

## *Joining Heaven and Earth: Chögyam Trungpa and the Dharma Arts of Shambhala Buddhism*

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by  
**Kimberley Lueck**

*Kimberley Lueck is a musician, artist, writer, healer, and a Shambhala Buddhist practitioner. She works, too, as a choir director for a United Methodist church.*

**ASHE**

It is late June in 2000. I find myself surrealistically far away from my husband and three children, who are home in Minneapolis, while I spend my days in an intensive meditation program at a center in the Limousin region of central France called Dechen Chöling, or “Dharma Place of Great Bliss.” The verdant, rolling French countryside is Minnesota-like in humidity and agricultural richness, but the medieval town, St. Yrieix-sous-Aixe, with its ancient church tower visible from the meditation center, a walkable distance away on the single lane roads characteristic of much of rural Europe, as well as this eighteenth-century estate with chateau and out-buildings of stone and ancient timber, erase any notion that I could be in the Midwestern United States.

Under the cover of an enormous open-sided white tent, the meditation hall for this program is sumptuously hung with satin banners exuding brilliant color: orange, red, golden yellow, royal blue and white. Elaborate, brocade framed Tibetan *thangkas*<sup>1</sup> further inundate the visual senses, and the eye is pulled to the silk brocade upholstered shrine with objects arranged very deliberately. The color, precision, and richness are overwhelming. On an elegant low table in front of the shrine, from a slender stalk of burning incense, a thin plume of smoke rises, looking alternately solid, as though one might grab hold, and then dissolving into the atmosphere of the room. Beyond the edges of the tent in one direction is a pasture where horses are cantering playfully in the distance, while behind me cows graze so close to the perimeter of the tent that I could touch their soft snouts if I wished. Flies also make their home, lazily buzzing from not too distant cow pies to investigate what I might have to offer, while I kneel on a blue meditation cushion in a sea of the same. It is in this environment, at once breathtakingly beautiful, excruciatingly gentle and also very ordinary, that I am a warrior in training, seeking to root out the enemy, aggression, with my weapon, which is a twelve-inch-long Japanese calligraphy brush, and its ammunition, a pot of deep black sumi ink joining together on the battleground of a pile of startlingly white paper.

This is the day in the retreat when we, myself and a group of fifty co-participants from Europe, the United States, and Canada, have received our brush, and the instruction for which we have been prepared with many hours of sitting meditation and teaching lectures. It is a calligraphy meditation called the Stroke of Ashe.

### **CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA AND SHAMBHALA**

The meditation program, known as Warrior Assembly, is the conception of Tibetan Buddhist meditation master, artist, poet, and writer, Chögyam

Trungpa. My participation is the culmination of two years of study including eleven weekends of sitting meditation intensives in a path Trungpa developed called



Shambhala Training. Along this path, the students have been introduced to practices known as Shambhala Arts, including Japanese flower arranging (*ikebana*) and tea ceremony, and now calligraphy.

Trungpa, who came to the West after Tibet was forcibly annexed by China in 1959, was trained as a young monk in traditional monastic disciplines of meditation and study of dharma teachings, as well as calligraphic arts, monastic dance, and *thankga* painting. After four years in exile in Dharamsala, India, he received a Spaulding scholarship at Oxford, England. When he left his refuge in India, he was quoted as saying, "I am going west to find Shambhala."<sup>2</sup> Asian legend offers that a kingdom called Shambhala, also known popularly in the West as Shangri-la, became a completely enlightened society. Trungpa elaborates on this in *Shambhala: Sacred Path of the Warrior*: "According to the legends, this was a place of peace and prosperity, governed by wise and compassionate rulers. The citizens were equally kind and learned, so that, in general, the kingdom was a model society."<sup>3</sup>

At Oxford, Trungpa studied comparative religion and Western philosophy, as well as English. He also studied Japanese flower arranging and received a degree from the Sogetsu school of *ikebana*. Still a monastic, he began to attract students in England and co-founded a center in Scotland where students came to study Tibetan Buddhism. Ultimately he was dissatisfied with the direction of this work, claiming "

... the scale of activity was small, and the people who did come to participate seemed to be slightly missing the point."<sup>4</sup> After a retreat in Bhutan, he returned to England and suffered a car accident from which he awoke partially paralyzed on his left side, a disability he would live with for the rest of his life. Rather than despairing, he saw it as his wake-up call, and recounts, "I realized that I could no longer preserve any privacy for myself, any special identity or legitimacy. I should not hide behind the robes of a monk, which for me turned out only to be an obstacle."<sup>5</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Trungpa gave up his monastic vows and married a young English woman, Diana Pybus—choices which were received with confusion by many of his students in Great Britain. Inspired and invited by American students to relocate in North America, he and his wife moved in 1970 to rural Vermont, and then to Boulder, Colorado, and later Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he died in 1987.

From the time of his arrival, Trungpa's Buddhist teaching and a colorful personal style attracted artists in the American world of art. Beginning in the early 1970s, he participated in cooperative arts endeavors in many arenas, including theater, performance art, poetry, and dance, as well as the visual arts. He hosted numerous public seminars around the country, which included, in collaboration with his students, art installations of his design, which were presented in conjunction with lectures on what he termed *dharma* art.<sup>6</sup>

#### ENCOUNTERING TRUNGPA AND *IKEBANA*

Lisa Stanley, photography and video artist, and *ikebana* practitioner who is also currently professor of fine art at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, encountered Chögyam Trungpa for the first time in the early 1980s. He had come to San Francisco, where she was an art student, to lead a dharma art program. Stanley had been introduced to the practice of meditation by some of his students so when apprised of the coming dharma art event, she leaped at the opportunity to attend. She quickly became one of the assistants to Trungpa who were known as "Explorers of the Richness of the Phenomenal World."

This description points to a central teaching of Shambhala Buddhism offered by Trungpa. He emphasized the power of awareness to awaken persons to the sacred world and its inherent richness, which is the world we are already part of when we

*Lisa Stanley has been a visual artist for over thirty years. She received her BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute and an MFA from the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her work has been exhibited nationally and she is currently an assistant professor of art at St. John's University. She began her study and practice of Dharma Art in 1981 while working with Chögyam Trungpa on his installation in San Francisco. In 2006, she has a grant to continue her study of ikebana in Tokyo, Japan.*



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actually take notice. Because we have sense perceptions, we are privy to the richness. Speaking of this availability to sacredness through awareness, Trungpa writes:

You experience a vast realm of perceptions unfolding. There is unlimited sound, unlimited sight, unlimited taste, unlimited feeling and so on. The realm of perception is limitless, so limitless that perception itself is primordial, unthinkable, beyond thought. There are so many perceptions that they are beyond imagination. There are a vast number of sounds. There are sounds that you have never heard. There are sights and colors you have never seen. There are feelings that you have never experienced before. There are endless fields of perception.<sup>7</sup>

Offered this perceptual view, the Explorers would do the legwork of gathering materials for environmental installations that became exhibits and culminating in the dharma arts seminars. According to Stanley, the installation being designed for the San Francisco dharma arts event was to be enormous, essentially offering Trungpa's vision of an enlightened home. The task at hand would include gathering furniture and other objects, as well as branches for *ikebana* arrangements, some of which were as large as eight feet high.

Grounded in contemplative practice, the art of *ikebana* has its roots in an early Chinese Buddhist practice of offering flowers to the shrine. When Buddhism made

its way to Japan, the flower practice became formalized and infused with the Japanese Shinto cosmology, which understands heaven and earth joined together in the human. Thus, *ikebana* arrangements start with three branches, each one representing one of the cosmological principles. First, one places the heaven branch, then the earth branch, and finally joins them with the human branch. The practice includes finding one's own materials in nature—thus relating to the seasons very directly—and learning to recognize their inherent richness apart from one's own preconceptions.

With these principles as groundings, the Explorers would gather the materials to be arranged, with very specific instructions from Trungpa as to their manifestation. Stanley particularly remembers the search for the *tenno* branch,<sup>8</sup>

the largest in an arrangement for a *tenno* room where people gathered for formal conversation. The branch was to curve in very specific ways, and was, of course, not to be manipulated into the shape sought, but rather follow that found in nature. "We spent three months looking for the branch and finally located it in Golden Gate Park. Of course, you don't just cut large branches off of trees in Golden Gate Park, so our job was also to obtain permission, which we were eventually granted. I remember the cutting was actually a ritual, with Rinpoche there, and this huge branch could not touch the ground, so it had to be caught in a fabric cradle and very carefully carried back."

She compares Trungpa's view of the arts with her experience with Western academic training, "Trungpa taught that a fundamental aspect of genuine art is that it is non-aggressive to oneself and to others. He gave us a slogan, 'elegance



Lisa Stanley  
Foil Ikebana

overcomes aggression,' and this is very different from my experience of the ego-based world of academic art, where you have to get shows, and get written up, and publish. Trungpa taught that this is not a practice for people who think of themselves as artists, *per se*—that we all have sense perceptions and we are all capable of communicating sacredness."

As she moves forward in her own work, she is drawn back to her early experience of the environmental installations with Trungpa. She is eager to explore installations in which her videography and photographs can dance spontaneously with *ikebana* arrangements. In doing so, she brings to the process the question, "How could photography and moving images relate to flowers?" She is also eager to dissolve the distinction between her academic responsibilities and her dharmic art practices, so that, as she says, "My continuous practice can be to go out and wait for that aha! moment, when sparky mind arises and I am really paying attention."

### TRUNGPA AND THE DAWN OF GREAT EASTERN SUN VISION

... [T]he concept of Great Eastern Sun is threefold. First is having a sense of goodness in yourself. Second, having some sense of decency in yourself already, you can project that to your audience, your clientele, or the world in general. In that way a tremendous trust is established: goodness, decency, and trust. Third, because all of that has been established, therefore you can create what's known as enlightened society—by works of art, by basic sanity and also by artists beginning to practice sitting meditation.<sup>9</sup>

While teaching an intensive Buddhist retreat in Land O'Lakes, Wisconsin, in 1976, Trungpa uncovered what he recognized as Shambhala *terma*, which means "treasure" in Tibetan. *Terma*, in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, refers to teachings hidden by a master until a future time calls for their revelation. They may be physically hidden in rocks or caves, or hidden and discovered in the mind stream—a sort of divination archeology. The Shambhala *terma* began with the vision of the calligraphy stroke, the *Ashé*. Central also to the Shambhala view transmitted by Trungpa is the symbol and logic of the Great Eastern Sun, which is emblematic of the brilliance inherent in our world and its constant availability to us and thus, the primordial quality of experience before concept. Trungpa's reception and transmission of these teachings marked a profound change in the approach his community of practitioners had taken up to that point. The community of practitioners around Trungpa had begun to get too comfortable in their Buddhist expertise. According to Carolyn Gimian, editor of much of Trungpa's writing, the *sangha* at the time was ready for a nudge.

If we were asked what Buddhism was about, a stream of foreign words often issued forth from our lips. And we were full of ourselves, sure that we were the best of the best of the new breed of American Buddhists. . . . I'm poking fun here, but I don't mean to belittle the students—rather I'm trying to clarify why it was so helpful and powerful to us for Rinpoche<sup>10</sup> to introduce Shambhala Training, forcing us to speak English and speak it from the heart.<sup>11</sup>

Into this milieu, and the milieu of the wider world, which Trungpa recognized as plagued by war and aggression, as well as religious conflict, he offered, as antidote, the Shambhala teachings, which he referred to as a secular path rather than a religious one. Having sought a method for offering the benefits of awareness practice to a wider audience, he felt the Shambhala path to be such a vehicle. In his introduction to *Shambhala: Sacred Path of the Warrior*, he writes,

I am honoured and grateful that in the past I have been able to present the wisdom and dignity of human life within the context of the religious teachings of Buddhism. Now it gives me tremendous joy to present the principles of Shambhala warriorship and to show how we can conduct our lives as warriors with fearlessness and rejoicing, without destroying one another. In this way the vision of the Great Eastern Sun can be promoted,

### NOTES

1. *Thangkas*, Tibetan for "painting" or "picture," are traditional Tibetan Buddhist iconographic art, used in meditative visualization practices, and the creation of which is a contemplative practice itself.
2. *Kalapa Journal* (2001) 26.
3. Trungpa, Chögyam, *Shambhala: Sacred Path of the Warrior* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1983) 17.
4. Trungpa, Chögyam, *Born in Tibet* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1995) 252-253.
5. *Ibid.*, 254.
6. *Dharma* is the Sanskrit term for "carrying" or "holding," and is central to Buddhist teaching and practice. It has several manifestations, including Buddha *dharma* or the teachings directly attributed to the Buddha, phenomenon as they are, and also the understanding of a great law which underlies the whole of existence.
7. *Sacred Path*, 101.
8. *Tenno* is a Japanese term and in this context, according to editor Carolyn Gimian, "the *tenno* room was a room in which formal meetings or discourse were conducted. There were *tatami* mats on the floor, where everyone participating in a gathering would be expected to sit. There were usually several calligraphies or Japanese brush paintings on display, as well as a flower arrangement and a few precious objects, such as a Japanese tea bowl or tea set, arranged for effect." Carolyn Rose Gimian, ed., *Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa*, vol. 7 (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2004) lxxi.

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and the goodness in everyone's heart can be realized without doubt.<sup>12</sup>

Integral to the cause of nurturing an awakened society, the Shambhala Arts of calligraphy and *ikebana*, as well as Japanese Zen archery (*kyudo*), the tea ceremony, horsemanship, and other practices, were the tools Trungpa offered to aid in establishing the awareness that no aspect of our phenomenal existence is considered trivial or non-essential, and therefore great care must be encouraged in all facets. Regarding art, he saw essentially no separation between art and life and dharma:

Dharma art is not purely about art and life alone. It has to do with how we handle ourselves altogether; how we hold a glass of water, how to put it down, how we can hold a note card and make it into a sacred scepter, how we can sit on a chair, how we can work with a table, how we do anything.<sup>13</sup>

#### CALLIGRAPHY: HEART AND BEAUTY

New York author, illustrator, calligrapher, and teacher Barbara Bash has enfolded the teachings of Shambhala Buddhism into her work since the mid-1970s. Led primarily by her curiosity as a college student, she studied drawing, ceramics, and dance before she discovered Western calligraphic book arts. All of these inform her primary teaching work now, as she leads students across the country in Big Brush workshops, inviting them to make a connection with the present moment through contemplative practice coupled with calligraphy strokes emanating from brushes as large as brooms.

She began studying Western calligraphy, drawn from childhood to the shapes of the Roman alphabet, and she was also deeply intrigued by the history of what she speaks of as "the alive period of Western calligraphic arts," the time between stone tablets and the printing press, roughly 100 C.E. to 1400 C.E. She says, "I began to get fascinated with the way the fonts reflected their periods. Though calligraphy was produced by very few people, and primarily monastics, there is a culturally reflective quality. The monasteries were conduits for the wider cultural point of view." She also relates, "Throughout the history of the world, calligraphy is associated with religion. It is one of the contemplative paths that synchronizes, that gets one to the present moment, at the same time letting something get through. We are the link between heaven and earth. We can join vision and ground and then express something. That is the human endeavor."

Western calligraphy was her ground, which she taught in the late 1970s under the auspices of Chögyam Trungpa at Naropa Institute.<sup>14</sup> She recalls having an interview with him, and feeling some trepidation in that environment where primarily Eastern religions and arts were being taught. She asked him, "Is this okay that I'm teaching Western forms?" She recalls his response as, "Absolutely. You must start with what you know, and then you can take a leap."

The roots of her current work she attributes to the meeting between the very precise Roman calligraphy she was doing and hearing Trungpa say, "It is possible to make a brushstroke which expresses your whole life." The manner in which she was approaching Roman calligraphy was leading to what she refers to as the "precision/depression syndrome." She elaborates, "... you can never get it precise enough and things can get pretty heavy." When she heard Trungpa make this declaration, her first thought was, "That means a very big brushstroke!"

Bash speaks of her current experience leading Big Brush workshops. She invites participants of all sorts of backgrounds, from corporate managers to the emotionally disturbed, into interaction with the present moment. She finds, "Being open to what comes to us, and contacting earth in the form of that good heart, over and over again, beauty is what shows up."

#### JOINING HEAVEN AND EARTH

Over the seventeen years from his arrival until his death in 1987, in answer to his powerful call "to make a full and proper presentation of the teachings of Buddhism,"<sup>15</sup> Chögyam Trungpa offered teachings in traditional Tibetan Buddhism, Shambhala Training, and the dharma arts. He established what are now over 160 practice centers, and what has become a respected liberal arts university in Naropa where, among other subjects, dance, fine arts, theatre, and poetry programs are taught through the lens and from a ground in meditation. Thousands of people have now been exposed to the Shambhala vision of an enlightened society, where a

#### NOTES, cont'd

9. *Collected Works*, 11-12.
10. *Rinpoche*, Tibetan for "precious jewel," is a traditional honorific title used by Trungpa's students.
11. *Collected Works*, xviii.
12. *Sacred Path*, 19-20.
13. *Collected Works*, 128.
14. Naropa Institute began as a summer program in 1974, and is now Naropa University, which was the first Buddhist-inspired liberal arts college in North America.
15. *Born in Tibet*, page 252.

#### OTHER SOURCES

All quotes from Lisa Stanley taken from a personal interview, July 22, 2005.

All quotes from Barbara Bash from a telephone interview, July 22, 2005.

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dualistic view of art and life, of sacred and secular is dissolved with a brush stroke, a branch placed, an awareness awakened to meet a phenomenal world found to be basically good and of infinite richness. Chögyam Trungpa's eldest son, Sakyong Mipham continues the legacy, nurturing the vision of enlightened society as a meditation master teacher, author, calligrapher.

And so, in the pastoral atmosphere of rural France, I am able to dip my brush in ink and make my first mark, a black dot in white space. I am nervous, and excited, and find myself falling in love with the ink, its blackness, its aroma and fluidity, and the softness, the weight and preciseness of the brush. We are reminded by our preceptors that each stroke we make is an opportunity to develop gentleness which overcomes aggression, and that we can literally cut aggression out with a mindful attention to our experience of this sensual environment. In the space created by awareness, humor arises. We can laugh at the inner dialogue, not out of derision, but as we might laugh at the tantrums of a precious and precocious child. This energy, too, exists in the sacred world and can be appreciated in becoming present to the totality of the moment.

I make my mark over and over again, and notice self-aggression in the form of constant mental critique, and ensuing comment on the critique, and outwardly manifesting when I find myself pressing so hard with my brush that a dozen hairs are twisted and torn off. The reminder is to come back to the present moment, to touch those experiences, rather than to follow them down a discursive and ultimately endless path of analysis and counter-analysis. I find myself smiling. The "why" has ceased to matter, and I come back to the whiteness of the paper, the richness of the ink, the weight of the brush, the instruction, glimpsing for a moment that in this very moment, I am joining heaven and earth. ❖

Barbara Bash  
*Big Brush Calligraphy*

