



# Reflections

## Trungpa Rinpoche and Zen

by David Schneider

[David Schneider cuke page](#)

David wrote: *This article, I think from Tricycle, largely builds on material from the introduction to The Teacup and the Skullcup. However, starting with the second paragraph, there's a story about one of the times VCTR (Trungpa Rinpoche) visited Zen Center, and Suzuki Roshi was there. It goes for a while, and then the rest of the article is inserted, and then it picks back up at the end.*

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The title of this article supposes that Trungpa Rinpoche is one thing, zen another, and that the two can simply be placed in relationship to one another. But as readers of this volume will surely be aware, Trungpa Rinpoche was not one thing. If ever a person manifest an astonishing array of forms, and spoke wide-ranging, even contradictory truths to meet the needs of varying situations, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was such a person. On the other side, the zen meditation tradition can not be crammed into any box of definition; it is as various as its practitioners. Zen masters of the past and present have looked different from one another, used radically different teaching methods, and have proposed divergent, if complementary understandings of truth. When pressed, no zen teacher would even admit that there *was* such a thing as zen. Yet all of them belong with pride to a lineage and to a style, even if it is as ungraspable as a cloud.

Having voiced these cautions, one might look at Trungpa Rinpoche's relation to zen by looking at his connections to the active zen teachers of his day in North America. Through these friendships, one can feel his respect for zen tradition altogether, and how it led to his using certain zen forms for his public meditation hall and rituals. Equally, it will be clear why Rinpoche inherited many of the students migrating through the spiritual scene in the early 1970's, a significant number of these coming from zen sanghas. Such practitioners had a definite effect on the emerging character of his "scene," and Rinpoche developed in return a humorous, teasing – sometimes mocking – approach in dealing with these people. As he began to define more clearly the path for his own followers, Trungpa Rinpoche started to teach about the distinctions between zen and tantric buddhism. In the first months of

1974 he delivered two seminars on the topic *Tantra and Zen*.

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In the Spring of 1971, Trungpa Rinpoche paid a visit to the San Francisco Zen Center, to deliver an evening talk. The lecture was moved from the Buddha Hall, where such discourse usually took place, to the dining room, to accommodate the large audience expected. I was practicing as a Guest Student at the time, and we were told simply that the evening schedule would be replaced by a talk from “Trungpa.”

This was thrilling news, because as far as I could see, there were two really penetrating teachers of meditation available to a young seeker at the time: Suzuki Roshi and Trungpa Rinpoche. There were others around, of course, but some didn't speak English, others didn't have books out yet, and still others were just beginning their careers. The day before his visit in fact, a few of us bunking in the Men's Dorm had huddled around a cassette recorder, listening to a talk from Trungpa Rinpoche. I'd been surprised to hear the pitch of his voice as he taught, “We shouldn't say ‘Things aren't as bad as they seem.’ Things *are* as bad as they seem!”

Following afternoon zazen and dinner, we worked to arrange the dining room into a lecture hall. Seats for the teachers were placed in front – a wingback chair for Suzuki Roshi, and a small sofa for Trungpa Rinpoche. Mats went down on the floor in front of these, for those who wanted to sit close and low. Rows of chairs filled the central part of the large airy room, and dining tables lined the perimeter. Because I'd been called on to move furniture – that is what Guest Students did in addition to sitting: we worked – I secured a good seat down in front. By the time the talk started, something after 8pm, every seat was filled, and people were sitting, even standing on the tables around the edges of the room.

A commotion arose near the door, and we turned to watch Trungpa Rinpoche enter. He lurched forward, limping heavily, and grinning broadly, followed by a group of his students. He took a seat on the sofa and surveyed the crowd. A drink of some sort was poured for him and set on a side table. An ashtray was set out. Suzuki Roshi seated himself in the wingback chair, folded his legs under him, arranged his robes, put his hands into the meditation mudra, and sat there in what looked like perfect zazen posture.

Someone began the chants traditionally done before a lecture; Suzuki Roshi and the zen students all put their palms together and vertical (elbows out, middle fingers the height of their noses) and intoned vigorously. Trungpa Rinpoche sat with hands almost together, his body weaving in circular motions during the chant. He looked drunk. There was no other way to describe it. We had heard that Rinpoche

sometimes, though not always, gave teachings after having consumed goodly quantities of alcohol.

He was in fact, drunk this time. At least in the quiet room where speakers waited before giving their talks, he'd greeted Suzuki Roshi a few moments earlier, with the words "Hi Roshi! I'm drunk!" The two teachers were close friends by this point, but this pre-talk meeting was apparently a short one, ending when Trungpa Rinpoche, fairly dismissed Roshi saying, "You can go now, Roshi. I'll be in in a moment."

Now Trungpa Rinpoche sat on the couch, looking at the audience, who, astonished, looked back at him. They also looked at Suzuki Roshi a few feet away from him. Trungpa Rinpoche sat there a long time. Finally he said, "Dopa way." At least this is what I heard, and I racked my brain for what it could mean. We were not long past the psychedelic era, and hippies galore were in the room; perhaps he was addressing them? No! it finally dawned on me - he'd said "The open way." But in thinking this through, I'd missed the next several sentences he'd said.

In any case, the talk seemed short, and very different from the zen talks I'd heard from Suzuki Roshi. Those talks struck me to be crystal clear, even if the words didn't always track in grammatical English. Roshi's meaning, conveyed also with hand and facial gesture, got through. But now I was having trouble understanding Trungpa Rinpoche's inflected English, and there were pauses and new starts... it seemed halting. At one point he crossed his legs, pulling a foot up onto his knee, but it slipped off again. His students whispered to one another.

The atmosphere in the room became increasingly electric. Something was happening, but no one - at least no one in the audience - was quite sure what. It was very provocative to see two enlightened masters - and there was little question for anyone present that both were enlightened - to be manifesting in such extremely different ways: Suzuki Roshi, still, proper, arranged, looking for all the world like a statue; and Trungpa Rinpoche, weaving, drinking, somewhat lounged on the sofa, and now lighting a cigarette! This performance distracted as well from the words of his talk. Shortly after, the talk stopped in any case, and he called for questions.

With the first question, an extraordinary transformation took place. Trungpa Rinpoche sat up, slightly forward, and energy seemed to flow into him. One had the feeling of seeing an image come from hazy into sharp, clear focus. I recall my impression that his body had become a sword or spear. He answered question after question brilliantly and with humor, often skewering the questioners with their own arrogance. One fellow called out from his perch on a table at the back of the room:

"Hey, it's said that you drink alcohol. You do, don't you?"

Rinpoche picked up his glass, and drank, and looked at the fellow, and nodded yes.

"And you smoke cigarettes too, don't you?"

Rinpoche took a puff, and said, "Sure," and smiled.

"Well, you know that it's no good for you, don't you? It's no good for your health."

Rinpoche said nothing but kept looking at the fellow, all the way across the room.

"Well, I do something that's good for *my* health."

"Mmmm hmmm..."

"I do kundalini yoga!"

This last phrase came out with great pride, as if simply by associating himself with the practice, the young man had earned a credential.

Trungpa Rinpoche looked at him a while, standing there on the table, and asked, slowly, with a smile, "You...do... kundalini... *yoga*...?"

"I do."

Trungpa Rinpoche began to chuckle, first quietly to himself, and then with more and more energy, breaking at last to a real laugh. As his laughter built, the audience joined it, and soon the whole room was howling. The questioner looked around in bewilderment and finally sat down, visibly deflated. As the laughter calmed down, Rinpoche took another sip, and looked out over the rim of his glass for the next questioner, the next challenger. I put up my hand...

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Of the many zen teachers that Trungpa Rinpoche would meet during his 17 years in North America, the first and most significant encounter was with Suzuki Roshi, founding abbot of the San Francisco Zen Center. By 1970, Suzuki Roshi had been practicing in North America for a dozen years, working intensively with the American students who'd joined his sitting practice, and the community that had grown up around him. With the purchase in the late 1960's of Tassajara, a monastery deep in the mountains of Los Padres National Forest and the publication of Suzuki's first book, *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind* in 1970, the population of Zen Center had begun to grow rapidly. Roshi often discussed the challenge of presenting traditional zen Buddhist dharma in a cultural vacuum, to American students who fit no category that he, a Japanese teacher, was familiar with. He struggled with this, and his struggle gave rise to innovative, powerful teachings and a vigorous community.

Suzuki Roshi, his wife Suzuki Sensei (mostly known simply as Okusan,) Trungpa Rinpoche and his wife Diana Mukpo, were all introduced in May of 1970 by Rinpoche's publisher, Sam Bercholz. During a visit to

Zen Center, an immediate affinity – what everyone who saw it called a “heart connection” – sprang up between the two teachers. Trungpa Rinpoche later confided to his wife that Suzuki Roshi was the first person he’d met in America who reminded him of his root guru in Tibet, Jamgön Kongtrül. He went on to say that in Roshi he’d found his first spiritual friend in the West.

According to biographer David Chadwick, Suzuki Roshi was familiar with Trungpa Rinpoche’s work, as Roshi had read *Meditation in Action*, and had heard praise from his own students who’d met the young Tibetan. Roshi had also startled his followers one evening by saying – apropos of nothing they could see – “Someone is coming. After he comes, maybe no one will be left here at Zen Center but me.” He was referring to Trungpa Rinpoche.

Diana Mukpo recalled that on their first visit, Rinpoche was quite interested in how Suzuki Roshi taught his American students the technique of counting the breaths during sitting meditation. Rinpoche also took careful note of the forms and atmosphere of the Zen Center. Up to this point - in his first year in America - Trungpa Rinpoche had stressed sitting meditation for his students, in distinction from other practices in the Tibetan traditions, but had given little instruction as to detailed form or technique.

During this visit and in subsequent joyful meetings and letters, the two teachers shared ideas for furthering buddhadharma in America, among them exchanging students and teachings, founding a Buddhist university, and creating a dharmically-oriented therapeutic community. Trungpa Rinpoche did in short order send several of his senior students for training to Tassajara, and with Suzuki Roshi’s blessing, used experienced Zen Center practitioners to lead extended sittings – day-long (*nyinthün*) and month-long (*dathün*) retreats - in his burgeoning scene in Vermont and the Rocky Mountains. Others of their shared visions took longer to come to fruition, but Trungpa Rinpoche always expressed his regard for Suzuki Roshi unequivocally in the meditation hall. One example of this is that during the first *dathün* in North America, Rinpoche allowed the rule of silence to be officially lifted only once each day - for a reading from *Zen Mind Beginner’s Mind*. Rinpoche adopted the zen-style sitting cushions known as *zafu*, and the practice of alternating sitting and walking meditation throughout a practice session. Perhaps the most striking expression of veneration is that from their first meeting until his death in 1987, Trungpa Rinpoche had placed on every shrine wall, in every center associated with his work, a picture of Suzuki Roshi. The other few photos on these walls were Rinpoche’s personal teachers and buddhist ancestors; that Suzuki Roshi’s Japanese face looked out from among Tibetan lineage holders was powerful poetry. It was also most fitting, for Suzuki Roshi referred to Trungpa Rinpoche as being “like my son.”

If the two masters clicked on an inner level, it may have been that they recognized one another as lonely spiritual voyagers. In poet Allen Ginsburg’s words they both had “burned their bridges. They gave all their



energy to trying to enlighten America, rather than depending on their older companions and monasteries. They both gave themselves completely to American karma.”

The two teachers cut away at what Trungpa Rinpoche would later famously call “spiritual materialism” - using religious practice to bolster one’s ego – and both saw sitting meditation as the primary path for American students. It is relatively difficult to manipulate *shamatha-vipashyana* for personal aggrandizement, or to make a trip out of *shikantaza*, as Roshi called the purest form of sitting. But both teachers ended up working patiently (if occasionally wrathfully) to keep their students on a goalless path. The America they found themselves in resembled a spiritual jungle: it was fertile, opulent, and rich; it was also overgrown, chaotic and full of danger for the seeker. Suzuki Roshi and Trungpa Rinpoche shared between them the disappointments and loneliness they felt in walking through that jungle, and in leading others through it.

Perhaps because he could intuit what Rinpoche was going through, Roshi accepted his drinking— an acceptance that upset some of his own students. “He drinks because he’s suffering,” Roshi explained with some sharpness once. “When I saw Alan Watts, I couldn’t accept his drinking, but when I met Trungpa Rinpoche, ...” Roshi threw up his hands, palms forward, “I gave up.”

Later that year Roshi, speaking after a serious operation, warned his students not to fix in any way only on what they could see. Discussing emptiness he told them, “...*The way you can struggle with this is to be supported by something, something you don’t know. As we are human beings, there must be that kind of feeling. You must feel it in this city or building or community. So whatever community it may be, it is necessary for it to have this kind of spiritual support.*

*“That is why I respect Trungpa Rinpoche. He is supporting us. You may criticize him because he drinks alcohol like I drink water, but that is a minor problem. He trusts you completely. He knows that if he is always supporting you in a true sense you will not criticize him, whatever he does. And he doesn’t mind whatever you say. That is not the point, you know. This kind of big spirit, without clinging to some special religion or form of practice, is necessary for human beings.”*

Roshi and Rinpoche offered one another ceremonial honor at rites of passage: descending from his apartment one May morning in a black mood to greet an unannounced visit from Trungpa Rinpoche, Roshi was softened and charmed to see the young lama holding his baby son in his arms and dancing strange circles with him in Zen Center’s front hall. When Rinpoche explained that he’d come to ask for a blessing for the boy, Roshi returned to his upstairs apartment, donned extravagant,

pale green robes, came back down and performed a blessing ritual in the Buddha Hall.

Soon however, the performance of rituals was coming from the other direction, for as intense and loving as this relationship was, it was cut short by Suzuki Roshi's death in December of 1971. Roshi died after painful months in bed with stomach cancer. When Trungpa heard only the diagnosis, he wept so intensely that a blood vessel in his eye burst, and blood-reddened tears flowed down his cheeks. After the death, Rinpoche went to see Roshi in the funeral home where he lay. In the small chamber where Roshi's body was Rinpoche meditated, chanted liturgies and performed mudras.

Trungpa Rinpoche's presence at Suzuki Roshi's funeral was also dramatic. The event was enormous and lengthy, and when it came time for the dignitaries in attendance to contribute Rinpoche was invited to step forward. He stood for several moments before the coffin silently weeping, and then tore the air with a passionate shout. At the same time, he threw open a long white silk scarf that arced down across the coffin.

As the ceremony wore on, Mrs. Suzuki took Rinpoche into a side room, and gave him Suzuki Roshi's walking stick – something Roshi had requested. One would be hard-pressed to imagine a more appropriate gift for a teacher treading the path, especially with the hobbling gait Rinpoche had, the result of a car accident some years earlier. If there were a more symbolic gift however, it might be the oryoki set (ritual eating bowls) that Rinpoche also inherited from Suzuki Roshi.

In the early days of Chinese zen, transmission of the lineage was symbolized either by the gift of a text from master to student, or the passing on of the master's robe and bowl. The walking stick, regarded as the legs of the buddha, and the bowls, seen as buddha's body, together with other ritual implements, have continued until the present to be instruments of transmission. This is not to say that Suzuki Roshi's lineage went to Trungpa Rinpoche alone, instead of to Richard Baker Roshi. Suzuki Roshi installed Baker as his successor at Zen Center with proper pomp and ceremony – and with great bravery as well, for Roshi was at death's door when he did the ceremony. But something did indeed flow from Suzuki Roshi to Trungpa Rinpoche, something more than the gifts, the pictures, the hints, the smiles, the invitations, accommodation and protection. Something even more than the many students who, with Suzuki Roshi's explicit permission, left Zen Center to study with Trungpa Rinpoche.

The next important zen connection Trungpa Rinpoche made was with the soft-spoken but powerful master Kobun Chino Otagawa. When Rinpoche had asked Suzuki Roshi about calligraphy, Roshi directed him to Kobun (as he liked to be called) living at that time about an hour's drive south of San Francisco. Their actual meeting turned out to be almost accidental. Trungpa Rinpoche had come to Los Altos to

consult with a group of psychologists who were busy transforming the Humanistic Psychology movement they'd founded into a new branch, later called Transpersonal Psychology. Abe Maslow, Anthony Sutich, and others, including Sonja Margulies, editor the influential *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, wanted to meet Trungpa Rinpoche because of his startling presentation of psychology as fully integrated into spiritual life. Margulies happened to be studying zen under Kobun, and when Rinpoche arrived, she made a point of introducing the two.

"They hit it off immediately," Margulies recalls. "They were both young men - Asians out of their cultures - both had married young Western girls - Kobun, a red-head, Trungpa, a blond - and both had young children. They had a lot in common." Beyond that, both men had admiring connections to Suzuki Roshi, were poets, would prove themselves master calligraphers, and both had an intuitive ability to speak the dharma to Western students, though in very different styles. On this early visit they did calligraphy together. Kobun had a variety of fine Japanese brushes, including a very large one. Trungpa Rinpoche had never worked with a brush of such a scale, and delighted in using it. They left Ms. Margulies an enormous calligraph: the words "self-realization" written in both Tibetan and Japanese scripts.

On a subsequent visit, Rinpoche met Kobun at Margulies's house to do calligraphy. The two men asked after one another's families, but neither answered as large sheets of rice paper were laid on the floor. They began drinking (green tea as well as sake) and mixing ink. Kobun deferred to Rinpoche, who first wrote out Tibetan letters for the names of Kobun's two children. Delighted, Kobun returned the favor by writing the names of Rinpoche's children in Japanese and patiently explaining the characters. Rinpoche then took another, larger sheet and wrote in thick Tibetan letters, "Mindfulness is the way of all the Buddhas."

Kobun responded by brushing "Great no mind" over his own large paper, to the delight of onlookers.

Kobun had come to the States in 1967 at Suzuki Roshi's invitation; having trained at Eiheiji Monastery as a ceremony master, he'd helped with many aspects of formal practice at Zen Center. Starting in the middle 1970's, as Trungpa Rinpoche gradually introduced more discipline and form to the Shambhala-Vajradhatu community, Kobun performed this same role again for Vajradhatu. He taught students the traditional approach to chanting, drumming, ritual procession, and most invasively for the students, zen-monastery-style eating, with *oryoki* bowls. Kobun introduced *oryoki* practice with care and a certain trepidation, for it is an intimate, inner practice of the zen tradition. Trungpa Rinpoche prized this practice highly, but struggled for its acceptance at his programs.

Another important stream of teachings flowed into Shambhala-Vajradhatu through connection to Kobun: the practice of the way of the bow, *kyudo*. In the mid-1970's Kobun introduced Trungpa Rinpoche to his own *kyudo* master and family friend, Kanjuro Shibata Sensei, 20<sup>th</sup>



in a familial succession of bowmakers to the throne of Japan. Trungpa Rinpoche invited Shibata Sensei to teach his martial art to the Shambhala sangha, and to take up residence in Boulder, CO. Over time, Shibata Sensei acceded to both requests, and propagated a form of kyudo that he felt cleaved to its spiritual roots. Sensei scorned of what he termed “sports kyudo” – purely trying to hit the target and win competitions. In Shambhala, Shibata Sensei was able to pass on the profound heart of his tradition.

When Trungpa Rinpoche created Naropa Institute in 1974, (fulfilling another part of the vision he’d shared with Suzuki Roshi) he asked Kobun to help with the place, and to look after it in the future. Kobun visited Naropa every year until his tragic death in the summer of 2001, guiding the school through his own elegant, understated presence and his serious practice. At the time of his death, Kobun held the Wisdom Chair at Naropa, and numerous of his artworks graced the campus.

The friendship between Kobun and Trungpa Rinpoche remained through the years as it had begun – gentle, loving, creative. “It was like family,” observed publisher Sam Bercholz, “There was absolutely no one-upmanship; they connected in a way that was simply like sharing food and drink. Kobun was always just there.” Indeed, early in their friendship, Kobun and Rinpoche pledged to be reborn as brothers throughout their lives.

Of the five roshis with whom Trungpa Rinpoche had significant relationships – Suzuki, Kobun, Eido, Maezumi, and Kwong – the next two were fruitful, but not without difficulty. (Kwong Roshi’s own recollections appear elsewhere in this volume; thus his story with Trungpa Rinpoche is not told here.)

In 1971, Eido Shimano Roshi hosted a visit from Trungpa Rinpoche. Eido Roshi– in the early days known as Tai-san – was a student of the great Soen Roshi, who’d sent him to the West. Tai-san had been eager to come, had learned a very good English; he’d first visited New York in 1963, serving as translator to Yasutani Roshi. During that visit, he stayed with disciples of D.T. Suzuki. Eido Roshi was by 1971 a dynamic, macho-tending zen teacher of the old style: he favored things Japanese and strict. He could on the other hand create an electrifying atmosphere through dramatic use of zen forms and his intense personal presence. He was also a talented artist.

Eido Roshi and Trungpa Rinpoche sat together a number of times in his home in New York, at least once together with Soen Roshi himself. On this occasion, Eido Roshi warned Trungpa Rinpoche – famous for making his students wait hours for a talk - that if he were to come to meet Soen Roshi, he would have to be on time. Rinpoche arrived a very correct ten minutes early. The masters all did calligraphy together and they were served sake by a devoted student who’d bizarrely kept the bottle against her body for three days. She’d been told that sake tasted best at “human body temperature.” Conviviality aside, Eido

Roshi remained in equal measure suspicious of and fascinated by Trungpa Rinpoche. "Who is this guy?" he asked a student who knew them both.

What Roshi seemed to want to know was how Trungpa Rinpoche could be an acknowledged lineage master, and a scholar with a devoted following, and at the same time have habits like smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, and conducting extramarital affairs with his students. Every time Eido Roshi had ventured into these behaviors – and it appears he ventured fairly often – he suffered unpleasant consequences. It was explained to Roshi that Rinpoche hid neither his drinking nor his philandering. Deceit and shame played no role in his approach, and he genuinely seemed to love all his students, not only the female ones with whom he went to bed.

Eido Roshi, on the other hand hadn't really been friends with his followers, nor had he ever relaxed with them until 1981 when, at the suggestion of Brother David Stendl-rast, he was invited to participate in a Buddhist-Christian conference in Boulder. There he saw how Trungpa Rinpoche worked closely and daily with many students, something Eido Roshi apparently began doing as well from this time on. Roshi also commented on how Rinpoche was served like a king by the sangha. This can only have reinforced his suspicions about Rinpoche; there are indeed powerful hierarchical distinctions drawn in the zen world, but they tend to be more subtle and hidden than the British and Japanese forms for service Rinpoche organized in his own home. Mixed feelings aside, the two teachers maintained a quiet, mutually respectful friendship during Rinpoche's latter years - a friendship that weathered the withdrawal of Eido's invitation to the Buddhist-Christian conferences, owing to rumour of scandal offensive to the Christians.

After Rinpoche's death in 1987, Eido Roshi came to Karmê Chöling where Trungpa Rinpoche was to be cremated in a few days. Unable to stay for the ceremony because of prior commitments, Roshi meditated with Rinpoche's body, met with his wife and eldest son (the present Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche) and performed private rituals. He also left as a gift a box of priceless incense that was subsequently used at the cremation.

Roshi felt so touched at Karmê Chöling that he stayed until the last minute before his flight, soaking up the atmosphere of devotion, and of the mindful, cheerful, indefatigable preparation that had been going on for many weeks. He also took the opportunity to meet with arriving Tibetan lamas and dignitaries. As his car finally raced at illegal speeds toward the airport, he proclaimed to his attendant over and over again that he'd at last seen the greatness of Trungpa Rinpoche; he'd seen the Rinpoche greatness in the environment of Karmê Chöling and in the comportment of his students.

Roshi went on to announce to his stressed driver that Trungpa Rinpoche was in fact "kami." This nomination from Shinto tradition would have pleased Trungpa Rinpoche very much, as it refers to a

larger-than-human energy usually associated with environments - rivers, valleys, mountains, springs, and so on; such energy could also be found associated with noble clans, nation-states, and genuine spiritual practice. “*Drala*” was the Tibetan term for much the same sort of thing. Invoking and manifesting drala had filled the last 10 years of Trungpa Rinpoche’s life and teaching.

In recent years, Eido Roshi has made a stream of visits to the Shambhala community, speaking at major practice centers, and guiding several Shambhala students through zen retreats. Still fascinated with Trungpa Rinpoche’s regalness, Eido Roshi commented in print that Trungpa Rinpoche had indeed been born to the manner of a king – that because of his utterly natural ease with it, Rinpoche made others happy in allowing them to serve him.

Finally returning to Naropa University in 2002, Eido Roshi gave the yearly Practice Day talk to the assembled community. He had conducted a wrenching funeral a few days before for Kobun Chino Roshi, and now, at the end of his talk he told Naropa students, “With large heartedness, sit, sit, sit - to experience our gratitude to Trungpa Rinpoche, the founder of Naropa University, or to express our gratitude to Kobun Chino Roshi, our long-time friend. The best way to express our gratitude is to practice, practice, practice and practice. And if you have extra time, practice more.”

It was at the 1976 ceremony installing Eido Roshi as abbot of Dai Bosatsu Monastery in upstate New York that Trungpa Rinpoche met Maezumi Roshi. A week-long sesshin preceded the event, timed for July 4th, and many important roshis and zen teachers were there. During a pause in the ceremonies, a thunderstorm broke out. Milling and chatting monks scattered in the downpour, but many a fine robe was soaked through. Trungpa Rinpoche, not so mobile as the zen brethren, had seated himself comfortably under an awning during the break and remained the lone dry VIP.

The lesson in holding one’s seat was driven home more pointedly later in the day to Dennis Genpo Merzel Roshi, who at the time was acting as Maezumi Roshi’s attendant. Genpo had been scurrying around between events, inviting people to come to Maezumi Roshi’s rooms. Trungpa Rinpoche accepted the invitation, and sat next to Genpo during the palaver. At one point Rinpoche leaned over and quietly asked, “Are you Roshi’s attendant?”

Until this time, Genpo had only thought of himself as Maezumi Roshi’s student, so he replied, “Sort of.”

“Then you should never leave his side!” Rinpoche told him sharply.

Genpo felt this direct address as a wake-up call – for himself personally, and for the entire Zen Center of Los Angeles community - on how to attend their teacher.

After the installation Trungpa Rinpoche invited Maezumi Roshi to fly back to Boulder with him, which he did, together with students Tetsugen Bernie Glassman and Genpo. In Denver, they retired to a good Chinese restaurant, where, following Japanese decorum, Roshi kept pouring sake for Rinpoche during the meal. Rinpoche did not, however, pour sake back for Roshi, a seeming violation of etiquette. Later Genpo, incensed about this, asked Roshi, “Why are you serving that guy all the time?”

Roshi replied, “He’s royalty and I’m a servant.”

Roshi went on to say though to his startled disciple, “It’s like in martial arts: the higher your stance, the easier it is to be knocked down.”

In 1977, Trungpa Rinpoche took his first extended retreat since arriving in North America. He asked Maezumi Roshi to come to Naropa Institute, there to serve as spiritual leader. In effect, he asked Roshi to be the spiritual reference point for the entire Boulder community, which numbered many hundreds of students. When Roshi arrived, Rinpoche took him for a drive through the gorgeous foothills surrounding the town and they ended up at a lookout point over Boulder. “This is my town,” Rinpoche pointed out, “and now I’m going to share it with you.” In a symbolic and probably necessary act, they pissed, and mixed their streams as they did so.

During the subsequent five weeks Roshi and two students – Genpo and Daishin Buksbizen - taught many things to the Boulder group: they led meditation, gave further instructions in oryoki and shrine-hall etiquette, and helped decipher an ancient text by Dogen-zenji, founder of Suzuki Roshi’s lineage in Japan.

The friendship between Rinpoche and Maezumi blossomed: they exchanged visits; Rinpoche extended invitations; Roshi gave gifts, among them a beautiful brocade *rakusu* (Buddhist chasuble) and another fine oryoki set; Rinpoche taught about the brilliant sun of inherent human goodness; Roshi responded by playfully titling his own first book *The Hazy Moon of Enlightenment*, and inviting Trungpa Rinpoche to write the introduction. In the piece, Rinpoche praised zen as the “vanguard of buddhadharma” in the United States, noting that it “remains genuine and powerful. Its simplicity and uncompromising style have caused Western minds to shed their complexities and confused ideology.” He concluded, “The Venerable Taizan Maezumi Roshi’s teaching has caused true Zen to penetrate into people’s minds and has cut through the trappings of their ego-oriented intentions. I have strong conviction that through his wisdom, buddhadharma will shine into the world, dispelling the darkness of samsaric confusion and bringing the gentle rain of compassion.

Riding the horse of mirage

Watching the sea of stars

Blossoming great eastern sun.”

From his side, Roshi told his students that one reason Trungpa Rinpoche was so powerful and successful was that he was not afraid to fully embrace opposites, chaos, and negativity.

But their own relationship was not without difficulties. Deep into the evening at a dinner party one night in 1979 at his house, Roshi suddenly challenged Rinpoche to answer a famous zen koan: “What is mu?”

“Mu” – meaning something like “no” or “not” – was how the great Chinese master Joshu responded to a question about a dog’s buddha nature. The ancient encounter, indeed the syllable itself, became zen’s most famous turning point. Disciples in the Rinzai lineage, which Roshi also held - were usually given the koan as their first spiritual hurdle. But this breach of collegiality seemed to irritate Trungpa Rinpoche and he refused to play along- or perhaps in stonewalling the question, he was, in a very zen style, mirroring “mu” back to Roshi. In any case, the dinner party drew to a rapid close.

Though there was little contact between the two in the early 1980’s, Roshi came to see Rinpoche during his last visit to Los Angeles in 1985. The atmosphere during their meeting was warm and affectionate, and two years later, upon news of Trungpa Rinpoche’s death, Maezumi Roshi immediately went to the Shambhala center in London, where he was teaching, and gave a glowing appreciation of Rinpoche’s life and work. A few days later he visited the Paris Shambhala Centre and gave an equally poignant, if very different eulogy. Maezumi-roshi’s first Western disciple, Tetsugen Bernie Glassman, continued through the years to play an advisory role to the Shambhala community, through teaching and serving on the board at Naropa University.

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Though Trungpa Rinpoche emphasized regular sitting practice for his Buddhist students and for those following the Shambhala Training path, it was not exactly the same method zen people used. Particularly in the early 1970’s students noticed that Rinpoche did not emphasize absorption techniques, nor concentration, and certainly not concentration on specific parts of the body, such as the *hara* – an area roughly between the navel and the genitals. This body region plays a role in zen meditation teachings, and more widely in Japanese culture. It is often taught that one should breathe from there, chant from there, or simply put strength there.

Instead of focusing inward on the meditator himself, the technique Rinpoche settled on taught practitioners to “go out” with their breath, and dissolve. Alternatively, he told many early students that they could simply, directly “open.” In other words, his technique did not point inwards, nor towards a center, but rather outwards, eschewing any central reference point at all. “Radiation with out a radiator” was one



way he described this.

In the ocean of Buddhist meditation techniques, a minor difference in how to follow one's breath may seem insignificant, but this subtle shift played out in broader consequences. If one meditates with awareness joined to one's environment, then it follows that the arena or theatre of meditation is more open, loose, and inclusive. Going further, Trungpa Rinpoche instructed his students not to make sharp distinctions in their approach to formal sitting periods, and post-meditation. He taught (and demonstrated) that with mindfulness and awareness, secular life could equally be seen as spiritual life. This view reached its fullest development in Shambhala vision. Here, every aspect of existence – from the manner in which one sat in the meditation hall or in an airplane, to how one ate, drank one's tea or one's liquor, ironed or stored or wore one's clothes, adorned oneself with jewelry or perfume or not, shopped, cooked, conducted business affairs, family affairs or romantic affairs – all these were suitable fields for practice. One could rouse precision, elegance, cheerfulness, humor, and insight, regardless of the situation. Having done so, Rinpoche taught, a person would be able to experience sacred world, no different from the very world one was already in - but seen with eyes cleared of pettiness through meditation and mindfulness.

When Trungpa Rinpoche leveled criticism at zen students, which he did at various times, it was either for being attached to zen or Japanese forms, or for having too strong a dichotomy between their formal practices – in robes, in the zendo – and their deportment in daily life, which he described as often “full of hanky-panky, very *un-zen-like* hanky-panky.” And when, in the early-to-mid 1980's a series of scandals hit American zen communities, it was not so much the sex, alcohol, or misuses of power and finance that brought teachers down, though these were certainly unwelcome surprises for many students. Under the rage that burned in many zen communities smoldered deception, and apparent hypocrisy. What went on with the teachers and leaders behind the scenes, it was discovered, was not concordant with what went on out front, before the community's gaze, or the public's.

When Trungpa Rinpoche took criticism on the other hand, which he did in no small measure from moral authorities outside his community – including a number of zen teachers, he took it for what he'd openly done, not for what he'd hidden. If one went to practice in the scene around Trungpa Rinpoche, one found out quickly what the score was, if one hadn't known already. Because he'd simply been who he was all along - naked, so to speak, before his students - Rinpoche spared the community and himself the exhausting degradation of a schism.

One might wonder why Trungpa Rinpoche had so much contact with zen people altogether; what was behind this association, which few other Tibetan teachers have pursued? Partly it seems to have been circumstance: when he began teaching in North America, the other

active practicing lineages were chiefly zen. Partly Rinpoche's connection to zen was rooted in his wide-ranging intellectual and spiritual appetite, his ecumenical approach. He'd read Alan Watt's books on zen while he was studying at Oxford, and had admired them immensely. (After Bercholz introduced them in 1972, Trungpa Rinpoche and Watts enjoyed one another's friendship. Interestingly, in November of 1973, Rinpoche and Watts spent a very pleasant afternoon and evening together – the last of Watts's life. He passed away peacefully in his sleep that night. Later, Rinpoche worried that Watts was stuck in an intermediate state – a ghost. He went with several students to Watts's library, which was then housed in a shed in Marin County, California. There in a field outside the building, Rinpoche had students chant several liturgies from the Kagyu Buddhist tradition, while he performed an exorcism.)

Through Naropa, Trungpa Rinpoche hosted teachers of many traditions. In addition to the roshis mentioned so far, many others also visited, Joshu Sasaki Roshi, Katagiri Roshi, Vietnamese zen masters Thich Man Giac and Thich Nhat Hanh, Korean master Seung Sahn, American teachers Tenshin Reb Anderson and Lou Nordstrom among them. One student laughed as she recalled her exasperation at a tea for Rinpoche and Thich Nhat Hanh – an appointment she'd worked hard for weeks to set up: "It was awful. They were both terrible. They were so completely polite and formal. Neither one of them would say a word!"

Perhaps a deeper reason behind Rinpoche's truck with zen lay in his quest to plant Buddhism in the west, fully and properly. Early on he saw that for dharma to take root, it would need a sympathetic cultural container. This he found notably lacking in North America, plagued as it had been with centuries of industrial materialism, physical and spiritual. Trungpa Rinpoche thus began to draw on his own upbringing as a secular ruler of a large area of Tibet (as well as a spiritual ruler), and to give teachings on creating an enlightened society. Specifically, he taught how one might work on oneself and one's surroundings to establish an uplifted, dignified culture featuring a daily life founded in and supportive of human goodness and beauty. These teachings - Shambhala vision - looked as well to other cultures for inspiration and example, including specific periods and leaders of India, China, Japan, and England.

It would be fair to say that in working with Japanese teachers and forms –this includes the zen-influenced "ways" of archery, tea, flower arranging, poetry and calligraphy, all of which played significant roles in the Shambhala community - Rinpoche was seeking to enrich the atmosphere for the practice of genuine spirituality.

The distinction between importing teachers, teachings, and forms for the purposes of enrichment on the one hand, and borrowing things from other traditions from a sense of impoverishment on the other is critical. To those who knew him, it was quite clear that Trungpa Rinpoche had no need of borrowing anything. Drawing from the profound well of his

own education and enlightenment, he had more than enough spiritual wealth to share with students. Despite his reputation as an outrageous siddha, he was equally the most exacting of teachers, taking no shortcuts on the meditative path, and offering none to his students. He loved the traditions he'd inherited, and worked tirelessly to propagate their authentic transmission. In early 1974, he felt it sufficiently pressing as to draw some distinctions: he held two seminars on the theme *Tantra and Zen* – one at his Vermont center, Karme Choling, and one in Boston.

While Rinpoche spent a good deal of time comparing and contrasting the two lineages in these talks, he also seemed to be conducting an experiment in how and how much to present tantric teachings altogether in a public context. The tradition of these teachings has been handed down in fiercely guarded, secret, oral transmissions. Trungpa Rinpoche began exploring how to talk about these things publically late in 1973; he continued with the two *Tantra and Zen* programs, and finally in the summer of 1974, gave a series of 15 talks on tantra to a public audience numbering more than 1,000 people at Naropa Institute. These talks were later collected into *Journey Without Goal*.

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“Zen is wild; tantra is crazy.”

In the *Tantra and Zen* programs, Rinpoche examined aims, methods, aesthetics and art-works of the two paths, stressing to his audience that both were based in traditional Buddhist meditation, and that both had elements of a gradual path, as well as the famous sudden awakening. He said that sudden enlightenment was actually impossible. At the risk of reducing to a few simple themes what took Trungpa Rinpoche seven insightful talks to elaborate, some points might be sketched out. The seminars are of sufficient interest that they should find their way into book form soon.

Trungpa Rinpoche located zen at the fruition phase of the mahayana (Great Path) tradition. He praised zen as an “extraordinary development of precision;” he called it fantastic, he pointed out exactly how zen, with its sharp black-and-white distinctions and its exhausting monastic schedule, led to a full realization of prajna (wisdom.) Then he went on to say that tantra, or vajrayana was a further step.

Where zen stands as the fruition of mahayana, Rinpoche said, tantric teachings reach the fruition of vajrayana, the third great aspect of the Buddhist path. Where zen leads to a clear, open, lofty mind, tantra points to ordinary mind, the lowest of the low. Where zen aesthetic, based in the Yogacharin tradition of “mind-only,” leads to statements of refined simplicity and elegance, tantra needs no statement at all, opting instead for the naked bluntness of “things as they are.” Rinpoche pictured such differences for his hirsute audiences as being like a beautiful tea cup (zen) compared to a skull-cup (tantra;) as like a

beautifully dressed noble person (zen,) compared to an unemployed, unshaven samurai. That tantric aesthetic was rougher stemmed not from its lack of sophistication or practice. The difference came from the notion that refinement or self-conscious artistic statement were no longer necessary for the tantric yogi. Such yogis were to conduct themselves in a direct, immediate manner, beyond dualistic distinction.

It's startling that Trungpa Rinpoche could posit tantra as an evolution of zen, a step beyond it, and yet convey absolutely no sense of belittlement to the zen tradition. But that is exactly what he manages in the seminars, through sympathetic insight and admiration. The matter of their relative status for him is not clear-cut in any case. In other talks on zen, Rinpoche acknowledged that it would definitely be possible for zen practitioners to attain tantric realization, and he mentions Suzuki Roshi as an example. He further allowed, in a stunning commentary on the zen "ox-herding" pictures, that the latter illustrations portray tantric understanding. He wrote, "...the final realization of zen leads to the wisdom of Maha Ati"(the highest level of tantra.) But according to Rinpoche's commentary, this is portrayed in the seventh drawing of the sequence. The eighth, ninth, and tenth pictures - all further steps on the *zen* path - show aspects tantric enlightenment. Thus it seems that on the one hand zen leads to tantra, but on the other hand, the zen path, seen through its art, accurately describes tantric fruition – how could this be? Perhaps zen and tantra are not what one imagines?

More practically, it is clear from the way Trungpa Rinpoche discusses zen that he has an insider's view of the training. When he describes the philosophical basis of zen, or the koans, or what life in a zen monastery feels like, it is though he has been through it. Perhaps, having been a monastic for many years himself, he had in a sense done so. Such sensibility gave him an unnerving grip on the zen students who came to his sangha after studying with Suzuki Roshi – a great many of these after Roshi's death – or from other zen teachers. Rinpoche lauded their good sitting records, but seemed to know precisely how any zen person might have corrupted or gotten tricky in their practice, and what problems this tendency could pose in the tantrayana.

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...the laughter died down, and Rinpoche took another sip, looking out over the rim of his glass for the next questioner, the next challenger. I put up my hand. He nodded at me, and suddenly it felt like being in the paralyzing gaze of a lion.

"Don't we have to try to take care of ourselves?" I blurted.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, if we want to see, don't we have to protect our eyes?"

He smoked his cigarette and took his time answering. I busied myself in thinking what I could say to his possible responses.

“There’s nothing to protect.”

I hadn’t thought of that. Stunned, I looked up at Suzuki Roshi, who glanced at me with raised eyebrows. Rinpoche repeated, “There’s nothing to protect.”

That left only one thing to say.

I bowed and said it:

“Thank you.”

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#### Note

Many people generously gave time and energy to this project, sitting still for interviews, answering questions, providing materials, allowing materials to be used, tracking down details. Among them are: Richard Arthure, John Bailes, Hathaway Barry, Sam Bercholz, Stephen Bodian, Cheryl Campbell, David Chadwick, Sarah Coleman, Carol Gallup, Carolyn Gimian, Robert Miphram Halpern, Moh Hardin, Lynele Jones, Judy Lief, Sonja Margulies, Genpo Dennis Merzel, Fabrice Midal, Bonnie Miller, Martin Mosko, Diana J.Mukpo, Henry Schaeffer, Paul Shippee, Judith Simmer-Brown, Michael Wenger. I thank all of these kind people, as well as anyone I’ve stupidly neglected to mention. Despite all this help, there may be errors in the piece; responsibility for these lies with me.

This article exposes some interesting fields for further research and study. It can’t do much more than that, I’m afraid, since the topic of Trungpa Rinpoche and zen is potentially quite vast. It is risky to write an article like this one in any case: the author can get things wrong, leave things out, offend people. I’ve only undertaken it because if people don’t take such risks, a rich vein of teachings may be lost to the future. May this foolishness inspire others.

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