

Tuned in Dropouts Script

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Underwriting: And by a major grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities:
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Noel: Hey it's Noel. Just a heads up that this episode contains descriptions of sexual assault and religious abuse that some listeners may find disturbing.

Tyler: In August of 1972, a group of hippies gathered in the mountains of Red Feather Lakes, Colorado, a picturesque cluster of alpine lakes in the mountains northwest of Fort Collins.

Mark Szpakowski: So the whole land was very, raw in a sense. It wasn't built up at all. It was the beginning of what was going to happen in the next few years.

Noel: This is Mark Szpakowski <<Spa-KOH-ski>>. He was visiting Boulder from Berkeley, California.

Mark Szpakowski: There's almost nothing here, it's kind of bare in a way. But the energy's, you know, felt kind of slightly wild, and also that there was something kind of ancient and ongoing that was meeting this very fresh energy here in North America, in general.

Tyler: The counterculture of the 1960s and 70s was in full swing. And many of its members had flocked to Boulder to see and learn from a man named Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

Mark Szpakowski: So this was a seminar. And at the end of the seminar, there was a blessing of the land. Chogyam Trungpa, lit a candle. Everyone else had a candle and he lit the next candle and then that person lit the candle of the person next to them and so on and so on. And pretty soon all the candles were lit.

Noel: As the light spread throughout the crowd, Mark was overcome with the feeling that something big was happening.

Mark Szpakowski: So Buddhism has started 2500 years ago actually in Northern India and then had spread to the rest of India, to southern India, Southeast Asia, China and then Japan and actually around 600 A.D. So that's about 1500 years ago, it had come to Tibet from India.

Tyler: And now, Chogyam Trungpa was bringing Tibetan Buddhism to NORTH AMERICA. Though he wasn't the first to do so, he was doing it in a way that nobody had ever seen before.

Mark Szpakowski: And here we are in the mountains of Colorado, in the center of the United States, and there's a sense of this candle having been lit 2500 years ago and then from person to person had gone on over the years and finally here it was. And it was this kind of incredibly exciting moment of there we were. And there was American karma, so to speak, about to begin yet another journey. And, you know, Buddhism had taken on very unique forms in each country it went to. And the whole question was, OK, what kind of unique form is it going to take here.

Brigid Meier: He was a singularity.

Noel: This is Brigid Meier. She wasn't at the gathering, but had met Trungpa in San Francisco a couple years prior when she was studying ZEN Buddhism with another teacher, the famous Suzuki Roshi. She says that, at the time, meditation felt like a welcome way to deal with the chaos of the world.

Brigid Meier: And it was a refuge to be able to go and sit and practice with him and from the cultural tumult that, you know, the country was going through, the Vietnam War, all of that, the whole summer of love. You know, it was a huge cultural moment.

Reporter: There were anti-war demonstrations on college campuses and in cities from Los Angeles to Washington. Draft card burnings became common and the chant of: *Hell No! We Won't Go!* was the theme of the protest generation.

Protestors: Hell No! We Won't Go!

Brigid Meier: and he was kind of like this comet, that just blazed upon the scene and blew it all open. It was very exciting.

Noel: But despite his brilliance, and the positive influence Trungpa had on her and many others, Meier's feelings about him have grown more complicated over the years.

Tyler: She says that Rick Fields, author of a book called "How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America", says it best.

Brigid Meier: And he's talking about Chogyam Trungpa. And he said, you caused more trouble and did more good than anyone I'll ever know.

[Intro Music]

Tyler: From History Colorado Studios, this is Lost Highways: Dispatches from the Shadows of the Rocky Mountains. I'm Tyler Hill.

Noel: And I'm Noel Black. On each episode, Tyler and I explore our home state of Colorado and The American West.

Tyler: On this Episode, how a man named Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche brought Tibetan Buddhism to the west by way of Colorado, and the complicated legacy of a teacher whose abuses of power are all too relevant to our current cultural moment.

Noel: Revelations of widespread abuse in countless institutions continue to shape how we think of power, hierarchy and accountability. In Colorado, a recent report by the state's Attorney General found credible accusations of abuse against 52 Catholic priests. Not to mention the ongoing ramifications of the MeToo movement.

Tyler: This is a story about how powerful people from all kinds of communities can end up abusing their power. And about the complicated emotions people face when confronted with unacceptable behavior from someone they love and trust, and someone who's changed their lives for the better.

[Intro Music 2]

Noel: Chogyam Trungpa was born in a remote village in eastern Tibet on March 5th, 1939.

Here's Dr. Holly Gayley. She's an associate professor of Buddhism in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Colorado, Boulder.

Tyler: She's also a long-time member of the Shambhala community, which Trungpa started.

Dr. Holly Gayley: So Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche was born in eastern Tibet and at a young age was recognized as a tulku or reincarnate Lama, and he received the traditional training of a tulku, both in Buddhist philosophy and ritual.

Tyler: Here's Elizabeth King, one of Trungpa's early students in the United States.

Elizabeth King: He was discovered, so to speak, in the Tibetan way that monks traveled out to follow certain signs and discover him. And the way that they did that was to take religious implements that had belonged to his former incarnation. And they would present doubles of these instruments, and he would choose the correct ones that actually had belonged to him in a former incarnation.

Noel: Even at a very young age, Trungpa passed the tests.

Elizabeth King: So that actually happened. There were signs that he was going to be found in a certain area of Kham. There would be a yellow dog and certain painted colors on his home. So there were all sorts of signs they were looking for, and apparently they found him.

Noel: Then, the Chinese People's Liberation Army began destroying temples in Tibet, and he was forced to flee his homeland in 1959 at the age of 20.

Dr. Holly Gayley: It took him months with a party, that he was leading out of Tibet, and he made his way to safety in India in the late 1950s, around the same time as His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

Mark Szpakowski: It was an extremely arduous journey over the mountains, you know, with the passes being like 20000 feet high and with a whole bunch of people. And he made it to the Brahmaputra River in northern India and then became involved with the Tibetan refugee community there.

Dr. Holly Gayley: And in India, he started to study at the Young Lama School and went on to Oxford University on a scholarship and founded Samye Ling Monastery in Scotland.

Noel: Samye Ling is considered to be one of the very first Tibetan Buddhist Monasteries in the West.

Dr. Holly Gayley: and finally left the monastery and decided to leave behind his monks robes as well.

Noel: He renounced his monastic vows because he said the dharma -- or teachings -- needed to be free of Tibetan culture if it was going to take root in the West and survive the destruction of Tibetan monasteries.

Dr. Holly Gayley: and married a young British woman, Diana Pybus.

Tyler: Pybus was just 16 at the time, 14 years Trungpa's junior.

Amani King: And after his marriage, they decided to come to North America. He came to Canada and then finally to New York. And that was where I was fortunate to meet him shortly after he came to New York.

Mark Szpakowski: And then, 1970, made his way at first initially to Montreal, Canada, and then he got whatever the legalities were to get, enter the United States and started working there with students. Someone purchased a big farm in northern Vermont and that became the so-called Tail of the Tiger Practice Center.

Tyler: It was also in 1970 that Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche visited Boulder and established a Buddhist community there.

[Music]

Tyler: Trungpa built various communities in different parts of the continent. Many of them have been called different names over time.

Noel: In Vermont, Tail of the Tiger eventually became Karmê Chöling.

Tyler: In Boulder, what started as Karma Dzong grew to include the Rocky Mountain Dharma Center, which is now Shambhala Mountain Center, and the Naropa Institute, which became Naropa University, the first accredited Buddhist University in the country.

Noel: All of this came to be under an umbrella organization called Vajradhatu.

Tyler: Vajradhatu has now become "Shambhala International" and is headquartered in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Even though many people experienced Vajradhatu and Shambhala as two distinct eras of the same institution under different leaders, you may notice that those words are used interchangeably throughout the episode.

Noel: But back in New York, San Francisco, and Boulder, the explosion of the counterculture was changing everything.

Tyler: As we've discussed in previous episodes, the young people of the 70's were challenging the status quo, and determined to create a different world than the one their parents made for them.

Noel: And they were searching for meaning in a world that -- in light of Vietnam -- seemed cruel and indifferent.

Elizabeth King: I had become disillusioned with my Christian upbringing. And then by chance, I one day met and went to the house where he was staying.

Noel: Elizabeth King couldn't help but feel like she had stumbled upon something special

Elizabeth King: And when I walk into the room, I found out I was somewhat mesmerized by this figure. He just emanated a lot of power of some sort, and I recall feeling that I had been totally exposed and it was extremely uncomfortable. It was so embarrassing and I didn't know why. I just felt like he had seen through me. And that was a really powerful experience.

Tyler: Others who would join Trungpa's communities had similar experiences.

Noel: They were searching for something. And when they met him, it felt like they had found it.

Mark Szpakowski: The whole Vietnam War thing is happening, and the anti Vietnam War activities, there's a lot of radical activities. There's a counterculture happening. And people were experimenting with the psychedelic drugs and for many of them, that those created very powerful experiences and then they tried to understand those experiences and often they would turn to what they thought or maybe hope was some kind of insider wisdom on that in Buddhism.

[1971 National Retail Distributive Workers Union: Rally in Capital to End War]

David Livingston: Under the constitution, you can end the war! Not another..

[News Report]

News Reporter 1: A rock music festival that drew hundreds of thousands of young people to a dairy farm in White Lake, New York over the weekend, came to an end today, and we have a report from Richard O'Brian

News Reporter 2: First, the 20-mile traffic jams and five mile hikes, then the intense heat and sudden rain, the thirst and hunger from the shortage of water and food just for the opportunity to spend a few days in the country getting stoned on their drugs and grooving on the music.

Unknown Voice: Turn on, tune in, drop out.

Noel rewrite: Here's Dr. Suzanne Newcombe. She's the director of an organization called "Inform" out of the London School of Economics that seeks to provide accurate information on New Religious Movements.

Dr. Suzanne Newcombe: I think one of the interesting things about this moment in the 1960s and 70s was, it's, it, rather than being something completely new, it's more an expansion of scale. Because a lot of the first people who became monastic Buddhists or studied yoga and from Europe and America was actually around the turn of the 1900s, almost 50 or 60 years before the 1960s. And then, of course, the Beat Generation also was very much exploring drugs and Indian religiosity as well.

Tyler: And as part of their soul-searching, many young people were traveling to Asia.

Dr. Suzanne Newcombe: And the generation of young people who were really able to have the means and kind of the privilege to consider their economic consider their meaning in life without consideration of their economic standing, so it didn't have to go out and get a job straight away, they could afford to hitchhike their way from Europe to India. On the other hand, the Chinese invasion of Tibet was new and it really pushed Tibetans out into the public sphere and sharing their teachings in a way that hadn't been before.

[Music]

Tyler: As she mentioned earlier, Brigid Meier had found Zen Buddhism to be an escape from the turmoil of the times, and met Trungpa in May, 1970 while studying under the famous Zen teacher Suzuki Roshi in San Francisco. She says that Trungpa's charisma was a stark contrast to the buttoned up approach of the Zen Center organization and community at the time.

Brigid Meier: The scene itself, I'm sorry to say, was uptight, you know? It was just kind of regimented, and, and Trungpa was just this amazing- he came and he was loose, he was full of humor. He seemed to have this voracious appetite to connect with us, the curiosity. It was extraordinary.

Noel: The scene Trungpa was building around Tibetan Buddhism was vibrant and exciting. She remembers how in awe she was that first summer at Naropa Institute in 1974.

Brigid Meier: All of a sudden, there's this huge panoply of cultural luminaries, the beat poets, all these New York dancers, musicians. It was really amazing. I, I - there was nowhere else I wanted to be like, it felt like the center of the universe, you know, here we were- it was marvelous.

Noel: Even his appearance was captivating.

Elizabeth King: He his and he doesn't look like other Tibetans to me. He was a bit stocky and he had had a car accident in England, so he limped. He was jolly, generally speaking, I look at him and think about what a jolly person, most of the time

Noel: Here's Amani King. He's Elizabeth King's son, and he spent a part of his childhood in the Shambhala community.

Amani King: I think of him as kind of round, I don't know how to say it. But he had a kind of round face. He had a very sort of open face, usually had a smile. And that smile had a lot of generosity in it, maybe a little bit of mischief, too, like he did have that kind of prankster quality

at times. It kind of felt like he was poking people a little bit to get them out of their own trip, you know, to bring them back to the present moment, there was a little bit of this kind of playful, mischievous quality to him.

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche: Transcending anything that exists on this earth, and the materialistic thinking, the spiritual search and spiritual achievement and spiritual enlightenment and the spiritual power is regarded as one of the most highest thing, the greatest thing, that mankind ever could achieve.

Amani King: He had a interesting voice, a kind of high register and a kind of- a different cadence to his speech, a combination of a gentleness to his voice and a kind of sharpness to like, um, precision. I remember, yeah, the texture of that and the kind of the kind of music of his voice

Brigid Meier: He just radiated the sun. He was- this smile was all encompassing. You know, he's Tibetan, he's not all that tall. Dark skin, full lips, black hair.

Tyler: Brigid Meier remembers the first time she saw Trungpa teach.

Brigid Meier: He was wearing chinos or jeans and a plaid sport shirt. And he had kind of like a Beatle haircut. He was in the Unitarian church there and he had a large can of Colt 45 that he was drinking and he was smoking a Marlboro. Well, this was not our idea, heretofore of what a spiritual teacher looks like or how he comports himself. So there was a way in which he undercut all of our concepts, and I think he just kept doing that.

[Music]

Noel: Many were flocking to Asian traditions like Zen AND Tibetan Buddhism, yoga, and the Hare Krishna movement. In popular culture, beat poets like Jack Kerouac, Gary Snyder, and Alan Ginsberg were writing about American Karma, and white teachers like Ram Dass and Alan Watts, heard here, attracted students and followers from across the country.

Allan Watts: So, in this idea then, everybody is fundamentally the ultimate reality. Not god in a politically-kingly sense, but god in the sense of being the self. The deep down basic whatever there is and you're ALL that, only you're pretending you're not.

Tyler: But Trungpa was doing something different. Rather than simply transport the Dharma to the United States, he was specifically trying to develop a kind of Buddhism FOR AMERICANS. And he was doing it right here in Boulder.

Brigid Meier: It - there was almost this compelling invitation to co-create Western Buddhism with him.

Mark Szpakowski: So I think he always had this drive to teach. Actually, in fact, I remember a conversation we once had where I was with a group of people and we were talking about the fact that one of the moons of Jupiter you know, there are signs that there may be could possibly be life there. And his first response was, oh, we should go there and teach the Dharma.

Dr. Holly Gayley: He lay the ground for a Western understanding of Tibetan Buddhism. He was one of the earliest Tibetan lamas who came to the U.S. and he was one of the few who spoke English fluently.

Tyler: Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche was responsible for a number of innovations that made Tibetan Buddhism more accessible to Western audiences, and to hippies specifically.

Noel: He made meditation the entry point and foundation of Buddhist practice, rather than something that came later.

Dr. Holly Gayley: The kinds of meditation that people do today would normally have been done by monastics after years of study. And so he was influenced by Suzuki Roshi and the Zen approach to doing meditative intensives.

Tyler: He was one of the first to develop the idea of a Dharma Center which enabled his teachings to reach a broader spectrum of people than ever before.

Noel: He exposed Westerners to the Tibetan idea of "Crazy Wisdom".

Mark Szpakowski: Which is a English translation that Chogyam Trungpa coined for a Tibetan term and the Tibetan really means wisdom let loose.

Tyler: Teachers of "Crazy Wisdom" engaged in a teaching style that was often chaotic. Here's Elizabeth King.

Elizabeth King: For example, there was one student who followed his teacher for years and years and didn't understand what he was learning, maybe. And the teacher finally one day turned around and slapped him in the face with his sandal, instant became enlightened. So there's that shock value, I think, of maybe shaking up the world or seeing things other than the ordinary logic.

Noel: Trungpa was like a whirlwind tearing across the hippie scene. And nobody really knew what to make of his eccentricities.

Brigid Meier: Well, he kept morphing. I mean, sometimes he would wear Japanese robes. At one point, he shaved his head and he was wearing blue jeans and suspenders and lumberjack shirts. That was weird. And then other times, royal Tibetan robes of summer celebrants, and he was on a white horse wearing white military kind of from the Raj India armor and a pith helmet. And it's like, what the hell? Anyway, he loved it, he loved the theatricality of it all, it seems.

Dr. Holly Gayley: Another innovation of his was Shambhala training, where he created a path of study and practice that was completely secular. And it was a way to create a language around meditation that was not Buddhist. And I think that, you know, his influence, paved the way for what we know today as the mindfulness movement.

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche: My work is dedicated to present a notion of enlightenment to the west. The world is not going to be saved purely by religion alone. But the world can be saved also, secular enlightenment. This world does need your help badly, very badly, and so on behalf of this world [Crowd Laughs] I would like to request you to come and do something about it.

Tyler: But at times that secularization had unintended consequences. And SOME Americans who were drawn to Buddhism -- both inside and outside of Trungpa's communities -- started to miss the point.

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche: And we have coined this word called, Spiritual Materialism. That using the name of spirituality and ego-hood, try to become a greater person, wise person. Which is very dangerous, very problematic, and it not only destroy you but destroy all wisdom of humanity, and it is in fact Satanism.

Noel: Dr. Suzanne Newcombe.

Dr. Suzanne Newcombe: So this is the kind of idea of the secret, or that you can kind of change reality by willing it according to your- to positive thinking. So if you you imagine, you visualize your parking place, you can find a parking place. But on the other hand, the tensions between money and pursuing spiritual goals are in every time and every place.

Dr. Holly Gayley: It's complicated how Buddhist groups had to kind of fit into models that were not existent in Asia, for example, the Dharma Center. A Dharma Center that has to pay rent, it really is Tibetans and other Asian reformers or modernizers who have laid the ground for then the sort of appropriation of Buddhist techniques into secular arenas where their Buddhist origins are often erased.

Noel: In the 50 years since Trungpa first came to the United States, that erasure has become more and more common as Buddhist teachings have entered the mainstream. Amani King.

Amani King: And so I think the trick of bringing a religion like Tibetan Buddhism into a culture like America is, you know, that's just where the American psyche was at and still is that in so many ways, right, like, like goal oriented, achievement oriented and it's like *meditate harder*, you know, go, you know, get more peace.

Noel: Here's Matthew Remski. He's a researcher and investigative journalist covering institutional abuse in yoga and modern Buddhist organizations.

Tyler: He's also the host of a podcast called "Conspirituality."

Noel: He says that at the time Chogyam Trungpa was coming onto the scene, early iterations of wellness culture were already starting to take off. Despite the radical politics and social justice movements of the era, by the time many found Eastern spiritual practices, it seemed like a relief to have an opportunity to turn their attention inward.

Matthew Remski: I think that what we have with many of the sort of foundational ideologies within the human potential movement is this kind of blessing of the notion of the individual path, the individual self as being, of paramount of paramount value. That, you know, the attention that we pay to how a community functions or what happens in local politics, that those are all, quote unquote, worldly matters, that, the grandiose narratives of Asian spirituality don't really apply themselves to, or something like that.

Brigid Meier: Well, like, for instance, I remember in 1967, one of the students asked Suzuki Roshi, what do we do about the war? And he very clearly said the war is right here. In other words, the war is right inside your own mind. You know, you are not a peaceful person. We are not peaceful people. We have all of this churning within us. And if you're able to quiet your mind. Along with quiet in your body, focusing on your breath, your outbreath. That that is one way of working with the tumult in the world.

Matthew Remski: And one of the most interesting things that that Trungpa did that had the effect intentionally or not, it had the effect of making people believe that they were actually

involved in political processes and they were actually involved in their local economies, is that he created his own kind of political system and institutions within Shambhala International that featured, you know, titles and roles and offices and, you know, they made their own currency and they issued their own passports and stuff like that, they had a national anthem. He created this almost virtual reality, real world in which people could feel that they were acting in some kind of noble and prosocial way that actually didn't interact with the local politics of Colorado at all.

Noel: In lieu of worldly politics, Shambhala was built up to have it's OWN isolated kind of politics.

Matthew Remski: The more you have, young, otherwise progressive, highly educated people thinking about how to control their inner environments, as kind of like this paramount virtue, the less politically active they're going to be.

Tyler: The academics we spoke to said that so-called spiritual materialism is MUCH more pervasive today than it was at the time Trungpa was building Vajradhatu. And it's obviously not universal amongst Americans who engage in Buddhist practices.

Noel: But the COMBINATION of spiritual materialism, isolation from the outside world, Trungpa's charisma, and the orientalism of the American fascination with Buddhism eventually created a dynamic that was problematic.

Tyler: Dr. Holly Gayley explains that Orientalism is the way Western cultures tend to view Asian and Middle Eastern cultures through a lens of colonialism.

Dr. Holly Gayley: I think there's a tendency based on an Oriental legacy of viewing the Asian other, if you will, either in highly idealized terms, the enlightened sages of the east or as, you know, in extremely denigrating terms such as the Oriental despot. And those are kind of historical tropes that inform Buddhism's reception in the West.

Tyler: In other words, Americans have tried to put Eastern spiritual practices in a box.

Dr. Holly Gayley: And so I think the tendency, has been to elevate the Lama into a kind of larger than life figure and to see them as fully enlightened, and that is part of the tantric tradition, to see the teacher as fully enlightened, even if they have faults.

Tyler: Matthew Remski says that among Trungpa's students, there is often an attempt to elevate him to an almost mythical status.

Matthew Remski: You know, he's an unparalleled master. He is a reincarnation of so and so and so and so and so and so. So there's also this like story of preciousness created around his content, in his presentation. And he holds something that nobody else in the world holds, and he has realized it. And, you know, his mind is kind of this transmission vehicle for a perfect knowledge and that becomes extremely attractive.

Dr. Holly Gayley: Yeah, I think that that, that elevation and that idealization doesn't leave room for a human-to-human encounter and the kind of accountability that's needed in Buddhist communities for their teachers.

Tyler: This is where the cultural elements at play in the development of Tibetan Buddhism in the West start to get complicated. Blaming American materialism and secularism seems too simple.

Because although there are differences in how different cultures approach the hierarchy of a teacher/student relationship, Tibetan Buddhist monks ARE ALSO traditionally seen as fully enlightened and beyond reproach.

Noel: Not to mention the problems with abuses of power within the Catholic Church, the entertainment industry, or other Western institutions, religious or otherwise.

Tyler: In my interview with Brigid Meier, she spoke glowingly of Trungpa and what his teachings have done for her life. But at the same time...

Brigid Meier: There was a shadow side and it did emerge and and we did not have the framing or the language to discuss it.

Noel: Meier has a phrase for the way that many of Trungpa's students put him on a pedestal.

Brigid Meier: There is such a thing as, if I may say so, idiot devotion. Trungpa used to talk about idiot compassion. Well, I think in our community there was such a thing as idiot devotion. That is being in denial about the shadow side, discounting it, indulging in what is known as I-got-mine-ism. In other words: "Well I never experienced it, or I never saw it, or therefore it didn't happen."

Noel: And she feels like that blind faith and lack of critical thinking are parts of Tibetan Buddhism's medieval and patriarchal tradition that just don't translate to modern Western culture.

Tyler: That reverence for teachers, along with the parts of Western culture that Trungpa embraced left a lot of people unable to square the differences between Trungpa's brilliance and that *shadow side*. He was known for taking *spiritual wives*, and having relationships with his students that would be considered inappropriate by today's standards. And he had a serious drinking problem -- often even lecturing while belligerently drunk.

Noel: Somewhere along the line, things started to get out of hand.

Tyler: And for Brigid Meier, there was a SINGULAR moment where "the shadow side" really came out.

Brigid Meier: Well, yeah, how did that happen? Big question. I personally think it happened. It erupted at that Halloween party.

[music fade out]

Funder: If you're enjoying this episode of lost highways, you may want to explore Trinidad's past and its place in the American West at the Trinidad History Museum. Featured exhibits such as *Borderlands of Southern Colorado* and the *Santa Fe Trail Museum* showcase, the region's diverse cultural and ethnic heritage the property features the *historic Blue Mansion* and *Baca House* two residences built in the late 19th century. As well as *Heritage Gardens* all on one block and Trinidad's acclaimed historic district. If you want to learn more about our 8 museums throughout the state go to HistoryColorado.org

[music fade in]

Tyler: It was Halloween, 1975. And Trungpa was teaching a seminary up in Snowmass, which isn't far from Aspen.

Noel: Trungpa's seminaries were intense. For three months, students would do two weeks of lectures and classes and two weeks of *sitting* and meditation.

Tyler: Each month was dedicated to one of the three major schools of Buddhism: Hinayana, focused on karma and distancing one's self from one's own thoughts, Mahyana, focused on compassion and wisdom, and Vajrayana, focused on working with the mind itself.

Noel: The students were expected to be serious about their study and extremely disciplined. From somewhere between 450 and 600 applications, only about 130 students were accepted.

Tyler: Trungpa had made the controversial decision to let the famous poet W.S. Merwin attend. He had been studying and teaching at Naropa's "Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics." He was a student of Buddhism, but other seminarians questioned whether he was serious enough to take on the intensity of the courses.

Noel: Trungpa also made the EVEN MORE controversial decision to allow Merwin to bring his girlfriend, Dana Naone, who was significantly younger than him and also lacked experience within the community.

Tyler: Tension had been brewing between Merwin, Trungpa, and the other seminarians, as Merwin refused to participate in certain parts of the training that he disagreed with.

Noel: Namely not engaging in chants that he considered violent.

Tyler: There were also less-than-positive feelings among the group at the way he and Naone spent all their time together and isolated themselves from the others.

Noel: The first two months of the seminary had been completed. And the students were about to start the most intense and uncomfortable section: the Vajrayana.

Tyler: Much of what they were learning was about shedding external layers, neurosis, and revealing one's True Self, and the Vajrayana section intensified that even more with its focus on tantric, esoteric teachings. It was time for Trungpa's "Crazy Wisdom" to shine.

Noel: And after two months of sitting with their own thoughts, the students were ready to let loose.

Tyler: Between the interviews we did and secondary literature like Tom Clark's book "The Great Naropa Poetry Wars," and a now-infamous *Boulder Monthly* article called "The Party" by the poet Ed Sanders and a group of students called the "Investigative Poetry Group," the picture we have of the Halloween party reminds me of the film "Rashomon", in which a group of eyewitnesses to a horrible event each share a collage of faded memories and different perspectives on what they had seen. But from what we can tell, it went something like this

Noel: And now is a good time to remind listeners that this section contains descriptions of sexual assault that some may find disturbing.

[Quick Music Fade-In]

Tyler: Mark Szpakowski.

Mark Szpakowski: So at the end of the Mahayana period, it happens to be Halloween. And so the idea is, OK, let's have a party and in fact, let's have a costume party. And in a way, that's a great metaphor for what had been going on, because, you know, we all have our psychological costumes, so to speak. And this was another way of kind of expressing that.

Noel: Brigid Meier.

Brigid Meier: I was looking forward to a party where we could dance. We'd been sitting a lot and everything was kind of claustrophobic, and it's been building up to this head.

Tyler: Elizabeth King.

Elizabeth King: The party started out with food and drink, and drink, and drink.

Mark Szpakowski: One of my roles at the seminary was to run the sound system and also the DJ and along with some other people, we had put together some cassettes of music to play and so on.

Tyler: Mark told me that he specifically remembered playing the Rolling Stones' "Sympathy for the Devil," as people were mingling and starting to let loose.

Brigid Meier: And it was just this sense of really kind of I'm going to use that word, uncorking. A lot of pent-up energy and so Mark is a terrific DJ and had a lot of great music.

[Music]

Rolling Stones: Please allow me to introduce myself, I'm a man of wealth and taste...

Elizabeth King: I remember feeling a little bit alienated and a little bit nervous, and so I offered to my husband and I would put the kids to bed maybe around 9:00 at night, I'm not sure. And he said: *"okay, thanks so much, you know I'll stay at the party."*

Brigid Meier: Whatever came down was over and above. Whatever energy was uncorked, at that event, it felt like it leaked out into the room like squid ink. It was like some, bizarre, almost malevolent black magic. An unrestrained id, subconscious, whatever.

[Music]

Rolling Stones: When I saw it was a time for a change...

Brigid Meier: But early on, I was standing there with my date and Rinpoche called me over and I went over, and he wanted a kiss and OK, so I gave him a kiss...

[Music Becomes Muffled]

Brigid Meier [becoming increasingly distressed]: And...he bit my lip...and it hurt. And then he started twisting my arm. And I thought...: *"what's going on here? what's happening?"* and I thought: *"oh, ok, well, I guess something kinky is happening here, and that's what he wants, I'll give it back to him."* So I remember, I remember digging my fingernails into his arm, and he did not let up on biting my lip and twisting my arm. I think there was some blood drawn on my lip and it hurt...and -- and he turned my head and he put his mouth on my cheekbone. And he- he

just- sunk his teeth into my cheek. Now, he didn't bruise my cheek, and he didn't draw blood, but the impression of his teeth....remained on my cheek for a week.

Mark Szpakowski: Ok, so meanwhile, not everyone was at the party. So Merwyn and Naone, and actually they dropped in on the party for a bit and danced a bit and then they went up to their rooms.

Brigid Meier: No, I was *freaked out*. Here's somebody *I love* and *I trust* and *what happened!*? What was that about? And while it was happening, I felt that since, the squid ink phenomena, this black energy, and I thought to myself, oh my God, anything could happen here, anything could happen.

Mark Szpakowski: Anyway so eventually at one point, Rinpoche noticed that Merwyn and Nyoni are not there, so he asked, you know, can they come down and join the party? And they say no. And things gradually escalated, you know, please come down. No, come down.

Tyler: After Merwin and Naone refused to come back, a group formed to retrieve them per Trungpa's orders.

Noel: Reports of the incident vary, but witnesses say the group kicked down the front door to the room and smashed through the sliding glass door on the other side.

Tyler: Merwin used a broken beer bottle as a weapon, cutting one of his assailants badly across the face.

Noel: It seems to be at that point that Merwin realized it wasn't worth fighting, and the two of them were dragged back to the party.

Tyler: After being bitten by Trungpa, Brigid Meier was thrown in the pool along with some of the other partygoers. She changed her clothes, and when she came back, she found a crowd of people surrounding Merwin and Naone as Trungpa pressured them to take their clothes off and "reveal their neuroses."

Brigid Meier: They were there in the center of the room and the music had stopped. There was no music anymore. There seemed to be a lot of yelling going on.

Mark Szpakowski: And there's one person, he kind of intervenes and Trungpa Rinpoche slugs him in the nose. And I see this arc of blood go up in this big semicircle and another friend of mine kind of just freaks out and runs out of the hall, at that point, it's just too much to take.

Elizabeth King: My husband came into the room, and I woke up realizing that he was in a state of distress, and I turn on the light and his nose was bleeding, and he looked as if he'd been in a fight. And I believe he had a black eye, I can't remember, but I know that it was frightening for me to see the state he was in.

Brigid Meier: Then I believe they were stripped, and they were fighting and Dana was screaming. Now I'll never be able- I'll never know, I'll never ever know, and I'll never be able to prove it. But I swear, I was within a few seconds of leaping out, to try and help her. This cannot stand, you know, and she's said: "*somebody help me, help me, help me, come on, help me. What's the matter with all of you? You're all cowards*" and it's like I was ready to rush out, but then...

Mark Szpakowski: Merwyn says something like: “*Why are we the only ones with our clothes off?*” And then everyone takes their clothes off. I mean, pretty literally everybody.

Brigid Meier: So it all happened really quickly, it was cinematic, you know. It moved from this really tense yelling, restraining. Suddenly they're- and they're naked and they're crying out for help. And then they're saying, what's the matter with the rest of you, and we all took our clothes off. Music came back on, we started dancing.

[Music]

Rolling Stones: -cop is a criminal, and all the sinners saints, as heads is tails, just call me Lucifer, 'cause I'm in need of some restraint. So if you meet me, have some courtesy, have some sympathy.

Tyler: The music came back on.

Noel: And they started dancing. Maybe it was because Merwin's suggestion had diffused the tension, maybe nobody even knew what else to do. Either way, the evening continued, almost as if nothing happened.

Tyler: But despite what one might think, the IMMEDIATE consequences were limited. Merwin and Naone even stayed for the rest of the seminary, and none of the people I talked to left Vajradhatu specifically because of the party.

Noel: Still, the fallout from the incident would continue to plague Shambhala for years to come as warring factions tried to cover it up, expose it, or deal with it internally to the best of their abilities.

Tyler: Meanwhile, Trungpa continued to illustrate problematic tendencies despite the mythology that had grown around him. Here's Matthew Remski who gives one example.

Matthew Remski: The proposition that he's saintly as well obscures what's happening behind the curtain, behind the scenes. That obscures the fact that, you know, when he's marrying his fifth so-called spiritual wife and torturing her sexually and, you know, having her feed him bumps of cocaine, that the group itself actually, in a way, exists to obscure that from the outside world.

Noel: Even 45 years later, people struggle to square his behavior with his teachings. Here's Brigid Meier talking about what she felt after being bitten by her teacher.

Brigid Meier: I personally spent 45 years thinking that that event was my fault, and that I had caused it and that it was a teaching. And now I think that's bullsh**. I don't think that's what happened at all. And it was not until I was asked point-blank over a year ago, do you think that was abusive? That I was, that I was forced to recognize, well, what else could we possibly call it?

Noel: Mark Szpakowski compares that night to a conversation a friend of his once had with Trungpa about the "Electric Kool-Aid Acid Tests" of the time. If you're not familiar with them, the acid tests were conducted by a group of people led by Ken Kesey who called themselves the Merry Pranksters when they would dose unwitting party-goers with LSD.

Mark Szpakowski: The Halloween event was extremely disturbing. Someone once described it as being like a bad acid test. Friend of mine who what used to be a merry prankster once asked Trungpa Rinpoche, what do you think of the acid tests? And he said: “*too heavy.*” But I think this Halloween party was also too heavy

Brigid Meier: There seemed to be this constant sense of undercutting our expectations and, you know, the line sometimes got blurry, between what is a teaching and what isn't?

Mark Szpakowski: You know, it was kind of a signature event in the history of American Buddhism, actually. You could and compress all the different issues that were going on, both with Buddhism in America and with presenting this particular style of Buddhism, which tried to meet the energies of the American zeitgeist, you know, that was happening.

Brigid Meier: Now, the hard core fundamentalists will say: “Yes, but that's the Vajrayana and, there's all this talk about pulling the rug out from under you and, you know, destroying your preconceptions and pushing you further, et cetera, and you know if they have to slap you across the face with a sandal.” I'm sorry, I'm not buying that anymore.

[Music fades out]

Tyler: Brigid Meier says that, teaching or not, Trungpa went too far that night.

Brigid Meier: Those are his words, to describe the party. “*I went too far.*”

[music]

Noel: Trungpa continued teaching, and soul-searching hippies continued soul-searching, many still being drawn to his unique and innovative practices. In 1986, 11 years after the Party, Trungpa moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia, taking the Shambhala headquarters with him.

Tyler: He died a year later of cirrhosis. He was cremated and his remains are interred at a stupa near Red Feather Lakes, CO, which was constructed by his students. It's a remarkable building, majestic and colorful, made of concrete designed to last a thousand years.

Noel: It almost burned down in the wildfires this summer, but was barely saved by firefighters.

Tyler: Since Trungpa's death, Shambhala has continued to be consistently rocked by scandals having to do with abuses of power.

Noel: People in the community tend to have complex feelings about the events of the party, but not so much by more recent incidents of abuse, which have been more flagrant and systemic.

Tyler: A man named Thomas Rich was made Vajra Regent after Trungpa's death. He was accused of raping one of his male students, and also hid the fact that he had contracted HIV while continuing to have unprotected sexual relations with his students of all genders. One of those students later died of AIDS.

Noel: And Rich was succeeded by Trungpa's son, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche. He was forced to step down from his duties after a survivor-led investigation called Buddhist Project Sunshine blew the whistle on widespread sexual assault within the Shambhala community, and attempts by leadership to cover up his transgressions.

Tyler: Within Shambhala International, there are debates about where to go from here. Like many other organizations, Shambhala HAS recently made efforts to address these issues of abuse. But some argue that it's not enough.

Noel: For example, some within the Shambhala community want to allow Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche to RETURN to his position.

Tyler: Here's Dr. Holly Gayley, who highlights some of the things Shambhala has done to try and heal their community and prevent future abuse.

Dr. Holly Gayley: Yeah, the Shambhala community right now has revamped their care and conduct policy. Trainings are going on in the right use of power and gender dynamics. There are wide awareness reading groups and trainings. So it's a huge commitment and process of consciousness raising and then cultural change. It's the American moment for all of this.

Tyler: But when it comes to Trungpa himself, even Brigid Meier says: "*it's complicated.*"

Brigid Meier: I'm going to circle back around to Rick Field's quote, about him causing more trouble and doing more good. I've landed with holding that dichotomy, without feeling the need to choose. And that's what the poet John Keats called negative capability. It's not a black and white binary. I would say how grateful I am for some of the core teachings. They have become inseparable from my being. And I'm comfortable in saying there were things that were not OK.

Noel: Journalist Matthew Remski's take on all of this is less generous.

Matthew Remski: I think one of the things that happened with the entire generation of people that pursued teachers like Chogyam Trungpa, is that what they *thought* they were pursuing was a form of cultural and social liberation, a throwing off of repression. But what ended up *happening*, especially in the gender politics of these groups, is that under the illusion of liberation, a kind of latent conservatism and even misogyny was able to be unleashed and rationalized and then spiritualized.

Tyler: Remski says that in trying to Westernize Asian religious practices, Trungpa also distorted the kinds of relationships people traditionally have with their gurus. Though it's not entirely unusual to elevate a guru beyond criticism, teachers usually engage with their students on a much smaller scale.

Matthew Remski: When we think about who Chogyam Trungpa was to people individually, he's operating on a level of modern celebrity that is completely new in relation to the way Buddhism has always been taught and communicated. He had literally tens of thousands of people who were longing for his attention, who were thinking, you know, grandiose or idealizing thoughts about him. What this culture of celebrity does is it completely abstracts the personal agreements and responsibilities that have always existed between spiritual teachers and their students within Asian wisdom culture, which are actually life-size, they're down to scale.

Noel: As for Dr. Holly Gayley..

Dr. Holly Gayley: You know, I kind of favor a *both and* approach, right, where a Buddhist teacher could be, you know, somebody could be a gifted teacher and have unresolved trauma. They could have visionary ideas and problems with alcohol, and they could have spiritual

realizations, charisma, and misuse those. The complexity and the humanness is really important in terms of the maturation of Buddhist communities in the West.

Tyler: She points again to the Orientalism of viewing Buddhism as some sort of exceptional religion that's immune to people abusing their power.

Noel: And she makes the important point that this kind of abuse is not limited to communities like Shambhala. In fact, it's ubiquitous.

Dr. Holly Gayley: It doesn't make Buddhists worse than anybody else or better than anybody else, it makes them human, and part of the societies that are part of. And I think we see the same thing now coming up with, you know, Buddhism and sexual abuse. It's part of the gestalt of America today, where we're starting to see the pernicious underbelly of systemic factors like power, privilege, and male entitlement. No, it's happening everywhere. And we have to address the systemic issues.

Noel: From charismatic religious leaders and cults like Keith Raniere and NXIVM, to Catholic Priests, entertainment executives like Harvey Weinstein, or politicians like Bill Clinton, the mainstream is finally reckoning with the hierarchical abuses of power that happen when someone is elevated to a certain status of power and celebrity.

Tyler: Without a certain amount of accountability and criticism from one's peers, even beloved teachers and mentors can commit egregious acts of abuse.

Noel: It's not unique to Buddhism, and it's not unique to those like Weinstein or Raniere who are easy to write off as "bad apples."

Tyler: The guests in this episode all agree that it requires nuance to confront these grey areas and the quote unquote shadow side of someone who was also a key part in their development as human beings, and who built communities that have been a beacon of hope for many.

Noel: And rather than try to find answers to any of these questions -- which may not exist in the first place -- our goal is to simply make sure that they're being asked.

Tyler: As we've said earlier, this story and the topics that it covers are complicated. No hour-long podcast episode is going to be able to answer the questions of ANY community dealing with the kind of hurt that the last few years have shown us are much too common. We often end our episodes with some sort of musing about what it all means. But this time, I think it's most appropriate to give the last word to Brigid Meier, who feels that if we ever hope to fully come to terms with all this, it's vital to include both the good and bad.

Brigid Meier: I wanna say something here that's really important to me, and that is- I really want to unequivocally acknowledge all the people who have been in one way, shape, or form, harmed or abused in Vajradhatu or Shambhala. And I want to give kind of a shout out to the survivors because I think they've been very brave to come forward and speak their truth. One of the meanings of Dharma is truth, and I think any teacher or article or anything that purports to represent these teachings needs to acknowledge that harms happened. That needs to be part of the mix. Otherwise they are condoning, colluding, and perpetuating those harms. It's really important for that to be said outright.

[Music fades out then in again.]

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Tyler: And even if you don't become a member, you can still get \$2 off admission to any of our museums just by mentioning the podcast.

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Tyler: And to Amanda Lane of History Colorado, and to Noah Allyn and Charlie Dreyer, our interns.

Noel: If you'd like to see the transcripts, either as a matter of accessibility, or because you'd like to use Lost Highways in your classroom, you can find them at historycolorado.org/lost-highways.

Tyler: The music for this episode was by Earth Control Pill. Our theme is by Conor Bourgal.

Noel: Many thanks to our editorial team:

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Noel: Finally, thanks to the entire staff at History Colorado. I'm Noel Black

Tyler: And I'm Tyler Hill. Thanks for listening.