

## Rainbows in the Sky

My heart leaps up when I behold  
A rainbow in the sky:  
So was it when my life began;  
So is it now I am a man;  
So be it when I shall grow old,  
Or let me die!

So wrote Wordsworth in 1802. More than two hundred years later my heart, too, leaps up when I see a rainbow, as does the heart of anyone who is capable of responding to the beauties of the natural world, and especially to its various colours. Indeed, rainbows have marked some of the most important events of my life, which is why I gave the first volume of my memoirs the title *The Rainbow Road from Tooting Broadway to Kalimpong*. I must admit, though, that I saw my first rainbows not in the sky but in two works of art. One of these was Millais's *The Blind Girl*, and the other was one of the two versions of Holman Hunt's *The Scapgoat*, both of which have been familiar to me since my childhood. I saw my next rainbow in the film *Fantasia*, which I had the opportunity of seeing in Singapore towards the end of the war. In this pioneering film, Walt Disney blended animated imagery with well-known pieces of classical music. I remember in particular the images that accompanied Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*. The storm is over, the sky clears, and across the screen there shoots the goddess Iris, trailing behind her a brilliant rainbow.

Many years later, when I took up the practice of the Green Tārā sādhanā, I remembered Iris and her rainbow as I visualized the offering goddesses emerging from the crown of my head and making offerings to the bodhisattvas in the sky. There were seven such goddesses, each of whom trailed a rainbow behind her as she rose into the air holding her offering. Pleased with the offerings, the bodhisattvas sent down blessings. The offering goddesses and their rainbows were not always easy to imagine, and I was glad to be able to see a real rainbow from time to time to refresh my memory. They were of varying degrees of proximity and brilliance. The most memorable in this respect was a rainbow I saw in Auckland in 1997. Auckland is a city well known for its variable weather. Standing in front of the men's community one afternoon after a passing shower, I saw the biggest and brightest rainbow I had ever seen. It rose majestically from immediately behind the houses on the other side of the road, its arc seeming to enclose half the sky. The colours of its unusually broad bands were particularly vivid and looked both solid and diaphanous.

Big and bright as was the rainbow I saw in Auckland, this was not the rainbow after which my first volume of memoirs was named. It was named after a whole series of rainbows I had encountered more than fifty years earlier. I was then staying in a hill station in east Punjab and it was there that I decided to go forth from the world as a homeless wanderer as the Buddha and his disciples had done. With me was my friend Satyapriya, whom I had met in Singapore. On the morning of 18 August 1947, therefore, we changed our civilian clothes for the traditional saffron of the ascetic and set out on foot for the plains. In the words of *The Rainbow Road*: 'As we left Kausali it was raining, but as in the course of our descent we emerged from the clouds into the bright sunshine below, we saw arching the road, at intervals of a few dozen yards, not only a single but double and triple rainbows. Every time we turned a bend we found more rainbows waiting for us. We passed through them as though through the multi-coloured arcades of some celestial palace. Against the background of bright

sunshine, jewel-like glittering drops, and hills of the freshest and most vivid green, this plethora of delicate seven-hued bows seemed like the epiphany of another world.' Thus the rainbow became for me a symbol of the spiritual path, the track of which I have followed, in one way or another, all my life.

The symbolism of the rainbow, and of its individual colours, of course varies from culture to culture and religion to religion. Green, for example, is the colour of Islam, and I remember that the little village mosques I passed in the course of my visit to Malaysia were all painted bright green. Similarly, I have seen Muslim fakirs who wore green in much the same way that the Hindu sadhus wore saffron. When *The Rainbow Road* came to be translated into Spanish, I was told that the title would have to be changed, because the rainbow, in the United States and elsewhere, was the symbol of the gay rights movement. I was able to verify this when I visited San Francisco. One day a friend took me for a walk from the Mission district, where I was staying, through the Castro, and I saw scores of small rainbow flags fluttering from windows and balconies. The flags indicated, so my friend explained, that a gay household lived there.

Gaily they fluttered in the sunshine, those little flags, and it was good that they should do so. The gay rights movement had made some progress in the US though in other parts of the world homosexuals were being persecuted and even killed. I had not aligned myself with the gay rights movement, but I sympathized with its aims and in my own way had done my best to promote them. When I founded the FWBO in 1967 I made it clear that it was open to all, irrespective of gender, race, nationality and sexual orientation, and I rejoiced that in that same year consensual sex between adult men was decriminalized in the UK. Much as I sympathized with the gay rights movement, however, I was far from identifying the rainbow with any socio-political movement. For me the rainbow symbolized not just the spiritual path but spirituality itself, especially when that spirituality reflected or was touched by something even higher. Thus, in the Buddhist art of Tibet rainbows emanate from saints and yogis as well as from stupas. Some highly spiritual beings, indeed, are made entirely of rainbows. This is especially the case with Padmasambhava, who is known as the Rainbow-Bodied One.

Padmasambhava came into my life the first time I visited the Tamang Buddhist Gompa in Darjeeling. This must have been in the early 1950s, shortly after I settled in Kalimpong. But great as was the impression made on me by the lifelike image in the gompa, it was not until October 1962 that my relationship with the Precious Guru was ritually confirmed, when I received in Kalimpong the Padmasambhava initiation from Kachu Rinpoche, the abbot of Pema Yangtse Gompa in western Sikkim. In the course of the two-day initiation he explained to me how I was to meditate on Padmasambhava and gave me the name of Urgyen, this being the Tibetan form of Uddiyana, a part of north-west India associated with the early life of the Great Guru. Kachu Rinpoche also explained how I was to do the Going for Refuge and Prostration Practice with Padmasambhava as the object of refuge. This practice I did regularly until my departure to the UK in 1964, by which time I had done it a total of 20,000 times – not a lot by Tibetan Buddhist standards. After the founding of the FWBO/Tiratna in 1967 I taught the practice to a number of Order members, some of whom have in turn taught it to others. Thus, Padmasambhava has been present in the life of the Order from the very beginning and he continues to be in it and part of it to the present day.

Recently I have been pained and surprised to learn that some Order members believe that Padmasambhava has been sidelined, and this some of them connect with a narrowing of the

movement, and in particular, with my remark about the re-founding of the Order. On the contrary, Padmasambhava is still very much alive in my own life and in the life of the Order, and his Day is still widely celebrated at our centres. His image stands on my shrine, together with the four-armed Avalokiteśvara and the photo of Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche, at whose behest Kachu Rimpoche gave me the Padmasambhava initiation. As for the alleged narrowing, when I spoke of a re-founding of the Order, what I had in mind was a reaffirmation of the principles and ideals for which we stand and for which we have stood from the beginning. If one can speak of a re-founding at all it can only be in the sense of making the original foundation stronger.

Shortly after my return to the UK, I gave a talk at the invitation of the then Brighton Buddhist Society. What I spoke about I no longer remember, but it must have been one or another aspect of the Dharma. After the talk an elderly woman approached me. She had seen a strange figure standing behind me while I spoke, she said, and she wanted to know who the figure was. I naturally asked her to describe the figure. He was wearing a kind of red cloak, she said, and a strangely shaped hat. What was more, he was neither Chinese nor Indian but something in between. From what the woman told me, it was evident that the figure that she had seen standing behind me was none other than the one I had seen in the Tamang Buddhist Gomba in Darjeeling all those years before. Since I visited Brighton regularly, Violet, as she was called, became a friend and a few years later I was able to see her and chat with her after her death, as I have related in detail elsewhere.

The last rainbow of significance in my life appeared on my ninetieth birthday, which was celebrated at Adhithana and throughout the movement. In the afternoon I was driven from the Annexe where I lived to the marquee in which four hundred or more Order members were waiting to receive me. It was raining heavily at the time, and there was a deep rumble of thunder. I was later told that at that time a rainbow of particular brightness had appeared over Adhithana, including the Annexe. I did not see the rainbow myself as I was inside the marquee listening to the speeches, but even hearing about it made my heart leap up.

Sangharakshita  
Adhithana  
15/1/2018 - 22/1/2018