if there were any special moments with him that were particularly enlightening for you?*

Saykong Mipham Rinpoche: One of the strongest things in our relationship, although we had a student-teacher relationship, we were very good friends and enjoyed spending time together. And I saw how he worked with people and we did retreats together. When I was doing a four to five months retreat in a house where he had me do some practices, at a certain point, I was having difficulty in a certain kind of practice and when I got up

in the morning, he called me over the phone. This was the only time he called during that period and said, "Are you having difficulties?"

So then we talked about my difficulties in the practices and things like that and about the retreat and how to overcome my difficulty. That call came at a very pivotal point that allowed me to go further.

In this particular time, we don't have that much choice to remove ourselves from the world. And even myself, having been to Tibet and to India, I've talked to lamas and rinpoches on keeping the purity of the monastic tradition, they all say it is very difficult. So the Dharma has to be 'of the now'. And there used to be a tradition of how the dharma was incorporated into family life.

Vaidurya: *How did your father's death affect you?*

Saykong Mipham Rinpoche: It was very devastating in the sense that I had lost one of the most if not the most important person in my life. Before his death he was sick and his health was kind of going up and down because of his previous bad car accident. But it was funny in the sense that he was only 47 or 48 and he knew (about

his death) a few years before. Because when he was training me he had me do more and more teachings and ceremonies and he was sending me to many places doing many things and he was telling me that, "you will have to do everything (yourself) pretty soon." In retrospect, I think one of the things is that he represented so much to me and at the same time I felt that I have received so much. Emotionally, it was a very sad and difficult time. After he passed away, we did all the important ceremonies and all the important teachers came and it felt like a very intense time. I felt like I needed to do more retreats and meditation. That's when I went to study with Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche.

Vaidurya: *In June last year you got married to Tibetan Princess Tseyang Palmo in what was dubbed a Buddhist royal wedding. Could you share with us the essence of partnership and its role on the path to awakening?*

Saykong Mipham Rinpoche: I think that the inspiration with this marriage is that we are both practitioners and that we both wanted to come together with our lives, not only for ourselves but naturally for people and I think that is a very strong benefit. I think a lot of times people think of marriage or partnership as being separate from your path and I think here, especially within the Tibetan tradition, you have a tradition that you have a partner and you walk together and I think one of the main things is having a common view, a common understanding of what we are doing, especially for somebody like me, it is important for somebody who understood that. And then every aspect of your life is trying to make it part of the path. I think if you are trying to be a real practitioner, you will have to do it everywhere. You can't just do it in one area. So I think that's really a kind of a theme.

As we know, usually the family can be the most difficult people to deal with or the most wonderful people to deal with. It is really an extreme. So because of its closeness, a lot of buttons get pushed. From my point of view it's a great challenge and also with myself dealing with a lot of people, there's a lot of difficulty in dealing

with a partner and dealing with other people.

You can't just escape home and hide and I think it's good because you have to practice what you are saying at home. And I think in our situation, because my wife has from a very young age been a practitioner, we have a routine. Every morning when we get up, we practice for several hours. I mean it's part of the whole custom. Because in modern culture some people say, I'm not going to do that.

Vaidurya: *What are some of the moments in your life that you are most thankful for?*

Saykong Mipham Rinpoche: I would say probably spiritually, after my father passed away, Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche took me in as one of his family members, because there had been a relationship between him and my father, where it is agreed that if one passed away sooner, then the other would help finish the work. For me, in terms of what I was doing, it was really important. My wife is another blessing that I am grateful for.

Vaidurya: *This is your third visit to Singapore, and through your observation from your talks, what message can you give Singaporeans?*

Saykong Mipham Rinpoche: I think that it can be done—the mixing. The main question I get is that because of the speed of the city and the work load of the city, that you can't mix your practice and your work. And the other thing I noticed is that it is important for people to have a sustained path because from my last visit, lots of people asked me about their own practices and I think that there was a lot of mixing and matching and so I think people should have a path laid out for themselves.

Singapore is at a very interesting position because it is at the cusp of the East and West. What's happening in the West is that people are beginning to discover the benefits of spirituality in modern and business life. And in Singapore, it is already here and so Singaporeans shouldn't lose the opportunity. ㊦