

*On Tibetan Buddhism,
Mantras, and Drugs*



INTERVIEWS WITH
Allen Ginsberg

By Paul Lobo Portugés

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Preface

These conversations took place at Naropa Institute in the summer of 1976. Ginsberg had asked me to help him sort out some of his notebooks, poems, and other writings. In exchange, I asked him if we could record our conversations about Buddhism, Mantras, William Blake, and drugs which I planned to use as the basis of research for my book *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*. Some of our conversations also appeared (in edited versions) in the *Boston University Journal* (1977), *Writers In East-West Encounters: New Cultural Bearings* (edited by Guy Amirthanayagam, (1982), and *Allen Ginsberg: Spontaneous Mind* (edited by David Carter, 2001).

Paul Lobo Portugés

On Tibetan Buddhism

Paul Portugés (P.P.): *It seems that a lot of contemporary poetry struggles to ground itself in the bare facts of reality, but it's so hard to do—to clamp the mind down on the quotidian American world.*

A.G.: The difficulty is in the thinking. You're getting down to the bare facts of reality, but it's *not* the bare facts of reality—it's the bare facts of your own perceptions of reality. You can paint your perceptions, like the whole point of the war poetry I wrote: it wasn't about the war, it was about television and radio—war as seen, as represented on television, radio, and newspapers. I wasn't faking the subject (except in a few spots) because I was recording my reaction to the *electronic war*, the electronic images of war. It would have been a fake to enter into the battle imaginatively, actually there in the mid (which I do a couple of times in a line like “sensitive yellow boy by a muddy wall”), but mostly it's just a recording of the headlines or the TV thing. There's a journal note I had on Kennedy's death in a book called *Poetry and Power*. It's just a journal fragment, recording the imagery of the television screen recording his death, rather than as if I were in Dallas. I was in San Francisco looking at the TV. His death was being recorded on the blips of the screen, in a helicopter rising into the dot screen of television. In other words, it's not reporting on reality—unless you want to define reality as *what we see*, purely subjective. But, we *can* know what we see. So that makes it easy: all you have to do is report what you actually

see—not mind thoughts about what you see, but what you see directly, or hear directly. That makes it like rolling off a log. You don't have to delve and analyze for reality. All you have to do is be aware of what you just saw.

P.P.: *Sounds somewhat like the Tibetan sitting practices, the samatha and visasyana meditation exercises. You've been seriously meditating in this tradition since 1971 or 1972, haven't you?*

A.G.: I sat a year and a half first (I think 1970–71) with eyes closed Guru Om mantra for Muktananda. Then in 1972, I think Trungpa suggested shifting to a more complex mantra, but with eyes open, a mantra without associations: A, Ah, Sha, Sa, Ma, Ha—representing the six worlds of Bardo, I think, as well as six chakras. But, with the eyes open, and on the out-breath only. Then, when I went to 1973 to the three month meditation Naropa seminary...

P.P.: *In Wyoming?*

A.G.: Yeah. He switched everybody within different kinds of advanced or *samatha* meditation just to the simple *samatha*—no mantra, eyes open, outbreath. I've been doing that ever since.

P.P.: *Could you explain what the samatha mediation practice is?*

A.G.: I've heard it defined—*samatha*, a Sanskrit word—as pacification of mind, or calming of mind, or tranquilization of mind style. Just the other day, Trungpa defined it as the wakefulness, a step toward wakefulness. Mindfulness. Wakefulness or mindfulness, as well as *samatha* also in the direction of tranquilization of thought or making thought more and more transparent and less and less solidified and obsessive. The more and more conscious and transparent the thought forms that pass, the less attachment to the thought forms; but there is what is called *vipasyana*, which is insight into detail, or awareness of detail. First, mindfulness, then, awareness around—particularly in the space around. The practice itself consists in sitting in the usual meditation posture with a tripod base, crosslegged, if possible, to give a good solid firm base, grounded to earth, straight spine. According to Suzuki Roshi, ears in line with the shoulders, nose in line with the belly button, top of the head upholding heaven. Specifically, *samatha*—as distinct from Zen style—is paying attention to the breath leaving the nostril and dissolving into the space in front of the face, or the space around—in front of you. I've heard it described as sort of like touch and let go, touch and let go, touch and let go—or attention to the breath going out, and then dropping it as the breath ceases, and then attention again to the breath when it goes out. So it's practice in redirecting your attention constantly to the space in front of your

face, outside your body. In that sense, almost by definition of practice, of egolessness because you're meditating on the empty space into which your breath dissolves, rather than into any psychological or sensational phenomena going on inside the body. Then there is a constant daydreaming and drifting away from that attention to the space. You're constantly waking up—mindfully waking up to the actual space around you, into which you're breathing. You use the breath as a handle to get back into that space.