

Obituaries

Lama Zopa Rinpoche requests that “students who read Mandala pray that the students whose obituaries follow find a perfect human body, meet a Mahayana guru and become enlightened quickly, or be born in a pure land where the teachings exist and they can become enlightened.” Reading these obituaries also helps us reflect upon our own death and rebirth – and so use our lives in the most meaningful way.

Advice and Practices for Death and Dying is available from the Foundation Store www.fpmt.org/shop

Berni Kohnen, 53, died 18 January, 2008 in Hubli, near Drepung Monastery in a motorbike accident.

By Alfred Leyens



Berni Kohnen, the youngest of four children, was born in a small town (3000 people) in the eastern part of Belgium. He grew up in modest conditions, raised by a hard-working, loving mother, who had to care for her four children by herself. After school, he did an apprenticeship in automechanics, and then went to work in a news-

paper printing company. He was liked by everybody for his good humour, and helpful, easygoing ways. Everybody remembers his contagious laughter.

I came to know him when we were 24-years-old. He had just lost his job because the printing company closed. A few very wild years followed. Because we wanted to find meaning in life, we desperately tried to have as much of a good time as possible, travelling, and so on. Although he was wild, he had a really good heart, and was never destructive or negative or aggressive, but rather he was very open and eager to experience life, to know new people, their opinions, way of seeing, etc.

At the end of our twenties, we went to Switzerland, cow-herding in the mountains from June till September. The rest of the year we would travel, as the job was well-paid. He travelled to Africa; I left for India, to Dharamsala, where I met Lama Zopa Rinpoche, and to Kopan, to do the Kopan course for the first time, in 1984.

Some other friends of those wild times came to do the Kopan courses, and in the third year Berni came, too. He was 33. Like so many before us, we found the Kopan course was exactly what we needed; it was the big revelation. I was

translating teachings and meditations for a group of friends including Berni, who at that time didn't understand enough English yet. Everything was very intense.

One day, after teachings by Rinpoche on emptiness, Berni said to me: “Rinpoche, through his coughing, gets me each time exactly to the point where your translation of his words are leading; each time I move away from the correct point, he coughs or clears his throat in order to bring me back, before you have even translated his words!”

In his simple words, he was explaining to me that I was not at all what I thought I was; that it was incredible. He looked blissful, open and amazed. I don't know if I can say this, but I think he had met the Guru at a very deep level. Anyway, from that time, he was “hooked”.

The following year, Berni came back with his girlfriend Annelise to Kopan. They took the Vajrasattva initiation and left for Bodhgaya and Dharamsala to do the three-month retreat in an old farmhouse in a small village. From what I understood afterwards, he “tasted the chocolate” during that retreat.

Berni and his girlfriend (his companion for life) didn't outwardly change their way of organizing their life: They remained a colourful, nomadic couple. Only their priorities changed – they did their practice every day.

Each year, they would continue to do the cow-herding job in the Swiss mountains from June till the end of September. Before and after the season, they would come for a week to Belgium, to see Berni's mother, family and friends. In winter, they would fly to India and Nepal, travel with their motorbike, and attend teachings by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and many other great teachers.

Berni and his friend loved India and Indian people; it was their terrain for practice. In Switzerland, they became better and better at caring for the animals. They had changed from taking care of grown-up cows to rather young

cows, which have not given birth yet, so there was no milking. They would move with them to the high pastures, sometimes changing their hut many times in one season. The farmers loved them for the perfect care the animals would receive. Over the years, a few thousand cows must have heard so many mantras from them.

Twice a year, in Belgium, we were eagerly waiting for Berni and Annelise to visit. Each time it was a real gift to have them for a few hours in our house. Over the years I remarked that Berni became more and more completely present to the person he was communicating with, giving his full attention, joy, and, of course, always some of his famous laughter. Everybody felt they got something deeper from him than the usual talk. Last time he came in November, and I felt such a joy after one hour that I really thanked them from my heart that they had come to see us.

Then I got a mail from him from Kopan, having done the whole course. He wrote how incredibly beneficial it had been for his mind, to have been once more at the feet of the holy Guru, at Kopan, where it started off for him twenty years ago, when he came to know the “big news” for the first time.

They left for Bodhgaya, and had the chance to receive the Great 1000-armed Chenrezig initiation from Rinpoche, who had been infinitely kind to him.

Annelise wrote to us about Rinpoche’s teachings, and Berni added a few lines at the end, saying, *“Will we ever have the chance to meet this great, unforgettable master again in this life, or did we create the causes to meet him again in a next life? I wish for all of us to find at least the real inner peace that we are all looking for. Eddi on merci, Berni.”* (“Eddi on merci” is our slang, and means good bye and thank you.)

We received this letter three days after the accident had happened. They had been to a teaching by the Dalai Lama.

His friend was able to contact Lama Zopa Rinpoche, who was staying in Hubli, soon after the accident happened and immediately Rinpoche sent a monk to help Annelise, and did practices and prayers for him, together with Pharig Rinpoche and Kyongla Rato Rinpoche. Ven. Roger Kunsang mailed me that he thought Berni was in good hands.

It was a great shock, and such a pain for his mother, his two brothers and his sister and their families, and all of us, when Annelise phoned, saying that: *“We had an accident and Berni used the opportunity to leave for Paradise. Please don’t cry.”*

But I was surprised to see how open and accepting they remained in this difficult situation, everybody caring so

much for the mother who is over 85-years-old, and worrying about Annelise, as it was almost impossible to contact her.

His mother told me Berni had explained to her often about death; that she didn’t need to be afraid of death, etc. She also said that after he came back the first time from Nepal, she felt that a real change had happened to him, and that from that time onwards he had become the one who created peace and harmony in the family when things became difficult. She was positive about the way he had led his life, and the teachers and teachings he had met.

It was difficult, but OK for them that his body was cremated in India and that they had nothing “tangible” near them. The day of the cremation, they sat together and rejoiced about all the joy and happiness they had received from him, and all the virtue he had created in his life, made offerings of light, incense and Indian fruits to the “completely clear and compassionate mind,” and read the dedication of Shantideva’s Bodhicharyavatara, ending with prayers for a good rebirth for Berni and a good life for Annelise.

Arriving here at Institut Vajra Yogini [where Alfred is now in retreat. Ed.], the directors had just come back from India. They told me that Berni had lived for little more than two hours after the accident happened. That it took so long before the ambulance came, that he was clear in his mind till the end, and died in hospital because he had lost too much blood. That during all that time he remained very concerned about the Indian truck driver who had caused the accident, as the police had on the spot made Annelise sign a paper declaring whose fault it was. She had to promise Berni to go back to the police and to change the declaration, saying it was not the truck driver’s fault, but Berni’s fault. He was worried the driver’s life and family would have been ruined. She did that after he had fallen asleep very peacefully, with a happy expression on his face.

The pain of having lost Berni is slowly being replaced by the joy of remembering his kind, caring nature, always ready to joke and laugh, and the way he integrated in day-to-day life the gift of blessing and teachings he had received from his Precious Root Guru Lama Zopa Rinpoche and all his kind teachers.

His sudden death and the way he was concerned for the truck driver’s welfare when dying, are by themselves a strong teaching for all of us. Thank you so much, Berni, and may you have the best of all journeys! ☸