

On Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche

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Elsewhere on this site, I have written about my involvement with what came to be known as the human potential movement, which was prominent in the 1970s and '80s. Names associated with this thrust in its heyday included psychologists Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Fritz Perls; journalist and tai chi instructor George Leonard; writer on Zen Buddhism, Alan Watts; the founder of the Esalen Institute in California, Michael Murphy; and the founder of the personal growth training program est (without capital letters), Werner Erhard. I wrote about them in the August, 2011 thought, "On est and the human potential movement":

What tied these individuals and their activities together was their conviction that human beings have enormous untapped possibilities. We can be way better than we are and life can be way better than it is, and that applies even to those who by conventional standards are physically healthy, personally well adjusted and content, and materially well off. We don't set our standards high enough, they insisted; that's our big problem. While the focus in the human potential movement tended to be on one person at a time, there was the tacit belief, sometimes explicit, that individual self-realization would be the foundation of positive social transformation.

This thought is to add a name to the above list of people associated with the human potential movement, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and to recommend one of his books, *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (Shambhala Publications, reprint edition, 2010). Amazon has it, as well as some libraries. I re-read it the last couple of days, and again found it well worth my time.

Born in Tibet, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1939-1987) brought Tibetan Buddhism to the West. In 1959, following an unsuccessful uprising against the Chinese communists, Trungpa (Rinpoche is an honorific title), already the head of a Buddhist monastery at twenty, led a party of monks on an arduous trek across the Himalayas on foot and horseback to India. After four years as a spiritual advisor at a school in India, he studied comparative

religion at Oxford University in England. Then it was three years in Scotland, where he headed a meditation center that became the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the West, and then, beginning in 1970, it was seventeen years in America, and, the year before his death in 1987, he lived in Nova Scotia. In the U.S., Trungpa founded a number of meditation centers (I spent time in one of them, in Barnet Vermont) and the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado, which became the first accredited Buddhist university in North America. A biography of Trungpa was published to mixed reception in 2004—the criticism, that it is overly adulatory--though I found it helpful, *Chögyam Trungpa: His Life and Vision* (Shambhala Publications, 2010 edition). A documentary film—not all that informative about the substance of his message, but it does give a basic sense of him and the reaction his followers had to him—“Crazy Wisdom: The Life and Times of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche,” is available on Netflix streaming and for purchase at Amazon.

Trungpa possessed a remarkable command of English. Without notes, he gave talks seated in a chair (he was partially paralyzed on his left side from a car accident) to rapt audiences, including me the couple of times I saw him speak. Films and still pictures of him do not show him to be physically attractive or personally appealing, but in person he radiated a charismatic, compelling presence. His many books are drawn from transcripts of his talks.

Shambhala is a legendary ancient kingdom—it’s debated whether it ever actually existed—known as the source of learning and culture of Asian societies, particularly Tibet. The book *Shambhala*, the one I’m recommending, has a secular focus. It is not about Buddhism per se but rather a way to live: the path of enlightened bravery, heroism, and kindness. From the forward: “This book is a manual for people who have lost the principles of sacredness, dignity, and warriorship in their lives.” Some of the book’s themes: not being afraid to be who you truly are; discovering your inherent goodness and what you have to offer the world; and living with integrity, fearlessness, and joyousness. Trungpa devotes a chapter in the *Shambhala* to discussing and advocating meditation, which may prompt you to give meditation a try. I’ve incorporated meditation into a yoga/exercise routine I do in the mornings.

With *Shambhala*, I found it profitable to stop reading frequently and mark the page and put the book down and spend time reflecting and writing in my journal with reference to the concerns and issues in my life the passages I was reading at that time brought up; and then pick the book up, find my place, and continue reading, all the while staying vigilant to how what I was reading related to my life. I'm clearer, more focused, and, I believe, more myself and more self-affirming after reading the book. Of course, Trungpa's book may not work for you as well as it has for me, but my positive experience with it compels me, assuming you don't know of him, to let you know that Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche existed and that I consider his book *Shambhala* in particular (I've found his other books useful as well) worth checking into as a possible reading.