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Buddhism to North America, 1970–1977

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Fresh Bread from an Old Recipe: Chögyam Trungpa's Transmission of Buddhism to North America, 1970–1977

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Abstract

Chögyam Trungpa was a seminal figure in the introduction of Buddhism to North America, and as such his unique perspective on transmission and translation deserve scholarly attention. This paper argues Tibetan traditional historiography regarding the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet greatly influenced Trungpa's transmission and translation of Buddhism to North America during the 1970s. Not only did Trungpa borrow the narratives of the Tibetan introduction, he presented the modes of transmission as ahistorical processes inherited within Buddhism itself.

Introduction

Born in 1939 in eastern Tibet and recognized as the eleventh incarnation of the Trungpa lineage as an infant, Chögyam Trungpa (1939–1987) was raised in a traditional Tibetan Buddhist monastic community, educated in meditative techniques, scholarship, and philosophy, with his most fundamental education in the tradition of Tibetan Vajrayāna and “crazy wisdom,” which employed outrageous and sometimes transgressive behaviour to teach Buddhist principles. In 1959, during the Chinese occupation of Tibet, he along with hundreds of other Tibetans fled the country to neighbouring India. There he had his first exposure to Western culture, but would gain much more, as well as a keen understanding of the culture, during his time at Oxford and in Scotland. He came to North America in 1970 with the intention of teaching Buddhism, which he did with enthusiasm and efficacy.

Trungpa relied on historical precedents from Buddhism’s introduction to Tibet as a paradigm for his transmission of Buddhism to North America, in particular, models of lineal transmission and standardized translation. Trungpa’s success in founding a stable Buddhist tradition in North America benefited from his understanding of North American society and culture and his selective using of Tibetan Buddhist traditions. He was aware of North American images of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism, fantasies of exoticism, spirituality, and authenticity, and so he introduced a partial Tibetan Buddhism, stripped to the bare essentials he thought most relevant to a North American audience. He stressed a lay practice that infused modern quotidian obligations with spirituality. He used traditional Tibetan Buddhist history to illustrate the adaptive quality of the Buddhist teachings, presenting them as always fresh, even ahistorical. In contrast, history is central to the functioning of transmission, lineage, and authenticity in Tibetan Buddhism, and in turn vital to the North American Buddhist traditions that derive from Tibetan Buddhism.

Indeed, traditional Tibetan Buddhist historiography provided Trungpa with much of his contextual material in his presenting Buddhism. Trungpa used these tensions, between monastic and lay practice, historical and ahistorical, to delimit his vision of a specifically North American Buddhism. In what follows I compare and contrast Trungpa's transmission of Buddhism to elements of traditional Tibetan introduction of Buddhism, with a focus on those related to lineal and institutional transmission and translation of teachings. From a description of Buddhism's introduction to Tibet, I turn to a description and analysis of Trungpa's own transmission and translation of Buddhism.

The paucity of sources dealing specifically with Chögyam Trungpa limits any study of his transmission of Buddhism in North America. Only with the publication of Fabrice Midal's *Chogyam Trungpa*, a sort of intellectual biography, has a full length book been available in English principally dealing with Trungpa and his transmission of Buddhism in North America—though any significant consideration of the development of American Buddhism or Tibetan Buddhism in North America touches on his influence.

Midal's book attempts to provide "an entrance into the world of Chögyam Trungpa" through his multifaceted approach to creating a meaningful relationship for his students with himself and with the Buddhist teachings.¹ However, Midal, as a member of the Shambhala community founded by Trungpa, is a constant apologist, and this is evident in his analysis of Trungpa's complex and occasionally contradictory promulgation of Buddhism. While a coherent and valuable source in regards to the different facets of Trungpa's intellectual life in North America during the late 1970s and to his death in 1987, Midal's work does not

¹ Fabrice Midal, *Chögyam Trungpa: His Life and Vision*, translated by Ian Monk, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2004), xxiv.

pointedly address the position of Tibetan tradition in Trungpa's teaching. The tradition of lineage is one that Trungpa often drew attention to, and while Midal acknowledges this, he does not consider how Tibetan or American Buddhists view or make use of their history.

While the current scholarship on Tibetan Buddhism and its influence on the development of American Buddhism are well developed, there are no studies undertaking an analysis of the historiography of Buddhism in North America, specifically in the case of Trungpa and *vajradhātu*. This gap in the scholarship is glaring to anyone who wishes to examine his influence on the development of American Vajrayāna, especially from a historical viewpoint. There are no studies of the role of traditional Tibetan Buddhist history in his transmission of Buddhism in North America.

Transmission and Translation of Buddhism in Tibet

Trungpa's introduction of Buddhism to North America cannot be understood without understanding the historical development of Buddhism's introduction to Tibet. A part of this understanding involves traditional Tibetan historiography, or how Tibetan's view history. Writing in 1968, Trungpa remarks Tibetan Buddhism had not been "clearly presented outside Tibet" and that an understanding of its historical development could provide greater context for such a presentation.² While recent scholarship has done considerable work in clarifying the presentation of Tibetan Buddhism in a historical sense, it has often done so in a manner

² Chögyam Trungpa, "Early Tibetan Buddhism," in Carolyn Gimian, ed., *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa*, vol. 1 (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003), 438.

at odds with traditional Buddhist historiography, due in large part to the prevalence of a source-critical historiography method in Western scholarship.³ However, to understand Tibetan Buddhism it is crucial to understand the Tibetan Buddhist perspective on their history. To the Tibetan, history and historical consciousness are part of religious experience. It is faith in the continuity of the Buddhist tradition itself that forms the foundation of Tibetan historical consciousness, and the character of the Tibetan religious system and its development reflect this. Tibetan history legitimizes distinct lineages as authentic transmissions, from the Buddha forward in time. Thus, while scholars may present source-critical histories of Tibetan Buddhism, in respect to an understanding of the transmission of Tibetan Buddhism to North America, Tibetan Buddhist history and its traditional reception as continuous and legitimate is far more informative for understanding the place of history in Buddhist lineal transmission.

Transmission

Trungpa inherited the key elements of his transmission of Buddhism from those elements central to Buddhism's historical transmission to Tibet from India, Central Asia, and China, namely, tensions between monastic and lay communities, scholastic- and Tantric-centric practice. It was this disparate character of Tibetan Buddhist development—orthodox and unorthodox, conventional and unconventional,

³ For an example of this approach see Ronald Davidson, *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism in the Rebirth of Tibetan Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 142ff. Through careful analysis, Davidson argues the Tibetan translator Marpa never met his Indian guru Nāropā, rather the hagiographic record of their meeting was fictionalized. For Davidson, the Tibetans are so invested in an apostolic lineage that they “swept aside” contradictions in facts.

monastic and popular—that the Tibetan historians, both orthodox and otherwise, sought to make sense of in light of their spiritual inheritance. The formal inclusiveness of the Tibetan religious system provides a space for myriad religious practitioners, both monastic and lay. In the same manner, remarks Kvaerne, the complex symbolism of Tibetan Buddhism has “meaning and validity on many levels of spiritual experience” and allows for “many apparently conflicting attitudes and methods to coexist within the same norm.”⁴ The reasons for this inclusiveness have to do with the development of Buddhism in Tibet and the competing influences at work during its stages of development, traditionally periodized as two “diffusions of the doctrine.”

During the eighth century King Trisong Detsen (khri srong lde brtsan)⁵ appointed Selnang (gsal snang) of Ba (sba) as governor of a province bordering Nepal. Selnang, already familiar with Indian Buddhists in Nepal and India, took advantage of this opportunity to visit Buddhist centres in India, including the University of Nalanda, where he met with the Indian *pandita* Śāntarakṣita, and together they planned the reintroduction of Buddhism into Tibet.⁶ Under Selnang’s advice Trisong Detsen invited Śāntarakṣita to Tibet to help establish Buddhism. However, there was considerable resistance within the court to the introduction of Bud-

⁴ Per Kvaerne, “Tibet: The Rise and Fall of a Monastic Tradition,” in Heinz Berchert and Richard Gombrich, eds., *The World of Buddhism: Buddhist Monks and Nuns in Society and Culture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984), 255.

⁵ Trisong Detsen is considered one of the “Religious Kings” of Tibetan history. He was influential in the “First Diffusion of the Doctrine” as a royal patron of Buddhism.

⁶ The “First Diffusion of the Doctrine” is attributed to King Songtsen Gampo (Srong brstan sgam po) in the late seventh century, due to the influence of his Chinese bride who brought as part of her dowry an image of the Buddha Śākyamuni, housed in the Ramoche temple built for her by Songtsen Gampo. However, Buddhism did not develop a solid foundation during this period. See Giuseppe Tucci, *The Religions of Tibet*, translated by Geoffrey Samuel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 1.

dhism and Śāntarakṣita's stay was short. On his return to India he invited the Indian yogin Padmasambhava to visit Tibet in order to exorcize the "demons" resisting the introduction of Buddhism.

Śāntarakṣita and Padmasambhava represent two distinct forms of Buddhist practice existing in northwestern India at the time. The doctrine of Śāntarakṣita focused on the Bodhisattva path of gradual accumulation of merit through means and wisdom, while Padmasambhava, a practitioner of Tantra, or Vajrayāna, also focused on means and wisdom, though as part of a belief in spontaneous realization held possible if the appropriate way was revealed by a competent teacher. Śāntarakṣita represented the academic, monastic, and dialectical forms of Indian Buddhism, while Padmasambhava's manner was more mystical, ritualistic, and taken from the Siddha ("Perfected Ones") tradition.⁷ The Siddha tradition would form the foundation of Trungpa's transmission of Buddhism in North America, with its focus on practice and experiential knowledge.

By the late eighth century, the construction of monasteries as schools of religious education and centres for the translation of Buddhist texts had begun. Samye would be the first of such centres, complete with sections for translation, study, meditation, and administration; it was modeled on the great Indian Buddhist University of Nalanda, an institution that would hold Trungpa's imagination as well, becoming the inspiration for Naropa Institute, later Naropa University, in Boulder, Colorado. The character of Samye would be due in great part to the influence of Śāntarakṣita, who returned to Tibet following Padmasambhava's successful subjugation of the "demons" of Tibet to oversee its founding and consecration.

⁷ While both paths lead to enlightenment, it was the notion of gradual versus spontaneous realization that marked the main doctrinal division.

In the early part of the ninth century, the Tibetan empire disintegrated, and Buddhism, lacking a central authority, became subject to “arbitrary interpretations,” which allowed free rein to religious improvisers of doctrinal and ritual amalgamation. Buddhism survived this period in two distinctive forms: lay and monastic. A magical orientation, subjective, and literal reading of Tantric texts, and the introduction of non-Buddhist ritual and custom characterized lay Buddhism of the time.

It was this disparate character of Tibetan Buddhist development—orthodox and unorthodox, conventional and unconventional, monastic and popular—that the Tibetan historians, both orthodox and otherwise, sought to make sense of in light of their spiritual inheritance.

One of the defining relationships of Tibetan Buddhism is of disciple and lama (bla ma, Skt. *guru*). The role of lama strongly influenced the development of Tibetan sectarianism. In Mahayana and Vajrayāna Buddhism the guru is, as Tucci explains, “enabled through living, direct contact, to transmit the letter and the spirit of the teaching, and to awaken the sparks out of which blaze forth the fire of mystical experience” in a bond considered as a spiritualized father-son (Tib. *yab sras*) relationship, deeper than simply master and pupil.⁸ Sectarian institutions developed from these lama figures, as direct instruction was held to guarantee the correct interpretation of the scriptures and the right understanding of the sense underlying the words, and in turn these interpretations were passed lineally as institutions in and of themselves.

During the second diffusion the position of the lama became unquestionable and indispensable, as Tucci says, “his qualities, the relationship between him and the student, the spiritual advantages derived from this relationship, were described ever more insistently.” Spiritual

⁸ Tucci, *Religions of Tibet*, 44.

transmission from master to disciple gradually became institutionalized into the monastic organization revived by Atīśa. It was the “spiritual advantages” of the relationship with a lama that stood at the centre of the Tibetan lineages. If the chain of transmission was broken, the teachings lost their efficacy, only accessible through the texts, open to interpretation and misinterpretation. The Tantras, as Trungpa described them, were “self-secret;” if the student were not ready, the spiritual experience would be incomprehensible; the student needed the guidance of a guru to affect their correct interpretation.⁹ It was around famous teachers and lamas that the early Tibetan Buddhist orders coalesced, their followers taking advantage of the deep spiritual relationship of master and pupil. This is no less true of the Tibetan Buddhist communities in North America, which were almost always founded around a specific teacher. Trungpa’s Vajradhatu was no exception. In Tibet, during this “Second Diffusion of the Doctrine” the authority and validity of the teachings had to be assured through direct transmission from teacher to student.

The potent effect of Atīśa’s time in Tibet was his insistence on the restoration of monastic order and discipline and the necessity of a pupil-teacher relationship based on devotion and obedience. Through his efforts a kind of formal sanction brought the practices of the monk and yogin into a united stream within the monastic system. Atīśa’s influence was not restricted to reforming debased lay or Tantric practices. While a master of Tantric initiations, he stressed *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) literature and focused less on mystical and Tantric practice. Nevertheless, Atīśa taught the Tantras as symbolic, removed from any connection with actual physical action. It was in this way Atīśa conferred Tantric initiations upon Rinchen Sangpo and his disciple Dromton

⁹ Chögyam Trungpa, “The Wisdom of Tibetan Teachings,” in Carolyn Gimian, ed., *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa*, vol. 3 (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003), 506.

(‘brom ston, 1008-1064), securing the practice of Tantra in the monastic curriculum, as it had been practiced in Indian monastic universities.¹⁰

However, Marpa sought to settle the dispute regarding the authentic teaching of Tantra through the passing of transmission orally, protected by oaths of secrecy and the devotion of a master-pupil relationship. He represented the continuation and spread of Siddha asceticism and its initiatory system, traced back to Indian teachers such as Nāropa and his guru Tilopa. Marpa and his disciple Milarepa (mi la ras pa, 1040-1123) exemplify the Buddhist Tantric yogin far removed from the monastic Tantra of Atīśa. These two divergent forms would meet again as the orders of Tibetan Buddhism took shape in the twelfth century.

The development of religious orders was closely related to devotion to one’s chosen teacher, from which came the concept of spiritual lineage, fundamental to the transmission of Tantric teachings. Marpa traced his own spiritual lineage backwards to Nāropa, Tilopa, and the primordial Buddha Vajradhara.

Atīśa and his disciple Dromton were the founders of the first distinct religious order in Tibet, the Kadampa (bka’ gdams pa, “Bound by the Word”), which corresponded to the celibate-based religious practice and monastic model. The reform efforts of the Kadampa unified all the teachings into systemized oral instruction and “simplified [them] into everyday practice.”¹¹ It was the success of Atīśa and Dromton’s Kadampa that informed the formation of subsequent religious orders, though these would continue to show characteristic differences from the Kadampa, both in their practice and approach to spiritual transmission.

¹⁰ Kvaerne, “Tibet,” 260.

¹¹ Trungpa, “Early Tibetan Buddhism,” 441-442.

The name of the order attributed to Marpa, the Kagyu (“Transmitted Command”), refers to the importance placed on an unbroken spiritual lineage, from Marpa to Milarepa, Gampopa, (sgam po pa, 1079-1153) and before Marpa the Indian Siddhi Nāropa and Tilopa, to Vajradhara, the “personified principle of Buddhahood.”¹² It was this unbroken spiritual lineage that legitimized the teachings of the Kagyu; thus, it was as important for these teachers to find suitable disciples to guarantee the continued promulgation of the Buddhist doctrine as it was for students to find a guru with an apostolic line. Milarepa lived as a strict ascetic and was reticent to accept disciples. Gampopa’s persistence won Milarepa over and he received the transmitted teachings and practices of Marpa, compiled from several great Indian sages and yogins. However, Marpa and Milarepa lived the lives of householder and ascetic and their tradition was taken from Indian Tantric masters, far removed from the monastic orders developing in Tibet during Gampopa’s time. Given their heritage of Indian yogin teachers and yogin founders, Snellgrove argues that,

Marpa and Milarepa can scarcely be credited with transmitting monastic traditions to Tibet, and it would seem clear that as the various Kagyupa orders came into existence toward the end of the twelfth century, the inspiration for the actual founding of religious communities can only have come from the earlier foundations of Dromton and his master Atisha.¹³

Gampopa is considered the true founder of the Kagyu due his success in combining Tantric teachings and transmission from Marpa and Milarepa with the monastic tradition of the Kadampa, which he had

¹² Kvaerne, “Tibet,” 260, and David Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and their Tibetan Successors*, vol. 2, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1987), 488.

¹³ Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 493.

been a follower of prior to his time with Milarepa. Gampopa's background marked the transition of practice from Milarepa's asceticism toward monasticism. Trungpa notes that as Milarepa's disciple, Gampopa had been told that he was not to become like Milarepa but "to bring out his own inner teaching."¹⁴ Trungpa draws attention to this in an effort to illustrate a point of authenticity. Gampopa's "inner teaching" would influence and carry forward in the separate sub-schools of the Kagyu founded by his close students, lending legitimacy to these lineages, just as Trungpa's own inner teachings would characterize the development and authenticity of Vajradhatu.

At his monastery Daklha Gampo (dvags lha sgam po), Gampopa continued to transmit and systemize the teachings passed to him. Tusum Khyenpa (dus gsum mkhyen pa, 1110-1193), one of the earliest and most devoted disciples of Gampopa, would become the first Karmapa, founder of the Karma Kagyu order, establishing his monastery of Tsurphu (mtsur phu) in central Tibet.¹⁵ The Karma Kagyu would remain one of the most influential religious orders in Tibet, continuing to hold spiritual, and at times political power throughout the history of Tibet. Succession in the Karma Kagyu worked through reincarnation. Several lines of reincarnating lamas developed within the Kagyu—Shanak (zhva nag, Black Hat), Shamar (zhva dmar, Red Hat), the Situ incarnation of Pelpung (dpal spungs) in Kham, the Pawo (dpa' bo) incarnation of Nenang (gnas nang) in central Tibet, and the Trungpa incarnation of Surmang in Kham.

The Nyingmapa, though considered a separate lineage, represent a "haphazard grouping" of Buddhists who held to earlier traditions dating to the eighth and ninth centuries. The Nyingmapa tradition, while

¹⁴ Chögyam Trungpa, "The Age of Milarepa," in *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa*, vol. 1 (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003), 445.

¹⁵ Tusum Khyenpa came from Kham in Eastern Tibet and the Karmapa incarnation maintained a close connection there.

never sponsored by noble patronage like most of the other orders, marks the continuity of Buddhism from the first to the second diffusion of the Doctrine.¹⁶ The Nyingmapa retained Central Asian and Chinese influences in conflict with the “Indian party” who came to dominate Tibetan Buddhist doctrine, developing a separate collection of Tantras, non-celibate religious practices, a later monastic organization, and Dzog chen (rdzog chen) practice, inherited from Chan Buddhism.¹⁷ They also maintained the “village Tantrist” practitioner, often living as householders forming a distinctive social group or class,¹⁸ much like Marpa. The *Nyingma Compendium of Old Tantras* (*rnying ma ‘i brgyud ‘bum*), compiled in the fourteenth century, contained older popular Tibetan Buddhist practices introduced as a result of small-scale contact of Tibetan “Tantric enthusiasts” and Indian yogin.¹⁹

Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (1820-1892) worked with Jamgon Kongtrul the Great (1813-1899) collecting and organizing the varied traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo was a *terton* who discovered a number of *terma*, including “pure visions”—“short lineages” of Nyingmapa, Marpa Kagyu, Shangpa Kagyu, Kalachakra, and Mahasiddha Orgyanpa.²⁰ Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo would mentor

¹⁶ Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 397, 399.

¹⁷ For a discussion of Chan influences on Tibetan practice see Sam van Shaik, *Tibetan Zen: Discovering a Lost Tradition* (Boston: Snow Lion, 2015).

¹⁸ Kvaerne, “Tibet,” 262.

¹⁹ Snellgrove and Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet*, 171.

²⁰ Di Cousens, Di, “Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo and the Ris-Med Movement,” in *Gentle Voice*, 14 (Sept. 2000), www.siddharthasintent.org/gentle.

Terma are hidden treasures that Padmasambhava is believed to have left for future generations in times of need. *Terton* refers to the individuals who “discover” these teachings, either as buried texts or “mind *terma*.” “Short lineages” involve visions of the founders of lineages, leading to a direct transmission which can renew lost lineages, deepen existing connections and understanding, or create a connection for conventional transmission.

Jamgon Kongtrul the Great, a significant figure in the teaching lineage of Chögyam Trungpa, and foster in Kongtrul a respect for the various spiritual traditions of Tibet.

Jamgon Kongtrul the Great was raised in the pre-Buddhist Bon tradition, entering the Nyingma monastery of Sechen at the age of sixteen. The more powerful monastery of Pelpung, the seat of the ninth Situ Rinpoche, then took the young Kongtrul and re-ordained and enthroned him in the Karma Kagyu tradition, as a *tulku* aligned with Pelpung. In 1840, at the age of twenty, Jamgon Kongtrul met Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo for the first time.²¹ His experience within the Bon, Nyingma, and Kagyu traditions, and his work with Jamgon Khyentse Wangpo, would guide the development of Jamgon Kongtrul's thought, turning it toward an increasingly non-sectarian view that came to be called Rime.

The meaning of Rime as envisaged by Jamgon Kongtrul and other Rime teachers is elusive, and varies from the Western definition of ecumenicism. As the third incarnation of Jamgon Kongtrul explained in a talk given in Vancouver, "to adopt the Rime approach means to follow your chosen path with dedication, while maintaining respect and tolerance for all other valid choices."²² In this sense, valid does not mean blind acceptance but a critical view. Jamgon Kongtrul the Great also believed in focusing on one tradition, one discipline, which would provide a basic foundation that would expand to accommodate other teachings, allowing students to relate with the teachings of other traditions in a broader sense, through a broader commitment.²³ The Rime movement emphasized scriptural exposition rather than the form of logical debate found in the Gelug tradition. The trend was towards simplification, com-

²¹ Richard Barron, *The Autobiography of Jamgon Kongtrul: a Gem of Many Colors* (Ithaca, New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2003), 4.

²² Barron, *The Autobiography of Jamgon Kongtrul*, 1-2

²³ Trungpa, "Jamgon Kongtrul," talk 4, 3/12/1974, Karma Dzong, Boulder, Colorado.

prehension, and an understanding of the meaning, beyond dogmatic doctrinal interpretation.²⁴

Jamgon Kongtrul the Great developed his own spirituality toward the common goals of Buddhism in an ecumenical, non-sectarian fashion. Kongtrul's goal was not to unify the separate spiritual traditions of Tibet—he accepted the “chaos” and diversity of views. His interest was in an experiential, practical understanding of Buddhism rather than the doctrinal divisions that characterized Tibetan sectarianism.²⁵ Kongtrul was a synthesist who emphasized the common ground shared by traditions, much in the same way that earlier teachers like Lonchenpa and Jigme Lingpa rose above dogmatic limitations. This forms the central focus of Trungpa's own transmission of Buddhism. Jamgon Kongtrul the Great's work the *Eight Chariots of Contemplative Traditions* was a synthesis rather than a collection of teachings, illustrating his own personal and experiential understanding of Buddhist thought.²⁶ It was this syncretic approach that would carry on, embodied in the teachings of his student the tenth Trungpa and the two incarnations of Jamgon Kongtrul that followed.

The tenth Trungpa, the previous to Chögyam Trungpa in the Trungpa lineage, as a student of Jamgon Kongtrul the Great, would return his teachings as the root guru of both incarnations of his former teacher, Jamgon Kongtrul of Pelpung and Jamgon Kongtrul of Sechen.²⁷ In turn the incarnations of Jamgon Kongtrul would transmit the teachings back to the eleventh Trungpa, Chögyam Trungpa. Jamgon Kongtrul of Sechen would be Trungpa's root guru, while he would receive ordina-

²⁴ Gene E Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts; History and Literature of the Himalayan Plateau* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 246.

²⁵ Trungpa, “Jamgon Kongtrul,” talk 1, 29/11/1974, Karma Dzong, Boulder, Colorado.

²⁶ Trungpa, “Jamgon Kongtrul,” talk 4.

²⁷ Trungpa, “Jamgon Kongtrul,” talk 4.

tion from Jamgon Kongtrul of Pelpung.²⁸ Jamgon Kongtrul of Sechen held both the Kagyu and Nyingma lineages—transmitted to him by his gurus the tenth Trungpa and Getsu Rinpoche respectively. He would pass these lineages to the eleventh Trungpa, in turn passing with them the Rime tradition.²⁹ Dilgo Khyentse, a Khyentse incarnation and teacher of Chögyam Trungpa, was a contemporary Rime teacher, demonstrating the continuing presence of the Rime tradition in Tibetan Buddhism, particularly current in the North American tradition.

Translation

Trungpa also stressed the importance of effectively translating the many teachings from Tibetan into English, a stress he again inherited from Tibet's traditional historiography. And again tensions come up between official (i.e. imperial) and popular, orthodox, and unorthodox. However, here Trungpa comes down on the side of standardized translations, more in line with the tone of those official, imperial translation systems, rather than the idiosyncratic systems of the Tibetan translators who studied with Indian siddhas.

One of the lasting achievements of the “First Diffusion of the Doctrine” was the translation of numerous Buddhist texts. Śāntarakṣita's arrival in Tibet (c. 767) marked the beginning of official translations, though earlier translations are assumed to have taken place as the Tibetan script had been in administrative use for a hundred and fifty years,

²⁸ This is a common practice within Tibetan Buddhism, where two incarnations pass transmission back and forth between incarnations. The Karmapa and Shamarpa incarnations are one example among the Karma Kagyu.

²⁹ Trungpa, “Jamgon Kongtrul,” talk 4.

and the first ordinates were already competent translators during the time of the founding of Samye (775).³⁰

Appointed translators, *lotsawa*, who worked with Indians, Chinese, and Central Asians, performed the official translation of scriptures intended for the education of the religious community. Trisong Detsen had 108 Tibetan youths trained as scholars and sent to India to study Sanskrit.³¹ It was under this official direction that the remarkable speed, accuracy, and prolific work of Tibetan translation took place.

The most significant feature of the work of translation was the fixing of Sanskrit terms and their Tibetan equivalents by the ninth century, while previously translated texts were retranslated to conform to the new system. Tibet had not developed an indigenous philosophical literature and offered a clean slate for the introduction of philosophical vocabulary, which benefited the translation of Indian Buddhist texts, and allowed for the development of precise terminology, avoiding problems faced by Chinese, and more recently, Western translators. Using almost entirely their own linguistic materials, with rare direct borrowing of Sanskrit terms, Tibetans formulated a religious and philosophical vocabulary and produced highly accurate translations of Sanskrit texts. Regarding the process of translation, Snellgrove points out, “one has to decide which existing word to choose as the least misleading equivalent of a Sanskrit Buddhist term, for which there is manifestly no true equivalent.” Tibetans maneuvered around this by inventing terms, or, if appropriate existing terms were available these were “absorbed within the overall Buddhist context.”³² The importance of clarity of translation was not lost on future generations of Tibetan Buddhists working with a

³⁰ Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 440.

³¹ Tucci, *Religions of Tibet*, 7-8, and Trungpa, “Early Tibetan Buddhism,” 440.

³² Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 441.

similar situation in North America—although these Tibetan Buddhist teachers had to consider the developed philosophical vocabulary of the West. As will be seen, the approach of Chögyam Trungpa with regard to translation took a rather different form fixing Buddhist vocabulary in North America.

“Word-Combination, a two-part work” (sgra sbyor bam po gnyis pa), written in the era of Trisong Detsen, demonstrates the focus on understanding and clarity underlying translation:

As for the manner of translating Holy Religion, translate into the best possible Tibetan without violating interpretation. When translating the Dharma (Buddhist Doctrine), if the meaning of the Tibetan when translated holds together without changing the order of the words in Sanskrit, then translate without changing the order of the words. If an improved understanding results from changing the order, then change the order as you translate, but keeping within a single phrase (or verse), whether it has four or six feet to it.³³

In this way a system of coherent presentation is shaped, allowing the “precise and unalterable statement and restatement of unchanging religious and philosophical notions.”³⁴ The ability to formulate such a system is at the heart of the introduction and successful propagation of Buddhism, whether in ancient Tibet or contemporary North America.

As part of the revival that occurred as part of the “second diffusion,” Tibetans went in increasing numbers to Indian Buddhist centres, such as the monastic universities of Nalanda, Vikramaśilā, Bodhgaya, and Odantapuri. As the religious revival spread to central Tibet, *lotsawa*

³³ Quoted in Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 442.

³⁴ Snellgrove and Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet*, 76.

began to make increasingly frequent pilgrimages to India in order to collect and translate texts, to study with Indian teachers, to be initiated by them into Tantric liturgy, and to be instructed in the oral tradition of the mystical, ascetic and yogic texts and Tantric practice.³⁵

The same period saw very different religious traditions and texts introduced from Nepal and Bihar. Along with other translators, Marpa (mar pa, 1012-1096) traveled to India and Nepal where he studied under the Mahāsiddha Nāropa in Bihar.³⁶ Returning to Tibet with many translated texts he settled down to lead the life of a married householder, a form of Buddhist practitioner that would greatly influence the development of American Vajrayāna.³⁷ Marpa began the “New Translation Era” which, according to Trungpa, “restored the pure teachings of the Tantra after they had become diluted during a period of social disorder” following the breakup of the Tibetan empire.³⁸ The “restoration” of the Tantras conveyed a perceived need for authenticity tied to the Indian tradition.

In response to the “perversion” of the Tantras, their translation was forbidden without permission, but as royal ordinance this had little effect on unofficial translations or productions of indigenous works. The orthodoxy promoted by new translations was connected with the availability of an Indian original, often despite “heretical” (Hindu) influences, though a “freer and more eclectic approach” was still evident in the literature produced by the Nyingma (rnying ma) and emerging lineages.³⁹ Buddhist ritual and practice were continuously compared to the Indian tradition, while Tantric practices passed through oral transmission ra-

³⁵ Snellgrove and Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet*, 115 and Tucci, *Religions of Tibet*, 22.

³⁶ See n. 3 above.

³⁷ Tucci, *Religions of Tibet*, 114, 118.

³⁸ Trungpa, “The Wisdom of Tibetan Teachings,” 503.

³⁹ Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 443, 475.

ther than commentaries or exegetical writings to avoid “misinterpretations” of their meaning as defined by Buddhist teachers.⁴⁰ However, both sanctioned and unsanctioned writings and practices continued to be elements of Tibetan Buddhism.

Literary innovation in Tibet was not stifled by the orthodoxy of official translation; on the contrary, it flourished in the popular literature centering on the life story of Padmasambhava—the *Pad ma thang yig* and *Bka' thang sde lnga*. These were compilations of ninth-century popular traditions—collected together in the fourteenth century—recording popular forms of Buddhism organized as local religious “schools” with their own lines of succession. Based on the historical figure of Padmasambhava, combined with legendary attributes—including his apotheosis to the stature of a second Buddha—the quasi-historical narrative form was uniquely Tibetan in origin, yet made full use of the newly introduced Buddhist terminology in a new literary form.⁴¹ This hagiographic literature characterized Padmasambhava as the primary converter of Tibet and by implication gave authority to the teachings promulgated in his name and held within the Nyingma tradition.⁴² Although oversimplifying religious trends, the biographies of Padmasambhava, “preserve allusions to real situations” not present in the orthodox accounts of the conversion of Tibet to Buddhism, although Padmasambhava’s role is often “contradictory or obscure.”⁴³ It is this quasi-historical character of the biographies of figures like Padmasambhava, Nāropa, and Marpa that allowed for the reevaluation of their relevance to different periods, much in the way that Trungpa made use of them in his propaga-

⁴⁰ Tucci, *Religions of Tibet*, 24.

⁴¹ Snellgrove and Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet*, 95-96, 98-99.

⁴² Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 397.

⁴³ Snellgrove, *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism*, 402, and Tucci, *Religions of Tibet*, 6-7.

tion of Buddhism, presenting them as continuously relevant, even ahistorical.

Marpa and his successors also introduced a new literary form—poetry both religious and didactic, based on the Indian model of *doha*, but also expressive of their personal feelings and observations. A famous Tibetan yogin and disciple of Marpa, Milarepa's poetry and biography are distinctly Tibetan literature—religious, didactic, and historical, often accurate in its description of local characters and situations.⁴⁴ This form of personal and expressive poetry is still prevalent in the Kagyu lineage—Chögyam Trungpa himself has left a significant collection of religious poetry.

Trungpa's Transmission and Translation of Buddhism to North America

With an understanding of the historical context of Buddhism's introduction to Tibet Trungpa's use of this traditional history as a steppingstone for his transmission of Buddhism to North America becomes clear. The reasons for his choices lie in his experience of Western culture and his conclusions as to how this culture might colour North American responses to Buddhism.

The Englishwoman Freda Bedi, an Indian nationalist and wife of Baba Bedi, a descendant of Guru Nanak, founder of Sikhism, took Trungpa into her home in Darjeeling, India, where he met John Driver, an Oxford-educated Englishman who tutored Trungpa in English, and encouraged him to think about teaching in the West.⁴⁵ The Dalai Lama

⁴⁴ Snellgrove and Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet*, 118, 132.

⁴⁵ Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 3rd ed., (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1992), 277-278.

appointed Bedi as the principal of the Young Lamas Home School in Dalhousie, and Trungpa became its spiritual advisor. The school was founded over concern for the education of so many young refugee *tulku* (reincarnate lamas). The young lamas at the school were taught a traditional Tibetan Buddhist education, as well as English. Though the school was intersectorian, students held separate devotional practices. When the school was dissolved, over half of the young lamas went to Europe or North America, though not all would teach Buddhism.⁴⁶

Trungpa received a Spaulding Scholarship to Oxford University, and would study comparative religion and philosophy while there. He arrived in England, along with Akong Tulku, in 1963—the two young lamas had fled Tibet together in 1959. Trungpa in particular was struck by Britain, with its own “dignified culture,” far different than the “stark modern realm” he had envisioned, influenced by the preconception formed during his first encounters with Western culture in India.⁴⁷ This was his first direct encounter with Western culture, and he was quite surprised and intrigued with what he saw, though by 1967 he had gained a clearer understanding of British society and began to consider teaching Buddhism. It was that year the English Sangha Vihara offered Trungpa and Akong Tulku the opportunity to take over Johnstone House Retreat in Dumfriesshire, Scotland. After consideration they agreed, renaming the house Samye Ling Meditation Centre, after the first Buddhist monastery of Tibet.⁴⁸ As Trungpa wrote in his autobiography, *Born in Tibet*, “it [Samye Ling] was not entirely satisfying, for the scale of activity was small, and the people who did come to participate seemed to be slightly missing the point.”⁴⁹ The difficulty he faced expressing the fundamental

⁴⁶ Fields, *How the Swans Came*, 278-279.

⁴⁷ Chögyam Trungpa, *Born in Tibet*, 4th ed. (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000), 252.

⁴⁸ Fields, *How the Swans Came*, 282.

⁴⁹ Trungpa, *Born in Tibet*, 252-253.

Buddhist teachings to Western students frustrated Trungpa. Nevertheless, he was enthusiastic to spread the Buddha's teachings and would continue to explore styles of transmission suited to his audience.

Guru/Crazy Wisdom

In his teaching Trungpa took the Kagyu Mahāmudrā and Nyingma Dzog chen (Ati) traditions of Vajrayāna practice and brought them together. “My presentation of Buddhism in America,” he said, “has been an expression of bringing together the two schools. The teachings are capable of reaching people’s minds properly, without any cultural sophistries, because of the saving grace of both those wisdoms. Those teachings transcend the conceptual level: they are able to communicate with us as human beings.”⁵⁰

His teaching style had as much to do with his transmission of Buddhism and his perceptions of North American society as his use of language. His conduct was distinctive, blending Eastern and Western influences. As Eldershaw and Dawson note, “his teaching was calculated to shake up and rupture old ways of understanding and foster openness to new possibilities,” his style was “unsettling, even offensive,” conflicting with the popular expectations of an “Eastern holy man.”⁵¹ He smoked, drank, and experimented with psychedelic drugs—something he described as “double illusions” or “super *samsara*.”⁵² This was all in keeping with his attempts to break through the romantic fantasies of Tibetan Buddhism and the guru relationship.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Midal, *Chögyam Trungpa*, 36.

⁵¹ Lynn Eldershaw and Lorne Dawson, “Refugees in the Dharma: The Buddhist Church of Halifax as a Revitalization Movement,” *North American Religion*, 4 (1995), 23.

⁵² Fields, *How the Swans Came*, 309.

His scandalous behaviour was tied to the “crazy wisdom” tradition, a controversial but legitimate tradition stretching back to Milarepa, Nāropa, Tilopa, and Padmasambhava, resting on the premise that a realized individual’s behaviour was an authentic form of teaching and communicating the Buddhist doctrine.⁵³ The essence of crazy wisdom was removed from relativity, and from the ideals of a saviour, spirituality, and good or bad. It was a direct experience of the practicality of life, with no “subtle philosophy” or “subtle mystical experience;” it was realization, the experience of sudden enlightenment.⁵⁴

Padmasambhava, Trungpa argued, had a skillful way of relating with students, especially Tibetans—an “extraordinary savage and uncultured” people who created obstacles for the introduction of Buddhism. American culture had a similar character, a “rugged and savagelike [*sic*] aspect” that required a dramatic approach to the introduction of spirituality.⁵⁵ Trungpa emphasized the mystical tradition of the Siddhas in his teaching, in large part because they practiced in their daily lives, much like North American practitioners, with little consideration for social conventions.⁵⁶

However, behaviour acceptable among the Māhasiddha (“Perfected Ones”) of ancient India and Tibet proved confusing to “inwardly puritanical America.”⁵⁷ Still, Trungpa argued that transmission did not need to be based on concessions to the Western or Eastern world; rather, it is fundamental to the transmission of Buddhism to relate to the world

⁵³ Eldershaw, “Refugees in the Dharma,” 25.

⁵⁴ Trungpa, “Crazy Wisdom,” talk 1, Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and “Crazy Wisdom,” talk 2, 26/12/1972, Karme Choling, Boulder, Colorado.

⁵⁵ Trungpa, “Crazy Wisdom,” talk 1, Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

⁵⁶ Midal, *Chögyam Trungpa*, 112.

⁵⁷ Stephen Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1994), 107.

as a “global” experience, a human experience, for all are connected as “samsaric people.”⁵⁸

Transmission

On a trip to Bhutan in 1968 Trungpa undertook a retreat at Tag-tsang, in a cave where Padmasambhava is thought to have meditated during the eighth century. During the ten-day retreat Trungpa invoked Guru Rinpoche and the Kagyu forefathers to guide his propagation of Buddhism in the West. He had an experience of needing to show more “openness and energy,” and of great devotion to Karma Pakshi, the second Karmapa, and Guru Rinpoche, Padmasambhava. At the same time, he realized that these two were one in the united tradition of Māhamudra and Ati (Dzog chen). In two days he wrote the *Sadhana of Mahamudra* to bring together, as he wrote, “the two great traditions of Vajrayāna as well as to exorcise the materialism which seemed to pervade spiritual disciplines in the modern world.”⁵⁹ Trungpa’s retreat in 1968 marked the definitive development of his teaching in the West—combining the Kagyu and Nyingma contemplative traditions with spiritual practice devoid of personal gain or ego. It is significant to note that it is orally held within the Vajradhatu community that Trungpa was quite drunk on several bottles of scotch given to him as a gift during this visualization.⁶⁰ This too can be described as definitive of the teaching style he would develop.

After returning to Scotland in 1969, Trungpa’s approach to his propagation of Buddhism became apparent as he returned his monastic

⁵⁸ Trungpa, “Tantra,” talk 5, 24/7/1974, Naropa Institute, Boulder, Colorado.

⁵⁹ Trungpa, *Born in Tibet*, 253-254, and Fields, *How the Swans Came*, 301-302.

⁶⁰ Eldershaw and Dawson, “Refugees in the Dharma,” 20, n. 43.

vows and Samye Ling developed a reputation for wild parties, free sex, and drugs.⁶¹ He explained returning his monastic vows as a response to the experience of a serious car accident that left him paralyzed on the left side of his body, though it is unclear when the wild reputation began. In *Born in Tibet* he wrote, “I could no longer attempt to preserve any privacy for myself, any special identity or legitimacy. I should not hide behind the robes of a monk...More than ever, I felt myself given over to serving the cause of Buddhism.”⁶² It was a sense of students being “turned on” by the reputation of Tibetan teachers, by the fantasy of the “wisdom of the ancients,” and the process of initiation into an order, complete with fantastical names and titles that would shape his transmission of Buddhism.⁶³ Soon after his marriage to Diana Pybus, a teenage Englishwoman from an aristocratic family, Trungpa severed his ties with Samye Ling and Akong Tulku and left for North America.⁶⁴

Chögyam Trungpa and his wife Diana arrived in Montréal, awaiting their American visas, in 1970, going from there to Barnet, Vermont, to Tail of the Tiger, a farm bought by some of his students from Samye Ling. Shortly after his arrival, Trungpa began a lecture tour of New York and California, where he encountered what he described as a “spiritual supermarket” of gurus, swamis, and roshis. America, he said, suffered from “spiritual materialism,” a term he would return to throughout his teaching career.⁶⁵ Spiritual materialism, he explained, was an ignorance of real spiritual qualities; it was an ego-gratifying grasping at spirituality focused on personal gain. Trungpa stated that spiritual materialism is,

⁶¹ Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 104-105.

⁶² Trungpa, *Born in Tibet*, 254-255. While driving a recently purchased sports car Trungpa “blacked out” and ran into a joke shop.

⁶³ Trungpa, “Initiation,” talk 5, 15/2/1971, Wesley Foundation Chapel, Boulder, Colorado.

⁶⁴ Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 105.

⁶⁵ Fields, *How the Swans Came*, 309.

“to say the common hippie jargon...spacing out,” not connecting with the true nature of spiritual practice.⁶⁶

By July of 1970, Trungpa had settled in Boulder and begun teaching at the University of Colorado, gaining exposure through his lectures, seminars, and books. During the following years, Dharmadhatus (Meditation Centres) were founded in New York, Boston, and Los Angeles.⁶⁷ The pace of the efforts to establish a stable and diverse American Buddhist community was rapid, beginning with the founding of Karma Dzong in Boulder in 1972, Dorje Kyung Dzong (Rocky Mountain Dharma Centre) and the first Vajradhatu Seminary in Teton Village, Wyoming, as well as the creation of Vajradhatu—as an umbrella organization for the Dharmadhatus, Tail of the Tiger, Karma Dzong, and Rocky Mountain Dharma Centre—in 1973, the founding of Maitri therapeutic and Padma Jong arts and crafts communities, and the first summer session of Naropa Institute in 1974—Naropa Institute held its second summer session in 1975, and had developed plans for accreditation. Trungpa also published a number of books during this time, with *Mudra*—a collection of poems—in 1972, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* in 1973, and *The Myth of Freedom* in 1976. The first North American visit of the sixteenth Karmapa took place in 1974, with a second visit in 1976. Finally, in 1977 Trungpa took a year-long retreat, allowing space for his students to gain confidence in their ability to undertake the administration of the emerging Vajradhatu community.⁶⁸

Naropa Institute, Vajradhatu Seminary, and Nalanda Translation Committee demonstrate the style of propagation Trungpa envisioned necessary to authentically articulate Buddhism to North American socie-

⁶⁶ Trungpa, “Crazy Wisdom,” talk 1, 1/12/1972, Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

⁶⁷ Fields, *How the Swans Came*, 309.

⁶⁸ Charles Prebish, *American Buddhism* (North Scituate, Mass.: Duxbury Press, 1979), 136-137.

ty. It was through these educational components of Vajradhatu that his style of translation and transmission were expressed, and that the underlying employment of traditional Tibetan Buddhist history, especially in the figures of Naropa, Marpa, and Padmasambhava, is manifest.

Trungpa believed that the traditional monastic lifestyle of Tibet was an obstacle to transmission in North America.⁶⁹ Instead, he designed the Dharmadhatu programs to integrate practice and study with the daily lives of practitioners—revolutionizing the need for a traditional monastic approach—presented in a gradual, systematic fashion, allowing for the individuality of students, and accommodating their North American cultural heritage and lifestyle. The programs were also ecumenical, incorporating Zen and Theravāda approaches by focusing on *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā* meditation.⁷⁰ The Vajradhatu Education Office developed study programs, syllabi, teaching materials, and examinations, all produced by former academics and graduate students.⁷¹ It was a unique, organized, and systematized program for transmitting Buddhist teachings.

Trungpa reinvented the Buddhist doctrine while remaining true to the tradition, the “authentic source.”⁷² Tradition, as Trungpa said, is “faith to what you’ve been taught, what you’ve been presented with, what your integrity says it’s all about.”⁷³ His education in Tibet under Jamgon Kongtrul of Sechen had a considerable influence on his perception of tradition and transmission. Jamgon Kongtrul pushed Trungpa to teach beyond the details, beyond “computerizing your memory,” to communicate personal experience and understanding—“just to start,” in

⁶⁹ Eldershaw and Dawson, “Refugees in the Dharma,” 23.

⁷⁰ Charles Prebish, *Luminous Passage: The Practice and Study of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 161.

⁷¹ Fields, *How the Swans Came*, 311.

⁷² Midal, *Chögyam Trungpa*, 84-85.

⁷³ Trungpa, “Tantra,” talk 5.

the traditional Tibetan way of clearing your throat.⁷⁴ Trungpa evolved, Stephen Batchelor has said,

a style of teaching that broke with the dry vocabulary of academia by employing colloquial terms and idioms with a poet's gift for metaphor. He was the first Asian Buddhist teacher to plunge into the existential plight of a Western culture and to articulate a way out of the dilemma in the language of those undergoing it.⁷⁵

Transmission, as Trungpa considered it, was an extension of inspiration, a sense of dynamic expression of the teacher's emotions, aggression, passion, and stupidity. It was the "meeting of two minds," addressing the students "basic psychological state" while not holding back one's own.⁷⁶

Naropa Institute, one of the clearest statements of Trungpa's vision of transmission, was modeled on the Buddhist University of Nalanda, where Nāropā had been an abbot. Though Buddhist inspired, Nalanda had a curriculum which covered secular subjects such as poetry, logic, arts, and sciences. At Naropa Institute it was hoped that the intellectual, critical mind of the West would meet the Eastern technique of contemplation and experiential wisdom.⁷⁷ In his own education Trungpa had been guided by Jamgon Kongtrul through meditative techniques, combining logic and philosophy with personal experience and understanding through contemplation, always stressing the importance of the contemplative tradition.⁷⁸ According to Trungpa, a contemplative tradi-

⁷⁴ Trungpa, "Jamgon Kongtrul," talk 6, 5/12/1974, Karma Dzong, Boulder, Colorado. When beginning to give a talk, Tibetan teachers will often clear their throat, repeating this when beginning a new thought.

⁷⁵ Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 105.

⁷⁶ Trungpa, "Tantra," talk 5, and talk 9, 2/8/1974, Naropa Institute, Boulder, Colorado.

⁷⁷ Fields, *How the Swans Came*, 316.

⁷⁸ Trungpa, "Jamgon Kongtrul," talk 5, 4/12/1974, Karma Dzong, Boulder, Colorado.

tion combining personal experience with understanding was the inspiration for Naropa Institute; he wanted to create a “living tradition” focused on contemplative education.⁷⁹ However, it was Trungpa’s scholarship that was most difficult for his students to understand. They were, as Prebish describes them, “victims of a serious misunderstanding that result[ed] in transparent anti-intellectualism,” rather than the balance of study and practice Trungpa emphasized.⁸⁰

The first summer session of Naropa Institute in 1974 brought figures like Ram Das, Allen Ginsberg, Herbert Guenther, Charles Prebish, Harvey Cox, and John Cage, along with almost two thousand students. Academics like Prebish were intrigued by the process of working with Trungpa’s students. During the second summer session in 1975, Prebish taught a “module”—where students and instructors would study, practice, and live in “close proximity”—with two students of Trungpa’s, Reginald Ray and the Dorje Loppon Lodro Dorje (Eric Holm).⁸¹ The experience provided Prebish with valuable insight into the emerging Vajradhatu community. It would also be during these first summer sessions that a vision for an accredited university would take form.

In 1975 Naropa began offering an MA in psychology, followed by a BA in Buddhist psychology in 1976, as well as a BA in Buddhist Studies and BFA in Buddhist Art (*thangka* painting). The poetics program at Naropa was particularly well developed. The Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics hosted writers like Allen Ginsberg, Anne Walden, Philip Whalen, Diana di Prima, and others.⁸²

⁷⁹ Trungpa, “Jamgon Kongtrul,” talk 1, 29/11/1974, Karma Dzong, Boulder, Colorado.

⁸⁰ Prebish, *American Buddhism*, 154.

⁸¹ Fields, *How the Swans Came*, 317, and Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 94.

⁸² Prebish, *American Buddhism*, 142.

As a scholar, Trungpa explained, Nāropā had understood the words of the Buddhist teachings but not the meaning—the sense behind the words—and so went looking for a guru, Tilopa, to gain experiential insight.⁸³ Similarly, he taught that Nāropā had sent Marpa back to Tibet, back to his home, to go through “certain life situations,” to gain an experiential understanding of the teachings he had received. On his return Marpa lost the notes he had taken during his time with Nāropā and was forced to translate and teach from his own understanding and experience, rather than from a textual basis.⁸⁴ Trungpa would often use the life stories of Nāropā, Marpa, and Milarepa to illustrate the fundamental importance of contemplative education, the balance of study and practice. In the entrance hall of Naropa University there is a painting of the Indian ascetic Nāropā, sitting cross-legged on a tiger skin in the Himalayas, holding a scroll with the words *prajñāgharba*—“womb of transcendental wisdom.” Nāropā, the Indian Mahāsiddha typifies the pedagogical approach of academic study and traditional Buddhist contemplative practice stressed by Trungpa.

However, concerned that Tibetan culture would prove a seducing influence, ritual was little stressed within Vajradhatu practice.⁸⁵ Though, as Herbert Guenther noted in *Dawn of Tantra*, “we need not be mystified by the idea of ritual. An example of ritual is the custom of a man’s removing his hat when he meets a lady. It is a kind of formalized gesture. It is also a way of going about a human relationship.”⁸⁶ The Karmapa’s visit in 1974 presented Trungpa’s students with an unfamiliar series of ceremonies and ritual, exposing them to Kagyu and Tibetan traditions, most

⁸³ Trungpa, “Jamgon Kongtrul,” talk 1.

⁸⁴ Trungpa, “Guru,” talk 5, 10/2/1971, Wesley Foundation Chapel, Boulder, Colorado.

⁸⁵ Prebish, *American Buddhism*, 152.

⁸⁶ Herbert Guenther and Chögyam Trungpa, *Dawn of Tantra* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1975), 2.

memorable of which was the Vajra Crown Ceremony, performed by the Karmapa for the first time in North America on September 21.⁸⁷ The occasion of the Karmapa's visit would mark a shift in the perception of lineage and ritual among the Vajradhatu community.

Prior to the Karmapa's visit Trungpa's students perceived themselves as "American Buddhist," without the ritual trappings of Tibetan Buddhism. Despite this, the visit instilled a sense of devotion to the lineage, a central characteristic of the Kagyu tradition. The Boulder community became more formal, ritual became more prominent, especially in the higher teachings of Vajrayāna, and suits replaced the jeans and long hair. However, Trungpa stressed that rituals and formalities were maintained in the Vajrayāna teachings, not as everyday protocol.⁸⁸

The members of the Vajradhatu community so impressed the Karmapa that in September of 1974 he proclaimed:

Chokyi Gyamsto Trungpa Rinpoche, supreme incarnate being, has magnificently carried out the liberation of students and ripening them in the dharma. This wonderful truth is clearly manifest. Accordingly, I empower Chögyam Trungpa Vajra Holder and Possessor of the Victory Banner of the Practice Lineage of the Karma Kagyu. Let this be recognized by all people of both elevated and ordinary station.⁸⁹

The great importance placed on lineage and devotion was manifest in the Karmapa's visit and proclamation.

⁸⁷ Midal, *Chögyam Trungpa*, 295. For a description of the Vajra Crown Ceremony see Fields, *How the Swans Came*, 329.

⁸⁸ Midal, *Chögyam Trungpa*, 304, and Fields, *How the Swans Came*, 331.

⁸⁹ Midal, *Chögyam Trungpa*, 302.

In his seminars and lectures Trungpa continually reiterated the importance of a relationship with the lineage and a personal guru. He described the practice lineage—the Kagyu lineage, emphasizing meditation practice and contemplative tradition rather than simply scholarly ability as perceived in the Gelugpa order—as “solid and workable,” concerned with life situations, like work, familial obligations, and other quotidian concerns faced by North American practitioners.⁹⁰ Devotion to the lineage was central to Vajrayāna practice, an aspect of Tibetan Buddhism which Trungpa slowly introduced to his North American followers.

Trungpa portrayed transmission, the lineage, and *abhiṣṭana* (Skt. energy or grace) like an “electric current” transmitted by the guru, regenerating, flowing energy that is renewed through transmission or communication.⁹¹ The dynamic quality of transmission and lineage that he expressed stressed the importance of devotion, continuity, and the role of the guru in Vajrayāna practice.

The purpose of Tantra is to de-literalize the world, emphasizing the extraordinary quality of life, as “fantasies in the fullest sense, as parts in the play of illusion.”⁹² Tantra, as Trungpa explained, opens the experience of life as “fabulous and fantastic,” allowing for an opportunity to rediscover and reinterpret the world. Nevertheless, he also made constant warnings regarding Tantric practice, comparing the sudden path of Vajrayāna to “riding a razor blade.”⁹³ When initiation into Tantric practice is done under the seduction of spiritual materialism there is a degree of ego-gratification, rather than the “meeting of two minds,”

⁹⁰ Trungpa, “Jamgon Kongtrul,” talk 1.

⁹¹ Trungpa, “Crazy Wisdom,” talk 7, 30/12/1972, Karme Choling, Barnet, Vermont.

⁹² Peter Bishop, *Dreams of Power: Tibetan Buddhism and the Western Imagination* (London: Athlone Press, 1993), 112.

⁹³ Trungpa, “Tantra,” talk 7, 29/7/1974, Naropa Institute, Boulder, Colorado.

what Trungpa called seduction by the “daughters of Māra.”⁹⁴ The sudden path of Vajrayāna offered an enticing imaginative world of exotic and fantastic symbolism.

The guru takes the role of a “spiritual friend,” (Skt. *kalyāṇamitrata*) or in the Vajrayāna, the “Vajra master,” guiding the student, as Trungpa says, letting them know “when to relax, when to exert into the path.”⁹⁵ He spoke of the relationship with the guru as developing in stages. The first is like a supermarket, where the student is “shopping” the richness of the guru’s qualities. The second he described as a criminal trial, the student reacting with a self-conscious response to the “mirror-like quality” of the guru, reflecting back their self-deception. Finally, the student is able to admire the peaceful qualities of the guru, like watching a “cow grazing,” though the student is stuck in the position of admiration. In the last stage the guru becomes like a rock, the student will “just pass and move on.” Trungpa also used the image of the guru as a movie so engrossing that the student passes into the audience.⁹⁶ All these illustrate the dynamic and protean relationship between student and teacher, placing the continuity and transmission of the teachings in an unpredictable human relationship. It was imperative for Trungpa to express the importance of the guru relationship to his North American students—knowledge that was ubiquitous in traditional Tibetan Buddhism.

In traditional Tibetan Buddhism there are three types of lineage transmission. Trungpa presented these in relation to the Vajrayāna path, though they address elements of his transmission of Buddhism in North America generally. *Kongza nyegyü*, transmission by “word of mouth, ear to ear,” utilizes ideas and concepts in a crude and dualistic, yet function-

⁹⁴ Trungpa, “Initiation,” talk 5. Mara is the ruler of the hell realms, the same mythical figure who tempted the Buddha as he was about to attain enlightenment.

⁹⁵ Trungpa, “Tantra,” talk 7.

⁹⁶ Trungpa, “Guru,” talk 4.

al manner. This form of transmission is connected with the scriptures and teachings, representing the living quality of the teachings. The style of *ringdzin dagyu* is crazy wisdom, it happens through the creation of incidents where the guru directs the student's attention "blamelessly" toward chaos and uncertainty. This was the style most apparent in Trungpa's outlandish behaviour. *Da* ("symbol") refers to the symbolic element of the teachings. The third style of transmission, *gyalwa gongyu* is intellectually the most profound. *Gongyu* means thought lineage, mind lineage, the "communication [between guru and student] is neither that of symbolism . . . nor that of words. By just being, the sense of precision is communicated," cutting through conceptual thought.⁹⁷ In all of these, yet most certainly in the last two, there was a requisite openness on the part of student and teacher. Trungpa repeatedly expounded the importance of this to his students.

One of the clearest uses of Tibetan Buddhist tradition Trungpa employed was the figure of Padmasambhava, whom he referred to allegorically, in the same way he referred to Nāropā or Marpa. His discussions of Guru Rinpoche were "complete[ly] un-scholastic," and a-historical. He was expressing the inspiration, the "fundamental meaning of Padmasambhavism" as it related to the principles of Vajrayāna that opened Tibetan minds, and would American minds as well.⁹⁸ He used Padmasambhava as a metaphor for personal experience rather than focusing on his historicity, the "Padmasambhava-ness in students' state of being." The eight aspects of Padmasambhava were connected to psychological penetration, deeper and deeper into the Tantric path; the eight

⁹⁷ Trungpa, "Crazy Wisdom," talk 2, 26/12/1972, Karme Choling, Barnet, Vermont.

⁹⁸ Trungpa, "Crazy Wisdom," talk 1.

aspects were symbolic of the experience of realization.⁹⁹ Padmasambhava was manifest in personal experience, in the “attitude of giving birth, sense of space, and then finally manifesting [the realization of the Tantric path].”¹⁰⁰

Padmasambhava’s eighth manifestation, Dorje Trollo, represents the crazy wisdom style of communicating and transmitting the Vajrayāna teachings. Dorje Trollo, with his wife Yeshe Tsogyal manifested as a pregnant tigress, would have been a frightening sight for the Tibetans. This Indian Siddha, commented Trungpa, “dressed as [a] Tibetan madman, holding Vajra and dagger, shooting out flames . . . [from] his body, riding on a pregnant tigress . . . extremely strange. He’s not quite local god and he’s not quite a conventional guru.”¹⁰¹ The point is well made. How strange Chögyam Trungpa himself must have appeared to his first North American audiences. Neither a traditional Tibetan monk, Western psychologist, nor other clearly definable label, he was an unconventional Buddhist teacher, who, because of this, made a deep and powerful connection with his North American students.

Translation

There is an imagining by European and North American society, according to Bishop, of Tibetan Buddhism as a storehouse of spiritual

⁹⁹ Trungpa, “Crazy Wisdom,” talk 2, Karme Choling, and “Crazy Wisdom,” talk 1, Jackson Hole. Padmasambhava is said to have had eight manifestations, and each one, according to Trungpa, represents a different manner of teaching.

¹⁰⁰ Trungpa, “Crazy Wisdom.” Here Trungpa is referring to the *trikāya*, the “*dharmakāya* as the embryonic space, and *saṃbhogakāya* as the forwarding quality, and *nirmāṇakāya* quality as actually manifesting itself, finally.”

¹⁰¹ Trungpa, “Crazy Wisdom,” talk 7.

techniques, which carries with it images of the professional, expert, and technocrat, linked with issues of authenticity, orthodoxy, and continuity. There are, as he writes, “fantasies about the immense quantity of information, about storage, access, retrieval, about order, systems, experts, and efficiency,” all at the fore of translation and issues of continuity and authenticity.¹⁰² The selection of translations, the systemization of language, is vital to the successful and authentic continuity of spiritual transmission, and Trungpa was keenly aware of this.

Trungpa avoided the vocabulary of Western philosophy, recognizing that Buddhist thought differed from Western metaphysics, finding closer equivalencies in Western psychology.¹⁰³ Francesca Fremantle, who collaborated with Trungpa on a translation of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, observed, “it is noticeable that several of the words which best express the teachings of Buddhism are part of the language of contemporary psychology, for the attitudes of certain schools of Western psychology often come closer to Buddhism than those of Western philosophy or religion.”¹⁰⁴ Confronted with a highly developed philosophical vocabulary—unlike the historical context in which Tibetan’s originally undertook the translation of Buddhist thought—Trungpa sought to translate the Buddhist doctrine into language accessible to Western audiences through the vocabulary of psychology and American idioms. He would talk about the “psychology of higher enlightenment,” the “psychological approach,” and “basic sanity,” making pragmatic connections to North American daily life through terms like “kitchen-sink situation,”—all linguistic choices based on the fundamental clarification of Buddhism.

¹⁰² Bishop, *Dreams of Power*, 100-101.

¹⁰³ Midal, *Chögyam Trungpa*, 96-97, 99.

¹⁰⁴ Francesca Fremantle and Chögyam Trungpa, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1975), xvi.

Carl Jung paved the way for the psychologization of Buddhism through commentaries, forewords, and introductions to influential books on Asian religion, including D.T. Suzuki's *Introduction to Zen Buddhism*.¹⁰⁵ Suzuki utilized, though not entirely, psychological terms to explain Zen Buddhism, though he emphasized that Zen Buddhism and psychology differed in their views of mind and the unconscious.¹⁰⁶ Jung also emphasized that, arguing, the "East has produced nothing equivalent to what we call psychology," though the suggestion has been made that Buddhism has become more psychologized than during Jung's time, emphasizing mental health over salvation.¹⁰⁷ More recently, the image of guide, doctor, and therapist has been used to envision the guru relationship, by Tibetan Buddhist teachers like Tarthang Tulku and Chögyam Trungpa, rather than the soteriological approach of earlier Buddhist teachers like Anagarika Dharmapala. It was one of Trungpa's more common metaphors to portray the guru as a doctor operating without anesthetic.¹⁰⁸

His choice in using Sanskrit terms, the *lingua franca* of many Buddhist traditions, was an interesting approach, different from the Tibetan system of translation, which avoided direct borrowings from Sanskrit. Whenever possible he chose Sanskrit terms over Tibetan—like *śamatha* rather than *shi-ne*—and wanted his students to pronounce Sanskrit terms correctly. However, the driving justification behind the use of Sanskrit terms like *vajra*, *bodhicitta*, *śūnyatā*, or karma, was the consideration of sense. Any English translation had the potential to confuse or misinterpret the underlying meaning of a term. Through familiarity with San-

¹⁰⁵ Poul Pederson, "Tibet, Theosophy, and the Psychologization of Buddhism" in *Imagining Tibet*, Thierry Dodin and Heinz Rather, eds. (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 160.

¹⁰⁶ Fields, *How the Swans Came*, 205-206.

¹⁰⁷ Pederson, "Tibet, Theosophy, and the Psychologization of Buddhism," 159.

¹⁰⁸ Trungpa, "Initiation," talk 5.

skrit terms Trungpa hoped that his students would acquire a deeper, personal connection with the Buddhist teaching held within each term. The earlier confusions of Victorian translations exemplify this worry. Sanskrit terms like *śūnyatā* or *nirvāṇa*, when translated as “emptiness” or “nothingness,” lose their subtler philosophical implications. The trend towards the inclusion in English of terms like Buddha, karma, yoga, and bodhisattva further inclined Trungpa to employ Sanskrit terms.¹⁰⁹

The Nalanda Translation Committee was founded in 1975 in response to Trungpa’s desire for his students to be able to practice in their own language, in accurately rendered translations. In this endeavour Trungpa and Lama Ugyen Shenpen guided the committee, though early members from among Trungpa’s students had little or no training in Sanskrit or Tibetan, and Ugyen Shenpa knew little English.¹¹⁰

The committee developed a five-fold statement, to create fresh and authentic translations of texts and commentaries in English, and to translate from a variety of genres from Tibetan Buddhist literature, including biographies, songs of realization, philosophy, and culture. To assist in the publication of texts to ensure quality and consistency, and to teach and transmit practices, to increase students’ understanding of their significance and cultural background, as well as to help with the presentation of Buddhist ceremonies and practices within the Vajradhatu community.¹¹¹ The primacy of authenticity and consistency is important to note. There was a distinct stress placed on the authentic translation of the teachings, though an understanding of the fundamental quality of authenticity was still emerging in 1975, guided by Trungpa’s involvement in the translation process.

¹⁰⁹ Midal, *Chögyam Trungpa*, 94.

¹¹⁰ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 168.

¹¹¹ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 168.

Early on, the translation group met with Trungpa to go over translations line by line, discussing the fundamental doctrinal point or experience behind each term. Midal wrote that Trungpa “manifested the very nature of the teaching,” creating a relationship with the experience of translation rather than a linguistic exercise.¹¹² The committee began modestly, translating the daily chants and Karma Kagyu foundation practices (*ngondro*), expanding as their acumen and language skills grew.¹¹³ Writing in 1980 Trungpa remarked, “I am realizing for the first time that the basically theistic English language has now been blessed by the Practice Lineages [Nyingma and Kagyu] and is becoming a great medium for expressing the nontheistic, enlightened dharma.”¹¹⁴ It is a perception among his students that Trungpa significantly influenced the English language, in its usage and vocabulary, especially in relation to spirituality and Buddhism, though the assertion is quite ambiguous.¹¹⁵ On the other hand, his acumen for translation and success in communicating Buddhist doctrine to a North American audience is implied by the continuing interest in his work.

Conclusion

Combining a keen perception of underlying North American images of Tibetan Buddhism, cultural heritage, and quotidian obligations with the

¹¹² Midal, *Chögyam Trungpa*, 97.

¹¹³ Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 168.

¹¹⁴ Midal, *Chögyam Trungpa*, 100.

¹¹⁵ During several conversations with members of the community Trungpa’s significant influence on the English language was raised. It is felt by a number of his students that he shaped language usage, forms of speech, and other elements of language in his transmission of Buddhism in North America. Unfortunately, this is something that has not been considered in any study of which I am aware.

selective use of Tibetan Buddhist tradition and history, Trungpa was able to translate and transmit the Buddhist doctrine to North American students in a manner that provided the ground for a stable North American Vajrayāna tradition, visible in the continued growth of Shambhala Buddhism, the organization headed by his son and Dharma heir the Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche.

Trungpa focused on lay practice, exemplified in the yogin, householder tradition of the Indian and Tibetan Siddha tradition, and the teaching style of “crazy wisdom,” which integrated spiritual practice with the living situation of his North American students, a situation not suited to the introduction of traditional Tibetan monasticism.

The references he made to traditional Tibetan Buddhist history were tailored to this focus, with Nāropā, Marpa, Milarepa, and Padmasambhava representing the integration of spiritual practice and the routines of daily life. However, these historical figures were presented in an ahistorical fashion, not trapped in the past but living examples of the present relevance of the Buddhist teachings, voiced in a vocabulary of mental health, wholly recognizable and relevant to North American preoccupations, presented in a teaching style accessible to Trungpa’s students.

He developed a reputation as an unpredictable figure, with an unconventional approach, yet this unconventional character was tied to his success. It allowed him to present the fundamental aspect of his teaching—that spiritual practice was not something exotic and contradictory to North American society, but something fundamentally necessary to “basic sanity”—in a manner that broke down any preconceptions of Tibetan Buddhism or the guru relationship, creating a new ground for an American Vajrayāna tradition.

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