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## Chögyam Trungpa, Freedom, and Meditation The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

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Some of you have heard me speak before about my interest in **pragmatic approaches to meditation**. Such approaches seek to balance the best of traditional Buddhism with all that we know here in the **early twenty-first century**. One significant figure in this movement (broadly speaking) is Chögyam Trungpa, who died in 1987 at the far too young age of 48 from health complications following a heart attack. You'll sometimes hear a title added at the end of his name, Chögyam Trungpa *Rinpoche*, a Tibetan honorific that means "precious one."

Today he is remembered as an inspiring, charismatic, and controversial teacher. Drawing from his online biography, he was the "11th descendent in a line of important teachers in one of four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism. And he helped promote a "non-sectarian" approach within the Tibetan tradition, which sought to **"bring together and make available all the valuable teachings of the different schools, free of sectarian rivalry."**

In his early years, he received a thorough, traditional monastic education and was named the head of a group of monasteries in Tibet. But **a major turning point came in 1959, when he twenty years old. The Chinese Communist party took control of Tibet, and he was forced to flee his native country.** Along with a few other monks, he was able to escape over the Himalayas to India. (Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama, was forced into exile the same year.)

Trungpa moved to England in 1963, where he studied **"comparative religion, philosophy, and fine arts at Oxford University."** In 1967, he moved to Scotland and founded the first Tibetan Buddhist practice center in the West. "Shortly thereafter, a variety of experiences

—including a car accident that left him partially paralyzed on the left side of his body—led to his decision to give up his monastic vows and work as a lay teacher.”

During his lifetime, he published fourteen books. The first of these appeared in 1969, titled *Meditation in Action*. The next year, **1970, was another major turning point. He got married, moved to the United States, and opened a meditation center in Vermont.** Now, it is important to be honest that the person he married was a sixteen-year-old from an upper-class English family who was one of his students. For anyone curious, you can read her perspective in her memoir, *Dragon Thunder: My Life with Chögyam Trungpa*. Part of what she has said for herself is that:

For him there was a slightly different cultural context, because people in Tibet tended to get married a lot younger than they do in the West. From my perspective, I really was not attached to the conceptual norms I had grown up with; to a certain extent I'd rather radically rejected my culture. I really wasn't looking at it from the reference point of whether it was appropriate or not. I simply had this unbelievable connection with him that felt to me very natural. I think you can say the proof is in the pudding. I don't feel I was exploited because this was not a casual encounter. This is something that developed into a deep, meaningful, lifelong relationship.... On the other hand...**I'm certainly not saying that I would condone 28-year-olds sleeping with 15-year-olds.**

They did stay married, had four sons together, and it was 1970, in the wake of the countercultural movements of the 1960s. But **Trungpa also reportedly had sexual relationships with many other students, and seriously abused alcohol over many years** (*The Other Side of Eden* xiv - xv, 31, 34, 40-41, 176).

In the spirit of fairness, it may be important to name that similar clergy/congregant dynamics were happening in Unitarian Universalism as well as many other religious movements at that time (including into the present) which parallel abusive guru/student relationships. And **while much good has come from the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s, there has also been a shadow side in which sexual freedom created opportunities for abuse.** The blasé attitude was often along the lines of, “Stop being so puritanical, it'll be fine.” In a few cases perhaps it was

fine, but in many cases it was not fine. **Abuse of power and betrayal of sacred trust caused lasting harm to individuals and religious communities.** If you are interested in learning more, I strongly recommend the courageous lecture delivered last year at UU General Assembly by my colleague The Rev. Gail Seavey titled “If Our Secrets Define Us.”

As our movement has sought to learn from misconduct in the past, a few years ago the UU Minister’s Association distilled our sexual ethics guidelines to a simple, clear set of twenty-one words: **“I will not engage in sexual contact, sexualized behavior, or a sexual relationship with any person I serve as a minister.”** If a minister chooses to enter into a relationship with someone for whom they have served as a minister, the ministerial relationship must end. And there are recommended best practices for transparency and accountability to increase the chance of avoiding harm when transitioning to a non-ministerial relationship.

At this point, I have in some ways moved afield from the life and teachings of Chögyam Trungpa, but as I have begun to explore his life and teachings more deeply, **I do not know how to talk about him responsibly without addressing the larger context of power dynamics and sexual misconduct** that we have greater clarity about today than we did in the 1970s and 1980s—although perhaps lack of clarity was less a factor than a lack of processes for holding abusers accountable, processes much more accessible today in the wake of the Anita Hill hearings and related movements, even as the current system remains far from perfect.

Returning to Trungpa’s story, why mention him at all today? The main reason is that **despite his major ethical shortcomings in some areas, it is nevertheless true that he had a particular genius for presenting traditional Buddhist teachings in a way that was accessible to a Western audience.** He was a trailblazer in bringing Buddhism to the West.

One significant part of that legacy was founding Naropa University in 1974 in Boulder, Colorado. Named after an 11th-century Indian Buddhist sage, **Naropa University became the first Buddhist-inspired academic institution in the United States to become accredited.** It is centered on a paradigm of “contemplative education.” The school began making a name for itself immediately when, for the first summer session, Trungpa invited Beat poets—including Allen Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, John Cage, and Diane di Prima—to lead sessions. They called

themselves the “Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics.” (Kerouac had died a few years earlier in 1969 at the age of 47.)

A few years after founding Naropa, another significant part of Trungpa’s legacy was **founding the Shambhala Training program**, named after a legendary kingdom that was said to be founded on the Enlightenment principles. One of the main goals was to teach Westerners that meditation was about far more than what happened on your meditation cushion. Trungpa taught that the practices of meditation should be integrated into all aspects of everyday life in our modern, secularized world. There are now hundreds of Shambhala centers around the globe, including one in Baltimore and one in D.C.

Trungpa’s final move was to Nova Scotia, Canada in 1986, not long before his death in 1987. Some of you may be familiar with the teachings of Pema Chödrön (1936-), who was a student of Chögyam Trungpa. **Pema Chödrön, author of many beloved Buddhist books, is the director of Gampo Abbey in Nova Scotia which Trungpa founded.** Today, Sakyong Mipham (1962-), the eldest son of Diana Mukpo and Chögyam Trungpa, runs the Shambhala organization.

Depending on how deeply you want to dive into this perspective, there is a ten-part Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa, each volume of which weighs in at many hundreds of pages—totaling well over 5,000 pages. The advice I received from people much more familiar than I am with the Shambhala tradition was to start with Volume 3 of his Collected Works, which skips over some of his early writings in England and starts with some of his best material when he was coming into his own in the United States and discerning how to teach at the intersection of traditional Buddhism and the modern West. Or for a much shorter version, you can **start with the two most important books collected in that volume, Cutting through Spiritual Materialism** (based on lectures from 1970 to 1971), and The Myth of Freedom and the Way of Meditation (based on lectures from 1971 to 1973). They are each only about 200 pages.

In reflecting on the mixed legacy of figures like Chögyam Trungpa, one of the most helpful frameworks I have found is what the philosopher Ken Wilber called the “**Level/Line Fallacy.**” Each of us has the potential to progress through stages of development along many different parallel lines. There are stages of *kinesthetic* development as babies learn to first hold their neck up, then roll over, crawl, walk, and run—and some people even reach Olympic levels

of kinesthetic development that are honestly beyond either the aptitude or inclination of most of us. There are also stages of *cognitive* development as babies learn to differentiate their sense of self from their environment, then to talk, read, and write—leading all the way up to world-class levels of cognitive development that most of us will never reach, such as winning a Nobel Prize. There are similar stages of *spiritual* development, *moral* development, *emotional* development, *aesthetic* development, and more.

And here's the key insight of the "Level/Line Fallacy": though **each of these lines of development are in many ways *parallel to one another***; they are *non-intersecting*. This framework helps explain how we can have, for example, an NFL football player with world-class kinesthetic development, who is arrested for domestic violence—a serious deficit in certain levels of spiritual, moral, and emotional development. Or consider how an artist might have heightened emotional and aesthetic develop, but not be the most skilled athlete. (Of course, this is not a commentary on all athletes or all artists. Please, no emails.) Rather, the point is to recognize that **someone like Chögyam Trungpa might have legitimate, world-class spiritual insight, but be tragically *underdeveloped in other areas***. There can be a seductive temptation to think that someone who excels in one area must be great in all areas. But if we pause for a moment, we might begin to perceive that it is perhaps predictably the case that a maniacal focus upon one area—or a few areas—will leave one almost inevitably underdeveloped in other areas. The "Level/Line Fallacy" is a reminder to be more realistic about those lifted up on pedestals in one area. (Yes, I recognize that I'm literally up on a stage right now.) For each of us, this insight is an invitation to hold a mirror up to ourselves.

For me, learning more about Trungpa has been an important process of wrestling with the legacy of someone who was at the forefront of teaching meditation in a way that is pragmatic, Westernized, and deeply transformative in a positive way for many students then and now. But it is also **important to be honest about the shadow sides our histories**. I will have to plan another sermon that goes more into the teachings of Chögyam Trungpa, but for now, I will conclude by inviting you to experience a meditation practice that is influenced by the pragmatic, secularized tradition that he helped pioneer. Vince Horn, one of the co-founders of my own

current practice community of [meditate.io](https://meditate.io), is a graduate of Naropa University, which Trungpa founded—although he attended years after Trungpa’s death.

As I said earlier, Trungpa emphasized that meditation practices were not only about what happened on your meditation cushion, but also about integrating mindfulness and heartfulness, awareness and insight into all aspects of our lives. Since today is the UUCF annual Business Meeting, I will add: even meetings! So I would like to invite you to experiment with a practice lightly adapted from a guided meditation called “**Mindful Meetings**”:

In this meditation, we will seek to settle our minds and soften our hearts for participating in a meeting.

If you are comfortable doing so, I invite you to close your eyes and assume a seated meditation posture: sitting up straight—relaxed, but alert—with your hands resting comfortably in your lap.

Let’s begin by noticing your body. Noticing the space it takes up.

Allowing your sitting bones to fall even more toward the earth. Allowing your spine to straighten even more toward the sky. Opening yourself to the inherent nobility of that posture: the embodiment of our First UU Principle of the “inherent worth and dignity of every person”—the basic goodness within each of us.

And now noticing the sounds in the room.

And now noticing your breathing. Sensing your breath as it moves in and out. And when your mind becomes absorbed in something other than breathing, just relax into this knowing. And gently return to breathing in, to breathing out. Noticing the body breathing itself.

Allowing planning or any kind of leaning into the future to fade into the background.

Noticing the emotions, the feelings that may be present. And allowing them to recede into the background and fall away. See if you can relax a little bit more. (May the body relax.)

Now consciously calling to mind the meeting some of us will attend in a few minutes—or the next meeting you will attend. I invite you to set an intention for this meeting.

And now allowing that intention to fade away with the breath as you sit here.

And now, bringing your attention to the heart, see if you can soften in this area. (May the body and heart soften.) Allowing an opening space to connect with others.

We can acknowledge that during meetings, it can be challenging to stay present. What area of your body can you intend to return to if and when you become absorbed in something other than what is happening in the arising and passing away of each new present moment?

Perhaps it is your hand resting in your lap, or your feet connected with the ground, or maybe it is the home base of your breath. Spend a few moments with your attention in that area, practicing.

Now, if you haven't already, see if you can notice the space in the room. Notice the space in the room and the area of your body that you are intended to use as an anchor.

When your mind becomes absorbed in something other than what is happening right now—and now, and now, and now—generally return to your anchor, while noticing the space in the room. May you—and we—have a fruitful and supportive meeting.