The Skylark's Song: Tibetan Literary and Religious Themes in Chögyam Trungpa's English Poetry

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes Chögyam Trungpa's English poetry along with his popular slogan for creating poetry, *first thought, best thought,* in order to identify some of the distinctively Tibetan formal, doctrinal, thematic, and aesthetic features of his work and thought. While it is clear that Trungpa's compositions are something of a departure from traditional Tibetan poetry, I argue that Trungpa's corpus — identified by some as modernist — resists the generic classifications scholars have heretofore imposed. I find that Trungpa's poetry carries a traditionally soteriological dimension and as such, defies the traditional/ modern classification altogether.

Cette thèse analyse la poésie anglaise de Chögyam Trungpa ainsi que son slogan populaire pour créer de la poésie, pensée initiale, pensée optimale, afin d'identifier certains des traits formels, doctrinaux, thématiques et esthétiques distinctement tibétains de l'œuvre. S'il est clair que les compositions de Trungpa sont un peu en retrait de la poésie tibétaine traditionnelle, je soutiens que le corpus de Trungpa - identifié par certains comme étant moderniste - résiste aux classifications génériques que les érudits ont imposées jusqu'à présent. Je trouve que la poésie de Trungpa a une dimension traditionnellement sotériologique et qu'elle défie donc totalement la classification traditionnelle / moderne.

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1. Introduction

> My poems are very simple, insignificant. They could hardly
> be called poetry at all. This simplicity could be a hang-up, but
> I don't want to create any commotion. I will be very happy if
> my poems are accepted as being no more significant than a dot
> on a page.
> Please excuse my being "Tibetan" (which I am happy to be.)
> I regard myself as a mere icicle in summer.[1]

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (*chos rgyam drung pa rin po che*) (c. 1940–1987), Abbot of Surmang monasteries (*zur mang dgon pa*) in Eastern Tibet, escaped to India in 1959 where he was under threat of imprisonment by the Chinese Communist party. He eventually made his way to the West where he studied at Oxford University and later renounced his monasticism and immigrated to the United States of America and later to Canada. In North America he continued to write and lecture extensively on Buddhism. Trungpa's grasp of the English language was excellent, and he met Western culture with verve, incorporating many of his students' interests into his Buddhist pedagogy, whether those interests were theatre, photography, psychology, or poetry. Trungpa's eclectic approach to teaching Buddhism as well as his mastery of the English language, won him a large following despite (or perhaps owing to) reports of unconventional behaviour like alcohol consumption, and sexual relationships with women. By the 1970's Chögyam Trungpa was in charge of one of the largest Buddhist organizations in the West.[2]

[1.] Excerpt from an unpublished poem entitled, *Preface* c. 1959–1968, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Held in the private collection of the Shambhala Archives in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

[2.] For the autobiography of Trungpa's life, see Chögyam Trungpa, "Born in Tibet," in *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa: Volume One* ed. Carolyn Rose Gimian (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003). For an abridged biography see Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993), 344–49.

Trungpa was also a prolific artist: he sketched landscapes; painted thangkas of Buddhist deities; produced Japanese calligraphies; took photographs featuring distinctly modernist subject matter; wrote plays; produced films; practiced *kadō* (the Japanese art of flower arranging); created installations with found objects; designed furniture, jewelry, flags, pins and banners; and he wrote poetry. He encouraged his students to engage with artistic creation as a means of training akin to meditation in action. He called this approach *dharma art.*

In exile, Trungpa wrote in English and experimented with new styles of poetic composition that resonated with his young counter-culture audience. He made close relationships with several influential American artists such as prominent Beat poets, Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997) and Anne Waldman (b. 1945). As a result, Trungpa's poetic corpus is often considered to be wholly innovative and unlike traditional Tibetan poetry. In fact, his open embrace of Western cultural forms in his art, fashion, and religious style, has led some scholars to see in him a lesser semblance with traditional Tibet as compared with his exile compatriots.

This thesis will nuance the narrative that emphasizes the rupture between Trungpa's English poetry and traditional Tibetan literary and religious culture by showing that Trungpa takes up indigenous Tibetan literary and religious themes, innovating and extending these themes in order to re-inscribe his cultural heritage in a new and foreign milieu.

1.1 Biography

Chögyam Trungpa was born in Eastern Tibet in Kham (*khams*) in the district of Nangchen (*nang chen*). His father, Yeshe Dargye (*ye shes dar rgyas*), and mother, Tungtso Drölma (*gdung mtsho*

sgrol ma), had an elder daughter together but were separated. By the time Chögyam Trungpa was born his mother had remarried.[3] At the time of Trungpa's birth auspicious signs were reported by the family and neighbors and in the months following His Holiness the 16th Gyalwang Karmapa Rangjung Rigpe Dorje's (*rgyal dbang karma pa rang 'byung rig pa'i rdo rje*; 1924–1981) vision of the Trungpa Tulku's rebirth, a search party identified the child as the reincarnation of the 10th Trungpa Tulku, abbot of the Surmang monasteries.[4]

Trungpa was brought to Düdsi Tel, one of the two main Surmang monasteries where he was further examined. Following a successful examination Trungpa was taken to a second and larger Surmang monastery, Namgyel Tsé, a three-day's journey from Düdsi Tel. There, the 16th Karmapa bestowed lay person's vows upon him and enthroned him as the 11th Trungpa Tulku. At the time Chögyam Trungpa was a little over twelve months old.[5]

When he turned five, Trungpa began studying intensively with a tutor and he was soon moved to a retreat center where he could focus on his studies without distraction. Around the age of seven he began having dreams of scenes that he couldn't explain:

> though even in pictures I had never seen the things that are made in the West, I dreamed I was riding in a mechanized truck somewhat like a small lorry, and a few days later in another dream I saw airplanes parked in a field. Also, about that time, in my sleep, I was walking through a shop which was full of boots, shoes, saddles, and straps with buckles, but these were not like Tibetan ones and instead of being made of leather they appeared to be of sticky dried blood. Later I realized that they were all the shapes and kinds that are used in Western lands.[6]

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3. Trungpa, *The Collected Works: Vol. One*, 21.
4. Samuel, *Civilized Shamans,* 345.
5. Samuel, *Civilized Shamans,* 345.
6 Trungpa, *The Collected Works: Vol. One,* 44.

These dreams were dismissed by his tutor at the time, but later they informed a narrative that some of Chögyam Trungpa's students held that Trungpa's relocation to the West was destined.[7]

By 1959 the Chinese Liberation Army had engaged in open warfare in the Surmang region and under increasing pressure from the Chinese to surrender, Trungpa decided to escape. He led a party of several hundred people, monastics and lay people alike, on an arduous nine-month journey to India.[8]

In 1963 Trungpa received a Spaulding scholarship to study at Oxford University and in 1967 he founded Samye Ling in Scotland, one of the first Tibetan Buddhist centers in the West. In 1969 he was involved in a significant car accident which left his body paralyzed on one side and profoundly impacted his life's trajectory. The following year, in what he described as a response to the accident, Trungpa renounced his monasticism and married a young British woman named Diana J. Pybus, despite the controversy their marriage instigated in both British and Tibetan communities alike.

The couple quickly relocated to the United States, where Trungpa had been invited to teach at Colorado University. In 1974 he founded Naropa Institute which later became Naropa University, and with a teaching faculty that included luminaries like Ram Dass, Gregory

[7] Diana J. Mukpo, *Dragon Thunder* ed. Carolyn Rose Gimian (Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, 2006), 61.
[8] For an account of this escape see Grant MacLean, *From Lion's Jaws: Chögyam Trungpa's Epic Escape to the West* (Mountain, 2016).

Bateson, John Cage, Allen Ginsberg and others, Naropa's first session attracted thousands of students, far exceeding the projected estimate.

Over the course of his short life, Trungpa taught tirelessly— his archives are home to more than 2,500 audio and video recordings of lectures. Towards the end of his life, along with traditional Tibetan Buddhist practices, Trungpa's community embraced a variety practices and disciplines. These disciplines ranged from those sourced from other Buddhist-influenced traditions, like *kyūdō*[9] and *ōryōki*,[10] and those, like dressage, elocution, and military drill, that were evidently not.

In 1985 Trungpa grew increasingly ill. He died in 1987 in Halifax, Nova Scotia, at the age of forty-seven, due to complications from a cardiac arrest likely exacerbated by diabetes and heavy alcohol consumption.[11]

1.2 Religious Training

The Trungpa Tulkus are an incarnation line within the Karma Kagyü (*karma bka' brgyud*) tradition, which traces its lineage from Vajradhāra (a manifestation of the Buddha), through Tilopa, Nāropā, Marpa, Milarepa, Gampopa, and the Karmapas. The first Trungpa was a disciple of Trung Mase, a fourteenth century siddha, who was himself a student of the Fifth Karmapa, Dezhin Shekpa (*de bzhin bshegs pa*; 1384-1425). The word *Trungpa* (*drung pa*) is an honorific

[9] The Japanese art of archery.
[10] A ritualized style of eating in the Japanese Zen tradition.
[11] Mukpo, *Dragon Thunder,* 382.

title meaning "attendant; secretary; one standing near" indicating the importance of the first Trungpa's relationship to Trung Mase.[12]

Chögyam Trungpa remarked that the Surmang Kagyü tradition was notable for its incorporation of the teachings from the Nyingma (*rnying ma*) school into the Kagyü lineage by the Eighth Trungpa, as well as the Eighth's adoption of Ekajaṭī (an important Nyingma deity) as a protector of Surmang Monastery. Additionally, important elements of the Surmang curriculum include *shijé chö* (*zhi byed gcod*)[13] practice introduced by the Fourth Trungpa; a unique version of the maṇḍala performance of the Cakrasamvara sādhana, translated into dance which was originally held by Trung Mase; and a scholastic focus on the Six Yogas of Nāropā, and Mahāmudrā.[14]

Trungpa discovered at a young age that he was also tertön (*gter ston*), or treasure revealer,[15] a rarity for a Kagyü master since the role is more commonly held by a Nyingma or Bön adept. Apart from the 16th Karmapa, Trungpa's main teachers were reincarnations of the founders of the Rimé (*ris med*) or Non-sectarian tradition.[16] The Rimé tradition began in the nineteenth century

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[12] Chögyam Trungpa, "The Mishap Lineage," *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa: Volume Nine* ed. Carolyn Rose Gimian (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2017), 599.

[13] Literally "pacification and cutting" practices. These practices were laid out by the Indian siddha Padampa Sangye (c. 11th century C.E.) and Machik Labdron (1055-1149). See: Michelle Sorensen, "Padampa Sanggye," *Treasury of Lives*, accessed June 10, 2019, http://treasuryoflives.org/biographies/view/Padampa-Sanggye-/2510.

[14] Chögyam Trungpa, *The Mishap Lineage: Transforming Confusion into Wisdom,* ed. Carolyn Rose Gimian (Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, 2009), 87. Mahāmudrā translates to "Great Seal" and expresses the non-dual ultimate reality in the Kagyü Tibetan Buddhist system. It also refers to a meditative practice central to the Kagyü lineage.

[15] Treasure revealers are those who discover term (*gter ma*), hidden treasures. Concerned about the longevity and vitality of the tantric tradition, early masters of the Nyingma lineage (in particular, Padmasambhava) are believed to have hidden dharma teachings or objects for future generations. These treasures are protected by spells and are only meant to be found when the time is right. The treasure revealers are the elite few whose lives have been prophesized by the treasure concealers. The great treasure revealers are considered bodhisattvas and emanations of Padmasambhava. See: John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* rev. ed. (Boston: Snow Lion, 2007), 378-381.

[16] Chögyam Trungpa was also the primary student of Khenpo Gangshar Wangpo (b. 1925–date of death unknown), himself a disciple of Jamgön Kongtrul of Shechen. This thesis will discuss some of Khenpo Gangshar's influence on Chögyam Trungpa in chapter three. For more on Khenpo Gangshar see Thrangu, 2011. Another important teacher

as a response to the prevailing sectarianism and factionalism between religious schools of the time. The movement affirms the worthiness of all the disparate practices of Buddhism and promotes the usefulness of the diversity of teachings to suit the needs of a variety of practitioners. As such, Non-sectarian lamas focused on collecting encyclopedic volumes of teachings from different schools and lineage streams. Rather than creating a synthesis of teachings, they held that these teachings streams were equally effective parallel paths.[17]

Trungpa's root guru, Jamgön Kongtrul of Shechen (often referred to as Shechen Kongtrul) Pema Drimé Lekpé Lodrö (*zhe chen kong sprul pad+ma dri me legs pa'i blo gros*; 1901–c.1960), was one of five reincarnations[18] of a founding leader of Rimé, Jamgön Kongtrul Yonten Gyatso *('jam mgon kong sprul yon tan rgya mtsho*; 1813–1899). Another important teacher for Trungpa, His Holiness Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche (*dil mgo mkhyen brtse rin po che;* 1910–1991), was the reincarnation of preeminent Rimé master, Jamyang Khyentse Wangpo (*'jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse'i dbang po*; 1820-1892) who, rather than privileging one school's doctrine over another's, travelled throughout Tibet during his lifetime collecting teachings and empowerments so that students might find teachings that were suitable for them. These Non-sectarian leaders were committed to the openness of their philosophy to the extent that they were not solely interested in orthodox Buddhist religious teachings and philosophy: they also sought out folk traditions and popular literature like the Epic of Gesar, incorporating these as spiritual sources in their movement.[19]

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for Chögyam Trungpa who is not discussed here was Rölpe Dorje (*rol pa'i rdo rje*), the regent abbot of Surmang at the time. See Mukpo, *Dragon Thunder*, 62.

[17] John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* rev. ed. (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2007), 360.

[18] Another recognized reincarnation of Jamgön Kongtrul Yonten Gyatso was Trungpa's preceptor, Jamgön Kongtrul of Pelpung monastery (*dpal spungs dgon*).

[19] John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism,* 360.

Geoffrey Samuel takes special note of the variety of influences in Trungpa's life story with the notable exception of influence from the Gelugpa school:

> Although Trungpa was a Karma Kagyüdpa *trulku,* his teachers included lamas from the Nyingmapa and Sakyapa orders . . . This is entirely typical for a Rimed lama of Trungpa's generation. The differences between the non-Gelugpa orders were essentially differences of practice, and students went to the most famous and reputed teachers regardless of formal affiliation.[20]

Samuel points out that in his education, Trungpa didn't have much interaction with Gelugpa teachers and his education was unlike a Gelugpa education in important ways: first, tantra was emphasized more and earlier in Trungpa's training; and second, although Trungpa received the degrees of *kyorpön (skyor dpon)* and *khenpo (mkhas po),* which are roughly equivalent to a Gelugpa *geshé (dge shes)* degree, his studies were less lengthy than that of an ordinary monk.[21] Additionally, unlike a typical Gelugpa monk, the *gter ma* tradition was an important part of Trungpa's training. Trungpa received the Rinchen Terdzöd (*rin chen gter mdzod*), a collection of terma texts assembled by the great Rimé masters of the nineteenth century from Shechen Kongtrul and gave the empowerment himself on two separate occasions.[22]

As such, when attempting to understand Trungpa's influences and teaching style, it is necessary to first understand that Tibetan Buddhist traditions and identities vary across regional and lineal lines. Samuel uses his understanding of the variety of Tibetan Buddhist traditions to argue that although not all Rimé masters in diaspora adopted the same teaching methods, they were

[20] Samuel, *Civilized Shamans,* 345.
[21] Samuel, *Civilized Shamans,* 345.
[22] Samuel, *Civilized Shamans,* 345.

nevertheless more likely or more willing to adapt their traditional heritage in surprising or unusual ways than were masters trained in the Gelugpa school.[23]

1.3 Training in Poetics

Chögyam Trungpa studied formal literary Tibetan verse as part of his early education. At the time, he also received instructions in composing "songs of experience" or "songs of realization," *nyamgur* (*nyams mgur*) with Jamgön Kongtrul of Sechen. As a child he wrote extensively and was influenced by the poetry of Milarepa (*mi la ras pa*; 1052–1135)[24] and Jigmé Lingpa *('jigs med gling pa*; 1730–1798).[25] Some of Trungpa's writings from Tibet have survived through the efforts of his nephew, Karma Senge Rinpoche (b. 1959) who spent many years recovering, collecting, and preserving approximately 600 pages of writing that Trungpa left behind in Tibet.[26]

In exile in India between 1959–1963, Trungpa studied English and he recalls encountering literature that made a strong impression on him at the time:

> . . . one day by chance I found in a magazine a simple and beautiful haiku. It may have been an advertisement for some Japanese merchandise or it may have been a piece of Zen literature, but I was impressed and encouraged that the simplicity of its thought could be expressed in the English language. On another occasion I attended a poetry recitation sponsored by the American women's club, in conjunction with the American Embassy. I was very struck by the reading, which I recall included works by T.S. Eliot. This was not hymn, chant, mantra, or prayer, but just natural language used as poetry.[27]

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[23] Samuel, *Civilized Shamans,* 349.
[24] Chögyam Trungpa, *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa: Volume Five* ed. Carolyn Rose Gimian (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2004), 285.
[25] Chögyam Trungpa, *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa: Volume Seven* ed. Carolyn Rose Gimian (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2004), 637.
[26] For more see, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, *Songs of Experience,* trans. Nalanda Translation Committee (Halifax: Nalanda Translation Committee, 2018).
[27] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven*, 605–6.

Trungpa already intensely admired the straightforward simplicity of Milarepa's songs; and he was struck that this affect was also achievable in English.

Later in New York, Trungpa had a chance encounter with Allen Ginsberg in a taxi. Ginsberg soon became Trungpa's student and he credited Trungpa with helping him arrive at the authentically oral, spontaneous composition style à la Milarepa that, inspired by the improvisational spirit of Jazz and the stream-of-consciousness methods of his Beat contemporaries, he had been striving to perfect for some time.[28] Ginsberg introduced Trungpa to his own poetry as well as the work and acquaintance of contemporaries like Jack Kerouac, Anne Waldman, Diane di Prima, Gregory Corso, Philip Whalen, Joanne Kyger, and William Burroughs. Trungpa's poetry became increasingly free in both form and content as he absorbed these influences.[29]

In collaboration with Ginsberg, Trungpa coined the slogan *first thought, best thought,*[30] an axiom that promoted the value of spontaneity in poetic composition. In 1974 Ginsberg and Waldman founded the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at Naropa University, signaling the central role that poetics played and continues to play in Trungpa's introduction of Buddhism to the West.

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[28] Patrick W. Dunn, "Allen Ginsberg's Oral Poetry: Performance, Spontaneity, and the Embodiment of the Breath" (PhD dissertation, Northern Illinois University, 2005), 27-29.

[29] For more on the relationship between the "New American Poets," Trungpa Rinpoche, and the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, see: Anne Waldman, "Tendrel: A Meeting of Minds," in *Recalling Chögyam Trungpa* ed. Fabrice Midal (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005), 419-38. See also: Louise Gratton Fabri, "At Play in Paradox: The Curious Space Between Tibetan Buddhism and Western Practice" (PhD dissertation, Arizona State University, 2010), 242-250.

[30] Hereafter this slogan will be abbreviated as FTBT in this thesis.

Trungpa composed poetry almost every day, often at dusk, with a secretary taking down his dictation. His poetry most frequently originated as oral compositions. David Rome, private secretary to Chögyam Trungpa recalls that Trungpa composed poetry almost daily, typically towards the end of the day in the early evening. During these sessions Chögyam Trungpa composed spontaneously as Rome acted as transcriber, arranging the words on the page to match the cadence of Trungpa's speech. Rome describes having free reign over the length of the lines, the punctuation, and the formal features of the written text. If, after the poem was sketched Rome determined that some parts needed clarification, Trungpa would rarely revise, instead he would compose extra lines as needed to clarify the meaning.[31]

To date, the Shambhala Archives in Halifax Nova Scotia has preserved approximately seven hundred poems composed by Trungpa from c. 1959–1985. Of these approximately 380 remain unpublished. To date, Trungpa's published poetry collections include: *Mudra: Early Poems and Songs* (1972)*; First Thought, Best Thought: One Hundred and Eight Poems* (1983)*; Timely Rain: Selected Poetry of Chögyam Trungpa* (1998); *Windhorse Broadside* (1997); *Royal Songs* (1995); and *Warrior Songs* (1991). Other publications that feature his poetry are: *Great Eastern Sun: The Wisdom of Shambhala* (1999); *The Art of Calligraphy* (1994); *Shambhala: The Sacred Path of the Warrior* (1984); *The Rain of Wisdom* (1980); *Born in Tibet* (1977); *The Myth of Freedom, and the Way of Meditation* (1976); and *Garuda III, IV, V: A Periodical Journal* (1971-1977). The majority of Trungpa's poems that were preserved were composed between 1966 and 1985. Approximately six-hundred of these were composed in English with the remaining composed in Tibetan.

[31] Personal communication, March 10, 2018.

1.4 Main Research Questions

My main research question is to determine what genre Trungpa's English poetry might be best situated in, with a view to enabling a more fruitful and accurate reading of his corpus. Trungpa's English language poems are understood as a departure from traditional Tibetan Buddhist verse by both emic and etic sources for various reasons: Firstly, Trungpa primarily composed poems in English, rather than Tibetan; secondly, he eschewed the traditionally metered verse of Tibetan poetic genres, opting instead for a free-verse, a hallmark of modern poetry, that was heretofore all but absent in Tibetan composition; next, he cataloged and elevated every-day banalities which is often associated with modern poetry;[32] and finally, through FTBT he extolled the virtues of a spontaneity more easily associated with the stream-of-consciousness compositions of mid-century American poetry than with clerical Tibetan Buddhist art.

While it is clear that Trungpa's compositions do depart from traditional Tibetan poetry, I would like to determine to what extent. This is important because Trungpa's poetry resists the generic classifications scholars have heretofore imposed. For instance, Trungpa's English poems, which has been characterized as modern, have a soteriological dimension. As such, the "modernist" label, to the extent that it implies a rejection of the past and an embrace of secularization, cannot adequately account for Trungpa's writings.

Therefore, this thesis investigates whether those literary elements in Trungpa's English poetry that have been construed as modernist such as spontaneity, free verse, and the exaltation of the

[32] Roger R. Jackson, "'Poetry' in Tibet: *Glu, mGur, sNyan ngag* and 'Songs of Experience,'" in *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre* ed. by José Ignacio Cabezón and Roger R. Jackson (New York: Snow Lion, 1996), 385-386.

ordinary, are continuous with traditional Tibetan Buddhism and literature. I explore the most salient features of *first thought best thought* and the English poetry of Chögyam Trungpa, and explore the extent to which these features align with, or diverge from, traditional Buddhist narratives. These questions formed the basis of my research.

1.5 Chapter Outline

In chapter one I examine the claim that Trungpa was primarily a modern poet whose famous slogan for composing poetry, *first thought, best thought,* is an ode to Romantic thought. I find that the spontaneity entailed in this slogan has less in common with Romantic-era definitions of spontaneity and more in common with traditional Tibetan Buddhist ones. I argue that the critical misreading of Trungpa's poetic slogan has obfuscated its function as a multivalent symbol and pedagogical tool.

Chapter two addresses Chögyam Trungpa's understanding of language in general and attempts to unpack the relationship between three concepts that Trungpa closely associated with poetry: mantra, onomatopoeia, and environment. I argue that Trungpa's overall approach to poetry is informed by these three categories, and that his understanding of these is rooted in Indo-Tibetan ideas regarding the creative power of sound and language.

Finally, chapter three examines the theme of ordinariness and the mundane. I argue that although Trungpa embraced the everyday in his compositions à la modernist poets, his understanding of the ordinary was deeply informed by the treatment of the secular and the mundane in the higher teachings of the Kagyü and Nyingma traditions. I find that his willingness to innovate and even

transcend his religious and cultural heritage is itself justified by his Buddhist training. As such, I argue that any nuanced reading of Trungpa's poetic corpus must include an understanding of his native context.

1.6 Methodology

During the course of this study I conducted a close reading and analysis of primary material including a selection of Trungpa's published and unpublished poems, audio recordings of poetry sessions with students, talks on art, lecture notes, and lecture transcripts. Cross-referencing my findings with secondary scholarship on Tibetan literary genres and Tibetan Buddhism, I conducted a comparative analysis of Trungpa's approach to artistic composition with a) Tibetan poetic genres, b) the theme of spontaneity within these genres, c) the Buddhist understandings of spontaneity, and d) the Buddhist teachings of Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen as both the possible soteriological and generic bases of this spontaneity. Next, through an examination of Trungpa's use of onomatopoeia and mantra and how these relate with poetry, I questioned to what extent Trungpa's theory of language differs from a common Western understanding of language. Finally, I examined possibilities for narratives of the everyday, innovation, and freedom to exist within a traditional Buddhist conceptual framework.

A theme that underlies all three chapters is the importance of disentangling notions of identity from ideas of influence. Discussions of identity often involve tracing the origins of identity formation through influence but there are some problems with this approach. These discussions too often present an un-nuanced picture of an active agent who molds a passive subject. Rather it's important to account for the ways in which individuals actively appropriate new ideas that

resonate with their established worldview and interpret these ideas in light of their native context. Along this vein, I would argue that Trungpa took up ideas that he encountered after he left Tibet that resonated with his worldview in order to extend and innovate the expression of that understanding, rather than amend, alter, or abandon it. Moreover, in discussing Trungpa's expression of his cultural identity, it's important to remember that Tibetan identity is not a monolith, nor is Tibetan Buddhism: instead there is a multiplicity of Tibetan Buddhist traditions and Tibetan identities. [33]

1.7 Literature Review

Chögyam Trungpa's life has been memorialized by many of his former students[34] however scholarship devoted to his teaching and writings is scarce. Trungpa has often been discussed as a charismatic and controversial figure, and scholarship that mentions him, tends to focus on the extent to which his behavior can be understood as conforming to tradition[35] or breaking with it.[36]

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[33] In particular, it may be fruitful in future studies to remember that Trungpa held an affinity for the Bön tradition: "I am a Bönist," he claimed, "I believe in Bön because I am Tibetan." Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 71. This influence shows up in his teaching in the West. As Geoffrey Samuel points out, Trungpa's popular Shambhala Training program designed as a secular introduction to meditation was in fact, "based on the symbolism of Tibetan folk religion." Samuel, *Civilized Shamans*, 348. Moreover, the Tibetan folk hero Gesar of Ling was a powerful influence for Trungpa who declared that he was his descendant. For an excellent study on the impact of Gesar of Ling on the teaching of Trungpa Rinpoche, see: Robin Kornman, "The Influence of the Epic of King Gesar of Ling on Chögyam Trungpa," in *Recalling Chögyam Trungpa* ed. Fabrice Midal (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005) 347–80.

[34] See: Diana J. Mukpo, *Dragon Thunder* (Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, 2006); Jeremy Hayward, *The Warrior King of Shambhala: Remembering Chogyam Trungpa* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2008); Grant MacLean, *From Lion's Jaws: Chögyam Trungpa's Epic Escape to the West* (Halifax: Mountain, 2016); Reginald Ray, "Chogyam Trungpa as a Siddha," *Recalling Chögyam Trungpa* ed. by Fabrice Midal (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2005), 197-221.

[35] Samuel, *Civilized Shamans,* 346-349.

[36] Burkhard Scherer, "Globalizing Tibetan Buddhism: Modernism and Neo-Orthodoxy in Contemporary Karma Bka' Brgyud Organizations," *Contemporary Buddhism* 13, no. 1 (2012): 125-37. doi:10.1080/14639947.2012.669282; David M. Divalerio, *The Holy Madmen of Tibet* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2015). DiValerio and Scherer take the view that Trungpa's behaviour primarily broke with tradition. For instance, Scherer describes Trungpa's behaviour as "radical westernizing iconoclasm" (133) and calls Trungpa's Buddhism "post-Buddhism" (132). Scholar David M. DiValerio has suggested that Trungpa, who famously introduced the term "crazy wisdom" (*ye shes 'chol ba*) to describe a teaching method or behaviour that holds the student's awakening as

Elsewhere, Trungpa has been discussed in terms of his historical role in introducing Buddhism to the West and the institutional legacy that he left behind.[37] Of course this legacy is so prominent that to discuss Western Buddhism or the reception of Tibetan Buddhism in the West is to address Trungpa in some way.[38]

However, few scholars have treated the content of Trungpa's writings seriously.[39] Among those who have is Roger R. Jackson who situates Trungpa's English poetic compositions outside of the Tibetan *nyamgur* (*songs of experience*) genre. He notes that the poetic form, which he argues is primarily a religious form expressing positive personal experience arising from meditative

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its ultimate aim and thereby at times, willingly transgresses conventional norms in service of that goal, fabricated the term in order to justify what is considered his more outrageous or exploitative personal behavior (240).

[37] See: Fabrice Midal, *Chögyam Trungpa: His life and vision* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2004); Fabrice Midal, *Recalling Chögyam Trungpa* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005); Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America* 3rd ed. (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1992); Lynn P. Eldershaw, "Collective Identity and the Post-Charismatic Fate of Shambhala International," in *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*10, no. 4 (2007): 72-102; Lynn P. Eldershaw "Shambhala International: The Golden Sun of the Great East," in *Wild Geese: Buddhism in Canada* ed. Victor S. Hori, John S. Harding, and Alexander D. Soucy (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010), 236-269; Bill Scheffel, "Everywhere Present Yet Nowhere Visible: Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Dharma Art at the Naropa Institute," in *West of Center: Art and the Counterculture Experiment in America, 1965-1977* ed. Elissa Auther and Adam Lerner (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 346-360; Barış Büyükokutan, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Appropriation: Buddhism, the Vietnam War, and the Field of U.S. Poetry," in *American Sociological Review* 76, no. 4 (2011): 620-39. doi:10.1177/0003122411414820; Louise Gratton Fabri, "At Play in Paradox: The Curious Space Between Tibetan Buddhism and Western Practice" (PhD dissertation, Arizona State University, 2010).

[38] See: Jeffrey Paine, *Re-enchantment Tibetan Buddhism Comes to the West* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004); Laurie Hovell McMillin, *English in Tibet, Tibet in English: Self-Presentation in Tibet and the Diaspora* 1st ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2001), accessed July 17, 2019. doi:10.1057/9780312299095; Donald S. Lopez, Jr, *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); Kenneth Ken'ichi Tanaka and Charles S. Prebish eds., *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Charles S. Prebish and Martin Baumann, eds., *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Whalen-Bridge, John, and Gary Storhoff, eds., *Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009); Jeff Ourvan, *The Star Spangled Buddhist: Zen, Tibetan, and Soka Gakkai Buddhism and the Quest for Enlightenment in America* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2013).

[39] Recently Eben Matthew Yonnetti has explored the presentation and translation of Chögyam Trungpa's terma text *The Sādhana of Mahāmudrā* (see chapter three of this thesis) and its influence on the formulation of Vajrayana Buddhist identities in a Western context. See: Eben Matthew Yonnetti, "Entering 'the Unified Maṇḍala of All the Siddhas:' The *Sādhana of Mahāmudrā* and the Making of *Vajrayāna* Buddhist Subjects" (master's thesis, University of Colorado Boulder, 2017). Ryan Jones has argued that Trungpa modeled his religious style and translation of the dharma in a western context after what he understood of the introduction of Buddhism to Tibet. Ryan Jones, "Fresh Bread from an Old Recipe: Chögyam Trungpa's Transmission of Buddhism to North America, 1970–1977," *Canadian Journal of Buddhist Studies,* ISSN 1710–8268, Number 13, 2008. https://thecjbs.org/.

realization, might be the philosophical and aesthetic basis of *first thought, best thought*, but that this couldn't be conclusively ascertained since Trungpa was also influenced by Zen and mid-century modernist poetry.[40]

Following this line of thought, in *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, David L. McMahan underlines the slogan's resonance with Western Romantic ideas about the worthiness of the artistic expression which arises out of the inner depths of the artist's unconscious. The ethic of spontaneity that is communicated by Trungpa's slogan couldn't have been inspired by Tibetan Buddhist art because, McMahan argues, "individual spontaneity and innovation have little place" in "native Tibetan traditions of religious art".[41]

Instead for McMahan, spontaneity is bound up with German and English Romantic and American Transcendentalist thinkers who, reacting to the supremacy of reason in Enlightenment thought, instead idealized the primitive, the child-like, and the subconscious. In this view, the best work of art is one which is produced by the artist who taps into the subconscious through methods like stream-of-consciousness automatism, revealing the genius that lies therein. This view of the artist breaks with the Classical-era conception of the artist whose unique ability was thought to reside in their skill in mimesis as an expert mirror of the natural world.

McMahan finds Trungpa's claim that dharma art primarily springs from meditative realization and need not include Buddhist iconography, incongruent with a traditional Buddhist approach to art:

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[40] Jackson, "'Poetry' in Tibet: *Glu, mGur, sNyan ngag* and 'Songs of Experience'," 391.
[41] David L. McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 143.

> We would likely search in vain to find any such statement in Tibetan or Sanskrit Buddhist texts . . . if we want to find a true kindred spirit to Trungpa . . . it would be among Romantics such as Rousseau, who declared: "Let us lay it down as an as incontrovertible rule that the first impulses of nature are always right".[42]

Louise Gratton Fabri notes that Ginsberg read Jack Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues* to Chögyam Trungpa on a road trip. Trungpa laughed the whole way and after called it "a perfect exposition of Mind."[43] She also points out that Ginsberg introduced Trungpa to William Carlos Williams' famous creative statement sourced from one of his poems: "no ideas but in things," which would seem to posit the superiority of poetry that was not overly abstract, discussing lofty ideas, but instead stuck closely to images, and the concrete world. This idea, Fabri argues, resonates with a Buddhistic concept of *deshin nyi* (*de bzhin nyid*; *tathatā*),[44] suchness, things as they are. This describes the ultimate nature of reality and emphasizes "raw experience and finely-tuned senses, without additional need for preconception or abstraction".[45] Fabri also argues that Trungpa's heavy use of contradiction in his poetry was a testament to the influence of T.S. Eliot and Williams.[46] However, I would argue that Trungpa already held an esteem for the use of paradox (i.e. contradiction) in poetry to express the ultimate view, as employed in the siddha song tradition of the subcontinent.[47]

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[42] McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, 143.
[43] Quoted in Fabri, "At Play in Paradox: The Curious Space Between Tibetan Buddhism and Western Practice," 250. The source of the capitalization of "mind" here is somewhat mysterious to me. Waldman quotes the same passage and does not capitalize the word. See: Waldman, "Tendrel: A Meeting of Minds," 428.
[44] In fact, Fabri says this is "'tattva' (or 'thusness')" however based on her description, I think the word *tathatā* is more suitable to her meaning. Fabri, "At Play in Paradox: The Curious Space Between Tibetan Buddhism and Western Practice," 248 n. 151.
[45] Fabri, "At Play in Paradox: The Curious Space Between Tibetan Buddhism and Western Practice," 248 n. 151.
[46] Fabri, "At Play in Paradox: The Curious Space Between Tibetan Buddhism and Western Practice," 249 n. 151.
[47] The ancient Indian tantric masters, the Mahāsiddhas (Tib. *grub thob chen po*) produced verses to spontaneously impart esoteric spiritual realizations. These verses commonly employed a "rhetoric of paradox". See: Roger R. Jackson, *Tantric Treasures: Three Collections of Mystical Verse from Buddhist India* trans. Roger R. Jackson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 16.
This rhetoric of paradox is notable because it acts as a technique to convey the highest Buddhist view of non-duality and it simultaneously indicates to the audience that the ultimate nature is beyond conceptual thought. However, the

The most in-depth study of Trungpa's poetry to date is undertaken by Enrique Gálvan-Álvarez in his unpublished doctoral dissertation. Gálvan-Álvarez's project is to locate narratives of exile in Trungpa's poetry. He finds that Trungpa's narrative was "on the margins"[48] vis-a-vis mainstream Tibetan ones. For instance, Trungpa's view of the People's Liberation of Tibet is not framed within a good-evil dichotomy like many other Tibetan refugees at the time, but Trungpa expressed criticism of the state of Buddhism in Tibet before 1959. He excoriated the factionalism and overall degradation of spiritual practice in Tibetan Buddhism while he was in exile, at a time when other refugees concerned with presenting a unified front. Gálvan-Álvarez finds that although Trungpa's poetry presents traditional elements like Dzogchen (*rdzogs chen*)[49] and devotional themes, the poet nevertheless pushes generic boundaries, blending old and new: in a devotional poem (*rgyang bod*) Trungpa adopts a deconstructed narrative style, combining a modern use of language with the conventions of a traditional genre;[50] he treats the archetypal,

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rhetoric of paradox should not be conceived of as a wholesale rejection of the conceptual, just as the logic of non-duality does not reject the dual, instead the logic of non-duality culminates in an affirmation of the dual and non-dual together at once. To clarify, from a conventional point of view, contradiction indicates irrationality: when we assert one thing, we simultaneously negate its opposite and if there is a contradiction the statement must be irrational. This is the logic of duality and from this point of view if we have a statement *A* we cannot also have *-A*. But, this is not the true nature of things from the point of view of non-duality. From this point of view, things are always ambiguous. The assertion that form is emptiness and emptiness is form as taught in the *Prajñāpāramitā* ("perfection of wisdom") literature, which forms the basis of the Mahāyāna Buddhist path, indicates that phenomena are both form and emptiness at once: emptiness *is* their form and vice versa. In this way, truth is not about coming to rest on one side of this duality (one can neither assert form nor can one assert emptiness). Instead, understanding demands an ambiguous dance rather than a concrete positioning. Here, the paradox of the siddha's songs rests on the logic of emptiness rather than the logic of the conventional perspective. From this point of view, the rhetoric of paradox is not an instrument that helps the audience break-through into transcendent experiences and out of rationality, but performative utterances that break down the extreme attachment to one or the other side of dualism and actualize a dance between both and neither.

[48] Enrique Galván-Álvarez, "*Eternal Guests, Sliced Tongues*: The English Poems of Chögyam Trungpa, Tenzin Tsundue, and Tsering Wangmo Dhompa" (PhD dissertation, University of Alcalá, 2011), 220.

[49] Dzogchen or "Great Perfection" is the highest teaching in the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. Chögyam Trungpa often used the term *mahā ati* to refer to dzogchen. Trungpa taught that mahā ati "is considered the final fruition of the Buddhist path. It teaches the indivisibility of space and wisdom." Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Nine,* glossary 782.

[50] Galván-Álvarez, "*Eternal Guests, Sliced Tongues,"* 61–62.

historical lineage figure of Marpa untraditionally— as a flesh and blood figure;[51] one of his poems written in the form of a *dohā* dwells on sadness to an extent that is "unlike traditional *dohās*".[52] Furthermore, Trungpa doesn't appear to long for a homeland, per se, instead, his gurus become his homeland, and he is able to hold them in mind regardless of location or circumstance.[53] Ultimately, Gálvan-Álvarez finds that although Trungpa carried over themes from his native literature, he was not focused on faithfully replicating Tibetan cultural forms. Instead, Gálvan-Álvarez suggests that unlike other Tibetans in diaspora, many of whom at this time were concerned with cultural preservation, Trungpa's interest was not in expressing "authentic Tibetan culture"[54] but rather in finding unique and innovative ways of "expressing his Buddhist heritage". It is this heritage, he argues, and "not any ideas of Tibetan-ness or the Tibet nation, that constitutes his home ground".[55] Nevertheless, for Gálvan-Álvarez, Trungpa's English language poetry resonates with other Tibetan exiled literature that displays the Tibetan identity in flux (as identity always is) and moves "beyond the paradigm of cultural preservation [to] reinvent itself by negotiating its own boundaries."[56]

Ruth Gamble writes about Trungpa in "Cosmic Onomatopoeia". For Gamble, Trungpa was a key player in shaping the Tibetan poetic genre of the *gur* (*mgur*) (songs) for a western audience but Gamble suggests that there is evidence that Trungpa went to some lengths to obscure the more obvious Tibetan aspects of the genre. In the process, she argues, he rebranded the *gur* as *dohā*

[51] Galván-Álvarez, "*Eternal Guests, Sliced Tongues,"* 214.
[52] Galván-Álvarez, "*Eternal Guests, Sliced Tongues,"* 210.
[53] Galván-Álvarez, "*Eternal Guests, Sliced Tongues,"* 217–218.
[54] Galván-Álvarez, "*Eternal Guests, Sliced Tongues,"* 274.
[55] Galván-Álvarez, "*Eternal Guests, Sliced Tongues,"* 274.
[56] Galván-Álvarez, "*Eternal Guests, Sliced Tongues,"* 14.

and emphasized their Indo-Tibetan Buddhist origins arising out of the Kagyü lineage, a lineage to which he belonged.[57]

Finally, Ginsberg gives credence to Trungpa's Tibetan literary roots in his "Introduction to First Thought Best Thought" but equally celebrates his adaptability and embrace of new literary conventions. Ginsberg sees Trungpa's poetry as a progression from a traditional, formal Tibetan verse to modern verse that adapts "techniques of Imagism, post-surrealist humor, modernist slang, subjective frankness & egoism, hip 'fingerpainting,' & tenderhearted spontaneities as adornments of tantric statement."[58] Anne Waldman briefly discusses Trungpa's absorption of modern poetic tropes in "Tendrel" but focuses more on Trungpa's impact on the work of American poets at the time.[59]

For academic sources on Tibetan literary genres I turn to Rheingans,[60] and Jackson and Cabezón.[61] For academic sources on Tibetan Buddhism I draw most heavily on Powers[62] and Samuel.[63]

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[57] Ruth Gamble, "'Cosmic Onomatopoeia' or the Source of The Waterfall of Youth: Chögyam Trungpa and Döndrup Gyal's Parallel Histories of Tibetan mGur," in *Tibetan Literary Genres, Texts, and Text Types: From Genre Classification to Transformation* ed. Jim Rheingans (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 117.
[58] Allen Ginsberg, "Introduction to *Fist Thought Best Thought,"* in *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa: Volume Seven* ed. Carolyn Rose Gimian (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2004), 721.
[59] Anne Waldman, "Tendrel: A Meeting of Minds," in *Recalling Chögyam Trungpa* ed. Fabrice Midal (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005).
[60] Jim Rheingans, ed., *Tibetan Literary Genres, Texts, and Text Types: From Genre Classification to Transformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).
[61] José I. Cabezón and Roger R. Jackson, eds., *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1996).
[62] John Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2007).
[63] Geoffrey Samuel, *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993).

2. Chapter One: First Thought, Best Thought

2.1 Introduction

"First thought is best/ Then you compose"[64] — this line opened a 1972 poem jointly composed by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg later reformulated this line into *first thought, best thought* (FTBT)[65] — a succinct slogan expressing Trungpa and Ginsberg's shared approach to poetic composition, in which spontaneity was the most important component. Scholars like McMahan have understood spontaneity as primarily influenced by Romantic narratives that call for a return to the natural and privilege the artist's spontaneous utterance over the formal training involved in crafting literary verse. As such, this chapter begins by investigating the claim that the spontaneity described in FTBT is primarily influenced by Romantic narratives. Ultimately, I challenge this claim since it ignores evidence that Trungpa explicitly opposed the Romantic conception of spontaneity. By examining the historical context within which FTBT was formulated I find that FTBT was a slogan likely designed to counter prominent post-Romantic ideas of the time, rather than promulgate them.

Turning to Tibetan poetic genres, I argue that spontaneity is an important theme in Tibetan literary genres. With spontaneity cast in a new light, as a Tibetan literary device, I briefly examine the poetic use of free verse, another poetic convention frequently used by Trungpa and

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[64] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 313-14.

[65] According to David Rome, (Personal communication, March 10, 2018). It is worth noting that Ginsberg later said that he thought he had made up the slogan first and that Chögyam Trungpa had gotten it from him. Carolyn Rose Gimian, "Introduction to Volume Seven," in *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa: Volume Seven* ed. Carolyn Rose Gimian (Boston & London: Shambhala Publications, 2004), xxxvii.

entailed in FTBT's spontaneity, which has been primarily characterized as western. I argue that it is continuous with traditional Tibetan literature as well.

Next, I locate an emphasis on spontaneity in both Trungpa's training in literature and religion in Tibet. Unlike the Romantic notion of spontaneity, I find that this is a deliberately cultivated spontaneity and as such, I examine the extent to which Trungpa's presentation of spontaneous poetic composition also stresses training, restrictions and conformity to a prescribed content.

Finally, I examine Trungpa's use of the slogan FTBT in various contexts, and find that in fact, Trungpa employed multiple interpretations of the slogan based on the varying levels of his audience's Buddhist initiation. In conversations with tantric students he gave esoteric interpretations of the slogan, and in discussions with the public, more exoteric ones. Outlining some of his more esoteric interpretations, I argue that scholarly analysis of FTBT has heretofore been limited to the extent that it has ignored the multivalent richness of this slogan.

2.2 Investigating *First Thought, Best Thought* as a Romantic Slogan

McMahan argues correctly, in my view, that the modernization of a religious tradition like Buddhism, isn't a story of a clean rupture with the traditional, but rather that traditional axioms either resonate or generate tension with a set of new and emerging values. Ultimately this relationship between old and new is negotiated in any number of ways.[66] He argues that, "Particular features of the tradition are high-lighted, occluded, or reinterpreted according to the particular resonance they have within the new context's network of meaning, value, and

[66] McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism,* 59.

power".[67] There are dominant narratives in modern culture— McMahan isolates three: Romanticism, scientific naturalism, and monotheism— that religious traditions must engage with in order to be culturally relevant. This engagement is sometimes contentious and sometimes complimentary. In coming to a Western audience, Buddhism, he points out, has been consistently placed in relationship with these three narratives whether that relationship is harmonious or acrimonious, it nevertheless always involves a negotiation.

However, in his discussion of FTBT and Chögyam Trungpa's dharma art, McMahan abandons this more nuanced conceptual framework and attributes undue influence to the modernist discourses he sees as the inspiration for dharma art without properly considering what Indo-Tibetan influences might well be present. Of course, in order to understand how something is adapted, modified, or hybridized, it's important to understand what it was to begin with. But in this instance, McMahan's discussion of traditional Buddhist art is limited. For McMahan Buddhist art is primarily iconic, used for the purposes of ritual activity. Arguing that traditional Buddhist art is not spontaneous, McMahan uses the example of the maṇḍala to illustrate his point:

> Likewise, the stunning Tibetan maṇḍalas now famous in the West are not merely elaborate decorations, nor are they used primarily as focal points for meditation; rather, they serve as material residences for specific buddhas and bodhisattvas who are invoked for merit-making and devotional rituals. These residences must be made to specification to serve such a purpose; hence individual creativity and self-expression are quite limited. Connections could be argued between the Romantic extolling of the imagination and the exercising of the imaginative powers in higher tantric visualization practices based on such maṇḍalas, but these practices, again, have an entirely different function than that of spontaneous creativity. Creative imagination in tantric practice is still iconic, in that it creates an internalized image of a deity—again to pregiven specifications—that the practitioner worships and identifies with. In short, the Romantic interpretation of Buddhist art, emphasizing the expression of interior depths,

[67] McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism,* 62.

> spontaneity, and individual originality, was something new to Buddhism—the result of placing selected Buddhist themes and cultural products into a distinctively modern context and transposing them to harmonize with the melodies of Romanticism.[68]

McMahan doesn't explicitly address spontaneity as a literary theme in the Tibetan context, but his discussion of FTBT is useful to reproduce in full here:

> Ginsberg, in a lecture he gave at the Naropa Institute's Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, recalled a discussion with Chögyam Trungpa in which Trungpa articulated what would become his often-repeated formula for creativity in art and life: "First thought, best thought". It is certainly not an aphorism Trungpa got from his native Tibetan traditions of religious art, in which, as I have pointed out, individual spontaneity and innovation have little place. Yet Trungpa declares "dharma art" to be not "art depicting Buddhist symbols or ideas" but rather "art that springs from . . . the meditative state". We would likely search in vain to find any such statement in Tibetan or Sanskrit Buddhist texts, but if we want to find a true kindred spirit to Trungpa, an Oxford-educated Tibetan who spent much of his life in Boulder, Colorado, it would be among the Romantics such as Rousseau, who declared: "Let us lay it down as an incontrovertible rule that the first impulses of nature are always right". Trungpa incorporates the Rousseauian emphasis on following the spontaneous impulses of nature into the Buddhist suspicion of conceptual elaboration: "first thought" is the fresh, spontaneous, "uncensored and unmanipulated" thought that precedes conceptual and "neurotic" elaborations.[69]

For McMahan that Trungpa's presentation of dharma art and FTBT aligns with modernist narratives, ultimately serve to decontextualize Buddhism in a Western context because it equates dharma with a "state of mind" over a historically situated religious tradition such that dharma becomes a "free-floating 'essence' of religion that precedes conceptual elaboration and imposition of symbols".[70]

However, in his discussions of dharma art and dharma poetics, Chögyam Trungpa was careful to distance himself from Romantic ideas of spontaneity wherein spontaneity is defined as guided by

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[68] McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism,* 139.
[69] McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism,* 143.
[70] McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism,* 143.

the untrained first impulses of nature. In discussions on the spontaneity of artistic expression in dharma art, Trungpa said:

> When we talk about enlightened art as "spacious" and "freedom," we are not talking about nouveau art in terms of just do what you like: spill a pot of ink on the paper and hope for the best. We are talking about highly trained mind to begin with, highly trained intention and attention, and a state of your mind. And that [is what] transmits through your body and your perceptions.[71]

Here, Trungpa strives to carve out a new definition of spontaneity and to distance dharma art from the ethic of spontaneity present in modern art practices. He argues that the freedom and spontaneity of composition from a dharma art perspective, assumes a disciplined foundation. In fact, in discussions of dharma art, Trungpa regularly expresses a similar sentiment. Although he refers to his composition as stream-of-consciousness writings,[72] he is also critical of the spontaneous composition of Western modern artists:

> I don't regard that kind of art as spontaneous. It is somewhat calculated . . . Once upon a time, in the sixties or maybe the forties, a heavy display of neurosis and insanity was very fashionable . . . Fortunately, that time is past.[73]

At a 1974 lecture at Naropa Institute, he makes a similar point: he describes the free flow of spontaneous composition that was popular at the time, as a reaction to the orthodoxy and the grammatical discipline of the literary poet. In this case, according to Trungpa, this means that free verse is paradoxically, not free at all: "your work becomes an expression of imprisonment rather than freedom," he argued.[74] In the poem *The Victoria Memorial* composed in 1969

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[71] Audio recording of Chögyam Trungpa at event, "Dharma Art," 4 April 1975, Item 19750404VCTR1024, Series 3 Dharma Art event, Nalanda Foundation Fonds, Shambhala Archives, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.
[72] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 607.
[73] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 702.
[74] Chögyam Trungpa, "The Tibetan Buddhist Path: The Doha Tradition," The Chronicles of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Accessed July 14, 2018. https://www.chronicleproject.com/tibetan-buddhist-path/.

Trungpa cautions, "whatever comes out of the mind, / regard not that as poetry. / When the true poetry comes, / no such question exists".[75] Not only does the uncultivated spontaneous utterance associated with automatic writing not constitute freedom for Trungpa, true freedom, authentic spontaneity, does not come about naturally, it must be developed.

Moreover, the tension between post-Romantic modernist notions of the artist and Trungpa's idea of the dharma artist is further revealed upon closer inspection of the context in which FTBT was born.

2.3 Situating *First Thought, Best Thought* in its Historical Context

The subject of poetry was evidently on Chögyam Trungpa's mind when he first conceived FTBT in May 1972. On the 6th, of that same month, poets Chögyam Trungpa, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Robert Bly, and Nanao Sakaki held a reading to benefit Chögyam Trungpa's Buddhist center, Karma Dzong in Boulder, Colorado. During the event, Chögyam Trungpa managed to offend poet Robert Bly to the extent that Bly refused to have any future association with him.[76] A recounting of the events of the evening will help to illuminate the tension between the poets, revealing a fundamental disagreement between them with respect to the overall role of the artist.

The reading began with Ginsberg reciting the English versions of four of Chögyam Trungpa's poems. He is followed by Trungpa who reads the poems in Tibetan. Trungpa reads only one of

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[75] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. One,* 388. For a dialogue between contemporary American poets including Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Waldman see: Trungpa, "Poet's Colloquium," *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 608-630. The poets express romantic ideas about the valorized "natural" man or woman (625) and Trungpa disagrees with some of their positions.

[76] Gimian, "Introduction to Volume Seven," xxxiv.

his poems in English: a concrete poem entitled, *Life Was As It Was* (discussed in chapter two of this thesis). Other than a flourish of rolled 'r's' in distinctively Tibetan fashion, Trungpa's performance is markedly devoid of affect or drama.

Following Ginsberg's reading and an intermission, Bly and Snyder take turns reciting poetry. Bly begins by reading his own translation of the poems of Kabir, a fifteenth century Indian mystic and poet. Kabir's poems were originally written in Hindi and translated into Bengali. From Bengali they were then translated into what Bly calls "very bad Victorian English."[77] Bly's translation modernized the English versions, rendering the poems into a contemporary style, incorporating colloquial language and free verse devoid of poetic meter.

Bly's orature is deliberately crafted and delivered with an exaggerated theatricality. His selection of poetry is curated to alternatively mock the audience's spiritual misunderstanding then correct it by providing ostensibly deeper, if vague, spiritual insights: "'cause here's Kabir's idea," he observes: "as the water gives itself into the ocean what is inside me moves inside you."[78]

Bly notes that he first recognized Kabir as a singular genius when he read: "I laugh when I hear that the fish in water is thirsty." "You get that?" he teases: "The spiritual water on all sides and everybody says, 'I'm so thirsty'".[79] Continuing the poem, Bly's translation finds humour at the expense of those who look to Tibet and India for spiritual guidance: "Go wherever you want, to

[77] Audio recording of Robert Bly at the event "Poetry Benefit for Karma Dzong," 6 May 1972, Item 19720506VCTR1024, Series 22 Poetry and elocution, Venerable Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche Fonds, Shambhala Archives, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, (1:33).
[78] Audio recording of Robert Bly, "Poetry Benefit for Karma Dzong," 1:38.
[79] Audio recording of Robert Bly, "Poetry Benefit for Karma Dzong,"1:39.

Calcutta or Tibet / If you can't find where your soul is hidden / for you the *world will never be real.*"[80] Of course, it is Bly, not Kabir, who inserts the criticism of spiritual seekers attracted to Tibet. The original poem admonishes spiritual seekers who pilgrimage to Benares and Mathura[81] thinking that they will discover the divine in those holy cities rather than inside their own minds. Discovering the divine within is a common theme in religious poetry in the sub-continent. In fact, Trungpa's poem *Don't Go to the Dentist with Such Good Teeth,*[82] offers his own variation on this theme. However, Bly's insertion of "Calcutta and Tibet" into Kabir's poem, at an event hosted in the name of a Tibetan Buddhist church, adds something more to the advice to seek enlightenment by looking inwards: it adds a chauvinistic cultural dimension to the critique.[83]

In a similar vein, Bly reads another of Kabir's poems that he thinks expresses suspicion of meditation: "The musk is inside the deer, but the deer does not look for it, it wanders around looking for grass." "It must be a poem on meditation, it must be!" he concludes. "That you don't get all tangled up inside yourself."[84] For Bly the deer is a symbol which, because it is unburdened by existential questions, ego-consciousness, and spiritual hand wringing, lives in accordance with nature and therefore in tune with truth. In this interpretation, meditation, and by extension, training of any kind is contrivance which gets one "all tangled up" in the inner quest

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[80] Audio recording of Robert Bly, "Poetry Benefit for Karma Dzong," 1:39.
[81] Kabir, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* tr. by Rabindranath Tagore Assisted by Evelyn Underhill (London: MacMillan, 1915), 50.
[82] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 574.
[83] In fact, Bly's primary influence is Carl Jung who, despite a strong interest in the "Orient" nevertheless believed that western minds were extroverted, whereas eastern ones were introverted. He thought westerners should adopt some level of introversion but should not look outside their own culture for solutions like meditation to their psychological problems. Rather they should discover methods of healing (individuation) that were native to the West. See: Carl G. Jung, "The Difference Between Easter and Western Thinking" in *The Portable Jung* ed. Joseph Campbell (London: Penguin Books, 1976) 480-502. For Bly's appreciation of Jung see: Robert Bly, "Preface to the Original Edition" *Iron John: A Book About Men* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1990, 2004), xv.
[84] Audio recording of Robert Bly, "Poetry Benefit for Karma Dzong," 1:44.

for something that is ultimately useless, just as musk is useless to the deer. The call here is a Romantic one: to return to the natural— a childlike, automatic relationship to the world (looking for grass), instead of pursuing training, the intellect, and meditation, which lead one astray to the extent that these techniques attempt to perfect nature, rather than uncover it.

When Bly tackles the subject of art and creativity he argues that Dante's image of a woman sleeping "in the back of his head" is a metaphor for the subconscious, the true font of creativity and spiritual life for a man— for a woman he says, it may be a *man* asleep in her head.[85] He roughly recalls a Tibetan verse that he thinks expresses the same sentiment: "Don't you understand that the body is the only thing that can carry you over the river. It's hard to get 'hold of a human body. Don't sleep now you fool!"[86] The body here is significant for Bly because it houses the subconscious, the source of creativity and truth. In line with Romantic narratives, the artist is exalted for the very reason that they are uniquely positioned to tap into those depths. What's more, the artist understands this connection and is the one who issues the imperative not to sleep.

Underpinning Bly's performance is the view of the artist as singular genius, a spiritually gifted preacher-poet whose project is to give birth to truth by returning to the subconscious, the natural. This ability is innate and requires little more than tapping into the psychic depths of the artist's own mind. The artist's project is to eschew training therefore, rather than hone their skill, polish their mirror, as it were, as prescribed by Classical era thought.

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[85] Audio recording of Robert Bly, "Poetry Benefit for Karma Dzong," 1:41.
[86] Audio recording of Robert Bly, "Poetry Benefit for Karma Dzong," 1:42.

During Bly's reading, Chögyam Trungpa began making exaggerated faces. The audience responded with awkward silences and some giggling throughout. Later as Bly reads W.B. Yeats with an exaggerated Irish accent, what he called his "corny imitation of [Yeats'] voice"[87] as if to correct for what he describes as the Irish poet's utter lack of musical sense, Trungpa picks up a large gong and positions it over his head in protest. The audience laughs, and Bly responds, "It's not a funny poem, you know." "Look at what Rinpoche's doing," Snyder says to him, directing his attention to the spectacle. "Ah yes!" Bly responds, laughing easily.[88]

At the end of the evening however, the tone of the reading shifts. Trungpa, who the poets might have dismissed as raucous and drunk, but ultimately un-offensive, issues a more pointed criticism, admonishing their entire performance. Chögyam Trungpa addresses the audience:

> "[These] poets, whatever they say in their poetry, I'm sure they don't mean what they said. Please, let me apologize for you. The drama involved with the poetic scene doesn't mean a thing. Please forgive us. We didn't mean to lay trips on you . . . Let us not influence you [as far] as our dogma goes. Please don't pay attention [to] our dogma, our concept philosophy. It's free—you could reject it, please reject it. Please, please, don't pay attention to it! . . . And let's—please, the idea is to stop aggression in this country, please."[89]

The poets, chastised publicly by Chögyam Trungpa, were perhaps justifiably offended. For the purposes of this study, this story serves to highlight the tension that resulted from what is often characterized as a harmonious or advantageous cultural exchange between mid-century American poets who were sympathetic to Eastern religious traditions and the authentic holders of those traditions.[90] What's more, this tension played an important role, likely acting as a catalyst

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[87] Audio recording of Robert Bly, "Poetry Benefit for Karma Dzong," 2:34.
[88] Audio recording of Robert Bly, "Poetry Benefit for Karma Dzong," 2:40.
[89] Audio recording of Robert Bly, "Poetry Benefit for Karma Dzong," 2:56.
[90] Baris Büyükokutan argues that what is often considered cultural appropriation—the adoption of Buddhism and other Eastern traditions by mid-century American poets active in Vietnam protests—should in fact be understood as

in Trungpa's formulation of FTBT, a poetic paradigm that was likely conceived in the days following the reading.[91] Suffice to say that Chögyam Trungpa's ideas of poetry, the attitude of the poet, and the artist's performance, conflicted with Western culturally acceptable norms and standards of behaviour or performance that were popular at the time. There was little that might be considered offensive or insulting about Bly's performance by the standards of the time. Nevertheless— and setting aside the question of whether or not Trungpa's complaint was justified— it is clear that Chögyam Trungpa perceived and reacted to an intangible cultural and/or emotional element of the poet's performance which he judged to be irreconcilable with other values and standards of his religious training (i.e. non-aggression) that, to him, were non-negotiable. This alone is evidence that Chögyam Trungpa was working within a framework of cultural values that at times did not conform, nor give way, to competing values that he encountered in the West.

In fact, it's important to check the temptation to assume that the Buddhist tradition, as well as prominent cultural actors like Chögyam Trungpa who were instrumental in its early translation, were diminished by their encounter with the West when, in many cases, "tradition" may have

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cultural exchange, such that both parties (the poets and the authentic holders of the traditions that were appropriated) benefited. The poets, he argues had cultural capital which was valuable to marginalized tradition-holders who conferred legitimacy on these students in exchange for cultural capital. In cases where holders of religious traditions were established to the extent that they didn't need cultural capital Büyükokutan found that they didn't engage in exchange. While I find Büyükokutan's argument persuasive, ultimately the scope of the theoretical framework doesn't allow for the influence of the actors' intention – he thinks whether or not Trungpa understood that he was behaving in this way or intended to, shouldn't bear upon the results of the study—and as such, doesn't account for instances where the legitimate holder of tradition acted in ways that worked against their own interests and alienated actors with cultural capital because of the perceived constraints and norms of the religious tradition that they considered unnegotiable. In other words, it doesn't account for the times when negotiations between cultural narratives broke down. As is the case, I argue, with the 1972 poetry benefit reading. See: Baris Büyükokutan, "Towards a Theory of Cultural Appropriation: Buddhism, the Vietnam War, and the Field of U.S. Poetry" *American Sociological Review* 76, no 4 (2011), 620-39.

[91] The exact date of the poem *First Thought* which coined the slogan has, to my knowledge, not been recorded. The poem is dated May 1972. Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 313-14.

proved more resilient than such narratives of appropriation can accommodate. It is equally true that in some instances, dominant cultural narratives in the West, like Romanticism, have been shaped and changed by Buddhist thought and not exclusively the reverse.

As we have seen, McMahan argues that Chögyam Trungpa and Ginsberg's belief that art is inherently connected to Buddhism is an invention of Americanized Zen which then came to characterize all of Buddhism in a modern context. Furthermore, he argues that their shared esteem of spontaneity and its association with Buddhism, was primarily borrowed from Americanized Zen which, via D.T. Suzuki had elevated its concern with spontaneity because that resonated with Romantic ideas about the genius of the artist, and not because spontaneity is a traditionally valued in the creation of Buddhist art. Remarkably, this argument ignores a prominent form of religious Tibetan poetry with an emphasis on spontaneity, freedom of individual expression, and a colloquial sensibility known as *nyamgur,* "songs of experience".

2.4 Poetry in Tibet

There are roughly three phases of poetic development in Tibet before 1959. The first period of note is the early indigenous oral folk song tradition (*glu*). Over time, this ancient folk song tradition met the Indian oral tantric song traditions of the *dohā* and the *gīti,* marking the second important phase in Tibetan verse. Finally, in the thirteenth century scholars introduced a seventh-century handbook of Sanskrit poetics into Tibetan, which changed the landscape of Tibetan poetry. This handbook, written by Sanskrit grammarian Daṇḍin, entitled *Kāvyādarśa* ("mirror of poetry"), ignited a major interest in the highly stylized conventions and ornamentation of Sanskrit poetics. The concern with *kāvya* marks a turn towards a more classically literary type of

verse in Tibet.[92] Nevertheless, the vibrancy of the oral song traditions did not diminish. To this day, songs have a central place in Tibet such that Tibet's song traditions are inseparable form Tibetan identity. In his keynote address to the Tsadra Conference in 2018, Lama Jabb emphasized the significance of the tradition of songs in Tibet, citing a Tibetan proverb: "In every Tibetan mouth there is a song. To claim not to know song is not Tibetan."[93]

2.4.1 Tibetan Songs: *Gur & Nyamgur*

There are several different words for "song" in Tibetan. The aforementioned *nyamgur* are a subcategory of the *gur* (*mgur*), "songs," an indigenous Tibetan genre, itself classified as either a subcategory, honorific, or synonymous with the *lu* (*glu*), the native oral folk song tradition.[94] Spontaneity and orality are central to the composition of *gur.* The earliest textual use of the term was discovered in the Dunhuang caves and dates back to the royal period between the sixth and ninth centuries C.E.[95] In these instances the term is used to refer to "songs sung by the kings and nobles, usually for political or propagandistic purposes, with a textual emphasis on personal experiences and the overcoming of obstacles."[96]

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[92] The *Kāvyādarśa* includes an extensive consolidation of poetic traditions from across north and south India and includes the presentation of their different uses of metaphor, "a lengthy discussion of the linguistic skills—almost the word games—involved in the mastery of rhymes, puns, and acrostics (including the deliberate manipulation of all kinds of literary effects across a poem's lines and meters)." Thupten Jinpa, "Translator's Introduction," in *Songs of Spiritual Experience: Tibetan Buddhist Poems of Insight and Awakening* ed. Thupten Jinpa and Jaś Elsner (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2014), 9. For Trungpa's creative take on an acrostic poem see Appendix A in this thesis. Thupten Jinpa describes the traditional method of teaching the *Kāvyādarśa* as a tremendously rigorous and extensive study in both the interpretation and the composition of poetic verse. Strict adherence to the formal and rhetorical conventions of the tradition was a given, and in order to navigate the layers of synonym and obscure references to Indian literature, composition of this type of poetry necessarily became an activity of the elite: those individuals educated primarily in the monastic system. Jinpa, "Translator's Introduction" in *Songs of Spiritual Experience,* 11-12.

[93] Lama Jabb, "An Act of Bardo: Translating Tibetan Poetry," Keynote Address (Boulder: The Lotsāwa Translation Workshop, Tibet Himalaya Initiative, Oct. 6, 2018).

[94] Gamble, "'Cosmic Onomatopoeia,'" *Tibetan Literary Genres,* 110-111.

[95] Terry Jay Ellingson, "The Maṇḍala of Sound: Concepts and Sound Structures in Tibetan Ritual Music" (PhD dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1979), 67-8.

[96] Ellingson, "The Maṇḍala of Sound," 229.

Roger Jackson finds that after the eleventh century *gur* became increasingly religious in content and tone. However wide ranging the moods and styles of this type of song, he argues the dharma was typically the underlying subject. Citing Döndrup Gyel's (*don grub rgyal*) (1953–1985) study that classified *gur* into seven major kinds, Jackson finds that these songs primarily:

> (1) remember the guru's kindness, (2) indicate the source of one's realizations, (3) inspire the practice of Dharma, (4) give instructions on how to practice, (5) answer disciples' questions, (6) admonish the uprooting of evil and (7) serve as missives to gurus or disciples.[97]

Gur may rely on one or more of these categories in one song and lines can range from seven-syllables to twenty-one. Döndrup Gyel argues that *gur* can be distinguished from *kāvya*-influenced verse by dint of their simplicity, straightforwardness, as well as their metrical flexibility and their reliance on distinctively Tibetan imagery and sayings.[98]

During the second diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet (c. 11th century), Tibetan translators like Marpa— who was regarded by contemporaries as uniquely talented in Tibetan song[99] — travelled to India to collect Buddhist scriptures and in the process, they brought back the tantric songs traditions of the sub-continent.[100] These masters subsequently incorporated the symbolic

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[97] Jackson, "'Poetry' in Tibet: *Glu, mGur, sNyan ngag* and 'Songs of Experience'," 374.
[98] Jackson, "'Poetry' in Tibet: *Glu, mGur, sNyan ngag* and 'Songs of Experience'," 374. A thorough comparison of Trungpa's corpus of English poetry with the categories of the *gur* is outside the scope of this thesis, however it is worth noting that Trungpa's English poetry is replete with examples of poems composed as missives to his students: for example: *For Anne Waldman*; *Praise to the Lady of the Big Heart: For Lila Rich*; *A Poem for John (Tischer)*; *Bonnie Johnnie Forever*; as well as poems remembering the guru's kindness: *Supplication to the Gurus of the Kagyü lineage*; *A letter to Marpa*; *Profound Samaya of the Only Father Guru*, and so on.
[99] Ellingson, "The Maṇḍala of Sound," 244.
[100] Siddha songs are often found in the form of a *dohā,* which are spontaneous couplets, likely sung in vernacular languages that expressed the author's experience of awakening. These songs are attributed to a group of Indian tantric masters, both male and female, known as the *mahāsiddhas,* (the great adepts or perfected ones). The *mahāsiddhas* are often depicted as social outcasts, some of whom left university, took up with low-caste consorts, lived near cremation grounds, "participate[d] in debauched rites" and were "out to subvert the social and religious order." Jackson, *Tantric Treasures,* 3–4. For an explanation of the *dohā, caryāgīti, and vajragīti,* see: Lara

elements of the tantric songs into their native song traditions. Tibet's greatest yogi, Milarepa (1052-1135) is the most famous author of this new type of *gur*[101] and his influence was such that he was perhaps single-handedly responsible for turning the *gur* into a religious genre. It is this influence which inaugurates the *nyamgur,* which are characterized by "intense subjectivity and reflection of direct insight"[102] in meditation. Throughout his life, Mila composed thousands of spontaneous songs[103] which were finally compiled by Tsangnyön Heruka (*gtsang smyon heruka*) (1452-1507) approximately 350 years after his death.

Mila's vastly popular songs may have appropriated tantric symbolism from siddha songs, but the genre of *nyamgur* nevertheless maintained thoroughly Tibetan elements like onomatopoeic phrases;[104] sequences of numbers; similes; parallelisms and antithesis; greater contextualization; specific locations; and accounts of personal experiences.[105]At the same time this song tradition enshrined an ethic of spontaneity reinforced by its encounter with the Indic song traditions. "It is the *nyams mgur,"* Lara Braitstein writes, "that retained the spontaneity and freshness of the siddha songs from the sub-continent."[106]

Braitstein, "Introduction," in *The Adamantine Songs (Vajragīti) By Saraha,* study, translation and Tibetan critical edition by Lara Braitstein, Treasury of the Buddhist Sciences series Tengyur Translation Initiative (New York: The American Institute of Buddhist Studies at Columbia University in New York, Co-published with Columbia University's Center for Buddhist Studies and Tibet House US, 2014), 47-53.

[101] Matthew T. Kapstein, "The Indian Literary Identity in Tibet," *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia,* ed. Sheldon Pollock (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 772. Despite the Indic influence, the *gur* continued to be an unmistakably Tibetan genre.

[102] Braitstein, "Introduction," in *The Adamantine Songs (Vajragīti) By Saraha,* 54.

[103] Christopher Stagg, "Translator's Introduction," *Mi-la-ras-pa. The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa: A New Translation* ed. Gtsaṅ-smyon He-ru-ka, trans. Christopher Stagg and Dzogchen Ponlop, Rinpoche (Boulder: Shambhala, 2016), xix.

[104] This thesis will deal with the theme of onomatopoeia in chapter two.

[105] Victoria Sujata, *Tibetan Songs of Realization: Echoes from a Seventeenth-Century Scholar and Siddha in Amdo* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2005), 203-228.

[106] Braitstein, "Introduction," in *The Adamantine Songs (Vajragīti) By Saraha,* 55.

2.4.2 Spontaneity in Tibetan Poetry

The tradition of composing spontaneous songs is still alive in Tibetan religious culture today. The composition of spontaneous verses that express one's meditative insight, or devotion to one's guru, are a common practice meant to demonstrate the quality of one's insight and meditative training. The emphasis on spontaneity provides a kind of personal relief, a "controlled break" from the rigors of a strict monastic education.[107] Thupten Jinpa contests that:

> Just as the continuing lineage of writing spontaneous poetry acted as a counterforce to the impact of the rigid formalization of verse writing, so in the lives of individuals the spontaneity of the experiential songs was most important counterbalance to rigorous philosophical training and analysis.[108]

This spontaneity, however, must be qualified. Lara Braitstein points out that the context for delivering these songs, and thus the meaning of spontaneity itself was changed over time: what may have once been a spontaneous song sung to a small audience morphed into the practice of publishing one's 'spontaneous' songs in "handsomely edited volumes or on-line."[109] Additionally, the restrictive influence of *kāvya* was felt everywhere including in the Tibetan song tradition.

As Tibetan poetry absorbed *kāvya* conventions and transformed, Jinpa writes, there was a cost for the *nyamgur*:

> Traditionally, this transformation of Tibetan poetry has been regarded very positively. In poetry in general it is hard to see any serious defects in the impact of Sanskrit poetics. But for the poems with which this book [*Songs of Spiritual Experience*] is concerned – songs of spiritual experience and meditative realization, the kinds of songs for which

[107] Lara E. Braitstein, "*Saraha's Adamantine Songs*: Texts, Contexts, Translations and Traditions of the Great Seal" (PhD Dissertation, McGill University, 2004) 126–127.
[108] Quoted in Braitstein, "*Saraha's Adamantine Songs*: Texts, Contexts, Translations and Traditions of the Great Seal*,"* 127.
[109] Braitstein, "*Saraha's Adamantine Songs*: Texts, Contexts, Translations and Traditions of the Great Seal," 127.

> Milarepa had already set a virtually supreme model by any standard – there was a price. The essence of spiritual songs is their spontaneity, their immediacy, the momentary capturing of a transformed state of mind while all the rules of meter, metaphor, and language encouraged by formalization can (and did) have the effect of hindering the natural flow of spontaneity in favor of technically refined forms. To a degree, mastery of form was emphasized at the cost of immediacy of content.[110]

On the subject of spontaneity Jinpa further comments:

> This problem of the potential loss of spontaneity has never been explicitly recognized in writings about formalized poetry, perhaps because after the assimilation of the *Kavyadarsha's* poetics everything definable as poetry was of the formalized kind. Yet there seems to have been an implicit acknowledgement of the conflict between form and spontaneity.[111]

Jinpa explains that this implicit tension was expressed through stylistic conventions. The *nyams mgur* retained a stylistic consistency that resisted the influence of conventional literary verse. Conventional Tibetan verse has two dominant meters containing either nine or seven syllables. Emphasis is placed on the first syllable of each foot. They can be rendered as such: --/--/--/--- and --/--/---. By contrast, the *nyamgur* "deliberately defy"[112] these rhythmic conventions, altogether rejecting the "insistence on regularity of rhythm and cadence."[113] The *nyamgur* are composed in 5, 6, 8, 9, or 11 syllable lines that can be expressed as: --/-/--, --/--/--, -/--/--/---, --/--/---/--, --/--/--/---/--.[114]

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[110] Jinpa, "Translator's Introduction," in *Songs of Spiritual Experience,* 12.
[111] Jinpa, "Translator's Introduction," in *Songs of Spiritual Experience,* 13.
[112] Jinpa, "Translator's Introduction," in *Songs of Spiritual Experience,* 13.
[113] Jinpa, "Translator's Introduction," in *Songs of Spiritual Experience,* 13.
[114] Jinpa, "Translator's Introduction," in *Songs of Spiritual Experience,* 12-13. It may be noted that Trungpa maintained that the seven-syllable poem was indicative of folk poetry, and the nine-syllable line was the provenance of the ornate *kāvya* inspired verse (*snyan ngag).* See: Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 634). Ruth Gamble writes that *lu* use even numbered syllables and *gur* use odd. Gamble, "'Cosmic Onomatopoeia'" *Tibetan Literary Genres,* 111).

Chögyam Trungpa took up this implicit tension and made it explicit. In a lecture on Buddhist poetry, he declared that one might say that Buddhist poetry does not exist[115] instead, he argued, there are Buddhist *songs*.[116] Here, Chögyam Trungpa explicitly aligns himself with the tradition of the *gur* over the scholarship of the clerical *kāvya* verse. This association with song-poetry is likely to have particularly appealed to his audience, many of whom were counter-cultural resisters of orthodoxy, but it also expresses a dominant narrative in the traditional Kagyü songs which were "remarkable for [their] eschewal of the ornamental conventions of *kāvya*."[117]

Moreover, Trungpa felt that the level of scholarship involved in mastering the *kāvya*-influenced verse was elitist and ultimately outdated.[118] Even when writing poetry in his mother tongue, he experimented with resisting *kāvya* influence. His approach to writing poetry in Tibetan was to "try to use the classical Tibetan format, without the classical Indian influence."[119] It's important to note here that it wasn't the foreign-ness of Indian verse that Trungpa objected to— he was very happy to highlight the confluence of Milarepa's compositions with the Indic *dohā* tradition[120]— but rather, echoing a well-established narrative tension between scholastic and contemplative approaches to Buddhism in Tibet, he opposed the scholastic rigor of the genre.

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[115] As Gene E. Smith notes Daṇḍin's *Kāvyadarśa* was the most influential Sanskrit poetics handbook to be translated into Tibetan and it was hugely popular with early Sakya masters. Just why Tibetans chose to translate Daṇḍin's text over the works of Bhāmaha or Udbhata who had authored similar treatises on *kāvya* became a question that later Tibetan scholars grappled with. The subsequent rationale for privileging Daṇḍin's text was that Daṇḍin was a Buddhist. But this explanation doesn't entirely hold water, Smith argues, since a more compelling argument can be made for Bhamaha being a Buddhist. In any case, this suggests that the preference for Daṇḍin's *Kāvyadarśa* was not primarily religiously motivated, or at the very least was motivated by other factors. This debate might provide more context to Chögyam Trungpa's remarks in 1974 vis-a-vis "Buddhist poetry," see: Gene E. Smith, *Among Tibetan Texts* ed. Kurtis Schaeffer (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2001), 205.
[116] Chögyam Trungpa, "The Tibetan Buddhist Path: The Doha Tradition," The Chronicles of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Accessed July 14, 2018. https://www.chronicleproject.com/tibetan-buddhist-path/.
[117] Ellingson, "The Maṇḍala of Sound," 773.
[118] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven*, 637.
[119] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven*, 634.
[120] See: Ruth Gamble, "'Cosmic Onomatopoeia,'" 110-135.

Trungpa's Tibetan verse is often composed in eighteen syllable lines, making frequent use of colloquialisms and puns. He hoped his approach to Tibetan poetry would, "create a surprise for new generations of Tibetans so that they also can compose poetry according to their own vision rather than having to stick to a format."[121]

2.5 Free Verse

A literary element that is often regarded as setting Trungpa's English poetry apart from traditional Tibetan verse, was his use of free verse. Trungpa experimented heavily with free verse evidently adopting the techniques of the poets he encountered in the 1970s when he came to America, and the majority of his English language poems do not conform to a poetic meter. However, as Gálvan-Álvarez points out, Trungpa's use of free verse, albeit in English, mirrors his contemporary Döndrup Gyel's Tibetan-language compositions at the time, that likewise, did not conform to meter.[122] Indeed, in his article, "The Heartbeat of a New Generation" Pema Bhum lauded a new kind of Tibetan poetry: one that was liberated from the constraints of both meter and ideology.[123]

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[121] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven*, 634. To my knowledge, Chögyam Trungpa's poetry was not widely read in Tibetan during his lifetime. See: Hortsang Jigme, "Tibetan Literature in the Diaspora," in *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change* trans. Lauran R. Hartley, ed. Lauran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini Vedani (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2008) 283. Nevertheless, his assessment that *kāvya*-inspired verse (*snyan ngag)* was in crisis in the 1970's appears to have been a prescient one. Some of Trungpa's contemporaries and many Tibetan poets who followed rejected the heavy scholasticism of the *kāvya*-inspired genre and opted for a freer poetic expression (a free verse).

[122] Gálvan Álvarez, "*Eternal Guests,"* 100.

[123] Pema Bhum, "Heartbeat of a New Generation: A Discussion of the New Poetry," in *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change* ed. Lauran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2008).

Tibetan free verse has been critically understood as a radical departure from the conventions of traditional ornate verse. However, recently Lama Jabb has criticized the overemphasis of this departure, arguing that there is continuity between traditional and modern Tibetan poetry.[124] In fact, Jabb finds that *gur* were a generic influence on the development of the free verse employed by influential contemporary Tibetan poets like Döndrup Gyel and Ju Kalsang (b. circa 1960). As previously noted, these songs employ metric flexibility, often allowing for lines of different lengths. This flexibility, Jabb argues, informed the development of Tibetan free verse.[125] Ju Kalsang also argues that Tibetan free verse was not the adoption of a foreign poetic technique: "the asymmetrical metrical form of the *mgur* . . . demonstrates that free verse is not a mere imitation of a foreign literary genre."[126]

Trungpa regarded the *gur* as particularly compatible with modern Western poetry; Tibetan songs didn't have to conform to a strict Indian literary tradition, he maintained, like mid-century American poetry, they promoted a freer expression.[127] Although Trungpa may have been influenced by modern poetry in his adoption of free verse, he nevertheless evidently felt that the literary convention of free verse resonated with his native song traditions. As such, Trungpa's use of free verse could be accurately cast as an adaptation of his cultural heritage, rather than a wholesale replacement of it. Here, I agree with Lama Jabb who argues that, "Tibetan national

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[124] Lama Jabb, *Oral and Literary Continuities in Modern Tibetan Literature: The Inescapable Nation*, ed. Gray Tuttle (London: Lexington Books, 2015), 8.
[125] Jabb, *Oral and Literary Continuities in Modern Tibetan Literature,* 8.
[126]Jabb, *Oral and Literary Continuities in Modern Tibetan Literature,* 8.
[127] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 636. Trungpa also finds a kinship between Milarepa's songs and the Zen tradition: "Milarepa was not regarded as a poet from the scholarly point of view. At that time, Tibetans cultivated the Indian style of poetry which is long-winded and full of synonyms, its imagery involved with *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* myths. But the ruggedness of Milarepa's literal poetry is comparable to the koan quality in the Zen tradition—purely stating the facts" (Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Five,* 347).

consciousness is reinforced not just through cherishing the memories and practices of the past in writing, but also through reusing or upholding older forms of narrative in innovative ways".[128]

2.6 An Education in Spontaneity

Turning to Chögyam Trungpa's education, we can locate narratives that promote spontaneity as both a religious and literary goal. In fact, part of Trungpa's education in poetry was learning to compose orally, spontaneously, in the moment. Part of Jamgön Kongtrul's education of Trungpa involved composing poetry with him spontaneously. The two would often compose one poem together, in their meetings, alternating authorship between lines. Trungpa replicated this style of teaching with his own students; the poem that birthed FTBT was a joint poem between Ginsberg and Trungpa, written in just this style. When they weren't composing spontaneously, Trungpa would write verses in six or eighteen syllables and show them to Jamgön Kongtrul who would make corrections to them. Over time, Trungpa found that the verses that he put less time into, that he wrote hurriedly on his way to meet with Jamgön Kongtrul, received fewer corrections. In affirmation of Trungpa's suspicion that the less he labored over his compositions the better they were, Jamgön Kongtrul told him: "If you write with intention, somehow it doesn't work. You have to write without intention."[129]

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[128] Jabb, *Oral and Literary Continuities in Modern Tibetan Literature*, 2.

[129] Audio recording of Chögyam Trungpa at event "Seminar on Jamgön Kongtrul: Talk Five," 4 December 1974, Item 19741204VCTR1024, Series 6 1974 Public Talk or Seminar, Venerable Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche Fonds, Shambhala Archives, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, 41:35.

Evidently Trungpa discovered a passion for writing verse during this time. He recalls writing poetry obsessively. He took every opportunity to write a verse: "I wouldn't write [a] simple note for people. Writing letters back home, I [would] always write formal poetry."[130]

After the young Trungpa complained to his teacher that he was becoming "too literate," Jamgön Kongtrul began calling Trungpa into his quarters to compose spontaneous verses in front of guests who had a keen interest or expertise in poetry. These sessions impressed upon Trungpa the need for "inspiration" and "fearlessness" when attempting to properly communicate one's positive meditative experience, one's "basic sanity."[131] Here, Trungpa's spontaneous compositions were free in delivery but not in content: their proper subject was his positive personal meditative experience.

Moreover, Trungpa associated spontaneous action with Jamgön Kongtrul himself. In a lecture about Shechen Kongtrul, Trungpa repeatedly used the word "spontaneous" to describe his teacher's character as he recounted the change in his understanding of a Buddhist master before meeting Jamgön Kongtrul and after.[132] Before their encounter, Trungpa had only heard the stories about accomplished meditation masters that his tutors had told him. He knew that because his role was both spiritual and political it was important that he act the part of a spiritual master, and that his education was aimed at turning him into a lama like the ones his tutors revered. However, because he had never met such a figure, he felt that all he could do was to imitate one. His tutors encouraged and honed this act: in meetings with the public, dignitaries, and guests,

[130]Audio recording of Chögyam Trungpa at event "Seminar on Jamgön Kongtrul: Talk Five," 41:35-43:25.
[131] Audio recording of Chögyam Trungpa at event "Seminar on Jamgön Kongtrul: Talk Five," 43:25-45:31.
[132] Audio recording of Chögyam Trungpa at event "Seminar on Jamgön Kongtrul: Talk Five," 43:25-45:31.

Trungpa would study and memorize a script produced by his tutors beforehand so that he might create a good impression. When not speaking, he would keep his eyes half-closed and assume a studied, perennially calm demeanor. "At first, I thought that even those [guests] were programmed as well, so everything should be synchronized. But somehow that wasn't the case, as I realized."[133] Trungpa described the chaos (and comedy) which would often result from these encounters: having no knowledge of the existence of a script let alone their lines, guests would invariably deviate from the plan, and a very confusing scene would sometimes ensue.[134]

In this context, meeting Jamgön Kongtrul strongly impacted the young Trungpa. Now Trungpa had a reference point for the type of holy person his tutors were trying to fashion him into. But according to Trungpa, Jamgön Kongtrul didn't act in a false or pretentious way: sometimes he didn't even sit up straight in his chair when they met; sometimes— and this astonished Trungpa— he even lay down.[135] Trungpa learned an enduring lesson about training and spontaneity:

> The interesting point here is how you begin on an ordinary level, on this sort of imbecile-child level, and from that how you begin to click into the various stages of sophistication, sanity, and a visionary kind of world. That theme seems to play a very important part in my life. How can you emulate a greater person? By imitating them? By memorizing their speech? By pretending? None of those seems to work. One just has to *be* it, on a very simple level.[136]

Spontaneous action, in this case, is an indication that one has integrated one's education into one's very being. Jamgön Kongtrul acted spontaneously because he was so accomplished. In other words, his action became spontaneous through mastering training. This view is consistent

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[133] Trungpa, *The Mishap Lineage,* 69.
[134] Trungpa, *The Mishap Lineage,* 69
[135] Trungpa, *The Mishap Lineage,* 68.
[136] Trungpa, *The Mishap Lineage,*70.

with the conduct of a person who has accomplished the highest realization at the Dzogchen (or ati) level in the Nyingma system:

> The conduct in the ati yoga system
> Bears the life of the view and meditation
> Through which conduct is spontaneous.
> Resembling the conduct of a madman,
> One acts with no restrictions whatsoever.[137]

2.7 "Spontaneity" in Buddhist Teachings

In fact, the term "spontaneity" has an important religious meaning in Nyingma Buddhist teachings. The term that is often translated as "spontaneous" or "effortless; without striving; naturally" is *lhun gyi* or *lhun gi drupa (lhun gyis grub pa*). Trungpa sometimes translated *lhundrup* (*lhun grub*) as "self-existing" and even "simplicity."[138] As Samten Gyaltsen Karmay points out, the adverb *lhun gyi* occurs frequently with other verbs in Dzogchen texts:

> such as *lhun gyis 'jug pa,* "entering spontaneously" and *lhun gyis dzogs pa,* "achieved spontaneously". The most frequent one and used in works other than on rDzogs chen is *lhun gyis grub pa* (*lhun grub pa, anābhoga, Mvy* 411), "effortless", "without striving". *Lhun grub* is one of the two terms used to describe special qualities of the Primordial Basis. The other term being *ka dag,* Primaeval Purity.[139]

The Primordial basis has three qualities: 1. It is primordially pure (*ka dag*) and has a physical form (*sku*). 2. It is both spontaneous (*lhun gyis grub pa*) and luminous (*'od gsal ba*). 3. Its nature

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[137] Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé, *The Treasury of Knowledge: Book Six, Part Four: Systems of Buddhist Tantra; The Industructible Way of Secret Mantra* trans. Elio Guarisco and Ingrid McLeod (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2005), 346.

[138] Chögyam Trungpa, "Mahayoga Talk 27," *Collected Vajrayana Seminaries 1973-1985* (Halifax: Vajradhatu Publications, 2015), 316. Trungpa also associates the *mudra* "symbol" of mahāmudrā with "self-existence." See Chögyam Trungpa, *Tantric Path of Indestructible Wakefulness*: *The Profound Treasury: Volume Three* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2013), 532.

[139] Samten Gyaltsen Karmay, *The Great Perfection (rDzogs chen): A Philosophical and Meditative teaching of Tibetan Buddhism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), 51 n. 43.

is primordial wisdom (*ye shes*) that is all-pervasive.[140] The primordial basis is the innate essence of the mundane samsaric mind as well as the basis of reality.[141]

The concept of spontaneity is equally important in the Kagyü conception of the innate/co-emergence (*lhan cig skye pa*). Here, the innate is considered an ontological reality but also the experience of that reality. The term for the innate, *lhan cig skye pa,* translates as "born together" or "born spontaneously" and indicates that appearance and emptiness or samsara and nirvana co-emerge. The innate carries with it the connotation of that which is "natural or spontaneous."[142] As such, spontaneous action is acting in accordance with reality: it indicates that Buddhist teachings are no longer an outer guiding doctrine, instead, they are lived. One is no longer imitating a spiritual person, one *is* one.

2.8 How "Free" is *First Thought, Best Thought's* Spontaneity?

Here spontaneity is understood as the culmination of rigorous meditative and scholarly discipline. Indeed, Trungpa insisted that an artist should have a strong discipline that extended to the rest of their lives, outside of their art practice:

> If you want to become an artist and you want to have the best of everything, you can't just have it. You have to start by paying attention to reality. You need to learn to eat

[140] Karmay, *The Great Perfection (rDzogs chen),* 177.
[141] In post-Prajñāpāramitā literature, Buddhist thought takes the view that enlightenment is not an ontological transformation, but an epistemological one. If the fundamentals of being do not need to be altered or abandoned, then awakening involves a shift in point of view. What was previously a cause for confusion, such as the āyatanas (sense-fields), and emotions, can instead be a cause for liberation since they are not fundamentally impure. Arising out of the Mahayana literature, the tantric tradition does not represent a new philosophy so much as a new approach to awakening. In a technique of mimesis, tantric practices involve identification with the *yidam* (*yi dam*) or deity in self-visualization in order to awaken to one's inherent, deity-like nature. This approach is often referred to as training in the fruition. As such, the highest view in the Nyingma system: "asserts that everything that exists, all phenomena included in cyclic life and perfect peace, is the total sphere of the dimension of reality, in essence, naturally present great pristine awareness. As such, all is primordially enlightened, without action or effort." Tayé, *The Treasury of Knowledge: Book Six, Part Four,* 339.
[142] Lara Braitstein, "Introduction," in *The Adamantine Songs (Vajragīti) By Saraha*, 27-28.

> properly, to cook properly, to clean your house or your room, to work with your clothes. You need to work with your basic reality. Then you go beyond that, and you begin to have something much more substantial. And beyond that, you actually begin to produce a master artistic world altogether. That is the same as in my tradition of Kagyü Buddhism. It is long and arduous; you can't become suddenly good at something.[143]

Trungpa was no subitist, he emphasized meditation as a necessary precondition for clear perception, which, in turn was the basis for creating dharma art.[144] It is only once a person was "properly trained without ego" that they might be able to perceive the world properly. Trungpa argued that the first stage of engaging in dharma poetics was to take a skeptical attitude towards the concept of art altogether, undermining one's attachment to the role of the artist, and to abandon habitual ego-orientation and the three poisons of passion, aggression, and ignorance.[145] Only once this is accomplished can one properly produce dharma art. Here we begin to understand the vast scope of dharma art, as the endeavor to dispel self-grasping and recognize egolessness are the goals of the Buddhist path. In fact, dharma art is nothing less than the perception and expression of a realized being: "So we are not talking about writing poetry alone," Trungpa reminds his students, "but we are talking about complete, comprehensive realization of the phenomenal world as it is."[146]

Trungpa not only emphasized meditation for producing dharma poetics, he imposed limitations on free verse. In group composition sessions, Trungpa sometimes vetoed a student's contribution indicating that rather than a free-flow of automatic writing, there were some criteria for the

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[143] Chögyam Trungpa, *Dharma Art* ed. Judith L. Lief (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1996), 7.
[144] For Trungpa's views on sudden enlightenment see: Chögyam Trungpa, "The Tibetan Buddhist Path: Meditation and the Fourth Moment," The Chronicles of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. Accessed July 14, 2018. https://www.chronicleproject.com/tibetan-buddhist-path/.
[145] Chögyam Trungpa, "Dharma Poetics," in *Windhorse* ed. John Castlebury (Boulder: Samurai Press, 1982) no page number.
[146] Trungpa, "Dharma Poetics," in *Windhorse,* no page number.

content of spontaneous verse.[147] Moreover, conversations between William Burroughs and Trungpa reveal the disagreement the two poets held with respect to the criteria for artistic output: whereas for Burroughs cataloguing his every idea is valuable, for Trungpa the artist should refrain from recording every idea for a poem since much of that would be merely confusion and "subconscious gossip".[148]

2.8.1 Threefold Logic

Trungpa also developed literary stylistic conventions. He developed a pedagogy for composition based on a tripartite structure which he called "threefold logic" which at times corresponds to a ground, path, and fruition structure, familiar to Buddhist logic.[149] Trungpa also relates this to formal Buddhist logic: "You have a case, and the reference coming out of the case and final conclusion—all are the same threefold process . . . You could say 'mind is empty: free from conceptions, it is enlightenment.'"[150]

In threefold logic, "there's an idea, and then there's a complementary remark with the idea, and then the final ending. Sometimes the end is punctuated by humor, or by opinion, or it could be just open-ended."[151] The initial idea, however, relates to the embodied perception that the poet "tunes" into on the spot. The second stage draws upon, extends, or further explores the first

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[147] For an example of Trungpa correcting his student David Rome's composition see: Chögyam Trungpa, "1976 Talk 23: Abhisheka," in *Collected Vajrayana Seminaries 1973-1985 (Halifax: Vajradhatu Publications, 2015),* 619. Trungpa also attempted to influence the subject of his student's poetry. Inspired by the *nyams mgur,* he encouraged his students to write about their experience in meditation: "a lot of Tibetan poets like Milarepa are spiritually moved out of the sitting practice. All kinds of things come up which they jot down, just write, just sing happily or sadly or whatever it may be and poems get written down. It's worth trying." Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 617.
[148] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 619.
[149] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 631.
[150] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 631
[151] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 631

observation – sometimes this is expressed as exploring the emotion of the first observation. Trungpa sometimes describes the third stage as the "ultimate" level, and the first two as the "relative" level. In any case, the third stage offers a different perspective from the first two. Trungpa's dialogue with Allen Ginsberg will help clarify this method:

> *Allen Ginsberg:* How would [threefold logic] apply to the last haiku?
> A wild sea
> and stretching across to the Isle of Sado
> the Milky Way.
> *Trungpa Rinpoche:* I think that hangs together as threefold process. You have a sense of "waterness" . . . you have a sense of nostalgia—the island, dwelling place . . . And then sort of "so what" – the Milky Way.[152]

Trungpa attests that the purpose of threefold logic is to help the poet become aware of how she thinks when she observes the world. Spontaneity, in this context then needs to be qualified: "spontaneous" here does not imply "unstudied" or "untrained". Instead there is a strong expectation of training in meditation and the use of pedagogical techniques like three-fold logic to produce dharma poetics.[153]

2.9 *First Thought, Best Thought* and Tantra: Esoteric Interpretations of the Slogan

Analysis that construes FTBT as solely inspired by western Romanticism risks obfuscating the Tibetan religious and literary significance of spontaneity, along with the expectation of a strongly disciplined foundation. It also risks missing the way in which FTBT was used as a

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[152] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 633.

[153] Specifically, Trungpa held that the technique of vipaśyanā, "insight," meditation wherein the practitioner places greater attention on the environment and less attention on the breath than in śamatha, "peaceful abiding," meditation, leads to the appreciation of the senses and a delight in the world beyond the impulse to bifurcate experience into good or bad categories. Thus, training in meditation produces a type of aesthetic experience that directly relates to the ability to create dharma art. See audio of Chögyam Trungpa at event, "Transformation of the Mind in Buddhadharma: Talk 7," 3 July 1978, Item 19780703VCTR1024, Series 4 Summer Session Founder's Course, Naropa Institute Fonds, Shambhala Archives, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

pedagogical tool to elucidate tantric teachings, thereby reducing the many uses and meanings of this slogan.

An inner layer of interpretation of FTBT is produced in Trungpa's discussions about the more esoteric teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. An examination of an excerpt from the poem which first coined the slogan, entitled *First Thought* gives us our first hint that FTBT might have significance in a tantric context:

> First thought is best
> Then you compose
> Composition's what you compose—
> In terms of what?
> What is *what*
> And *what* might not be the best
> *That what* could be best
> That *what-was* was the only best
> Why didn't you?
> The first thought was the first what
> That what was the best what[154]

The authors, Chögyam Trungpa and Allen Ginsberg discuss what the "first thought" might be, Trungpa offers: "The first thought is the first what." Vague though this may seem, "the first what" gains significance if compared to Chögyam Trunpga's discussion of *evam*, wherein he formulates an explanation of the *evam* principle in the same terms.[155]

In tantric texts, the union of the syllables *e* and *vam* symbolize nonduality, the union of twofold phenomena, like emptiness and form, nirvana and samsara and so forth. *Evam* also represents

[154] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 313-14.
[155] "Evam" is also the first word of all sūtras and suttas, which begin: "evam mayā śrutam" (thus have I heard). In this instance, "evam" translates as "thus".

tantra itself[156] and the essence of the mind, referred to as the causal continuum. According to Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Tayé, the causal continuum is the:

> natural condition of the mind from the level of a sentient being to the state of a buddha, which abides, like the sky, without ever changing. There are any number of expressions for this, such as "nature," "essence of enlightenment," and "naturally present affinity," found in the sutras; "essential principle of oneself," "awakening mind," and "mind of Ever-Perfect," found in the lower tantras. In this system of highest yoga tantra, however, the causal continuum may be explained in conjunction with the meaning of the union of *e* and *vam*.[157]

Turning to Trunpga's discussion of *evam* we can situate Trungpa's line: "The first thought is the first what," in terms of this presentation. In the discussion that follows, *e* represents vast space and *vam* the first utterance that naturally occurs in that space— the expression arising out of space:

> The interesting point about what happens in that space [represented by the syllable *e*], that particular type of outer space is [pause] what? [pause]
>
> That seems to be it. It is "what." There are a lot of different ways to say "what." You could say it from the point of view of panic. You could say it from the point of view of satisfaction. You could also say it from the point of view of hunger or uncertainty, but this [is the sense] of "what" we are talking about here. If there's no space, you can't say "what" anymore. Once that space is provided [one can] say "what," [or] "what is that?" There is some kind of clear perception [that] begins to dawn in the midst of that gigantic vast space. It becomes very real and very powerfully open but, at the same time dynamic, equally.
>
> And that is what we are talking about is the second principle, *vam*. Unconditional space gives birth to [the] unconditional question "what?" [Perhaps] you could say you couldn't care less what it's all about, but still you would say "what". It's like [the] traditional idea of a mantra, the first utterance.[158]

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[156] Trungpa, *Tantric Path of Indestructible Wakefulness,* 551.
[157] Tayé, *The Treasury of Knowledge: Book Six, Part Four,* 144. For more on *evam* principle in the vajrayana see Tayé, *The Treasury of Knowledge: Book Six, Part Four,* 187-200; Trungpa, *Tantric Path of Indestructible Wakefulness,* 551-553.
[158] Audio of Chögyam Trungpa at event, "Evam ITS: Talk Two," 6 April 1976, Item 19760406VCTR1024, Series 6 1974 Public Talk or Seminar, Venerable Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche Fonds, Shambhala Archives, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

If *vam* is the natural question-statement "what" that arises out of the space symbolized by *e,* the first thought, which is the first "what" is another term for the syllable *vam.* Again, the union of *e* and *vam* describe the union of dualisms, and as such the expression that naturally arises from space symbolized by *e* is neither a corruption nor a diminishment of that space. In the same way, the first thought is the natural expression of the enlightened mind.

2.9.1 Maṇḍala

For Trungpa, *first thought, best thought* can also be associated with maṇḍala. Maṇḍala or *kyil khor* in Tibetan, translates into *center* (*kyil*) and *fringe* (*khor*). Traditionally maṇḍalas are two or three-dimensional images of a deity's palace. They are primarily meditation tools that aid in visualization during sādhana practice. The deliberate generation of the visualized maṇḍala and deities in a practitioner's practice is an important stage in tantric ritual practice, called *kye rim (bskyed rim),* the *generation stage.* The main deity of the practice is visualized in the center of the maṇḍala with accompanying retinue of deities at the outer gates of the palace. Typically encircling the entire scene are charnel ground images signifying the totality of the maṇḍala: it encompasses everything; life and death; the sacred and profane. In this case, Trungpa describes *first thought* as the center of the maṇḍala and *best thought* as the fringe or surroundings.

The *first thought* here is "the first perception of reality".[159] This first perception is simultaneously a sense of being, but in the tantric context this being is *vajra* (adamantine) being; it is one's identification with the central deity.[160] Next, the *best thought* is an elaboration, a

[159] Chögyam Trungpa, "1982 Talk 17: Mahayoga," in *Collected Vajrayana Seminaries 1973-1985* (Halifax: Vajradhatu Publications, 2015), 1174.
[160] Trungpa, *Tantric Path of Indestructible Wakefulness,* 318

projection of the first perception, Trungpa describes this as "the colors that we perceive".[161] "It is like saying 'kingdom.' You have a 'king' first, and the 'dom' comes later, which makes a whole world; so altogether it is a maṇḍala."[162]

First thought, best thought was formulated, Trungpa said, to describe this natural pattern which functions in ordinary perception, and in every moment of perception. Trungpa defines *best thought,* the extension of the first thought, as the act of projection without identifying with those projections. In this understanding, the maṇḍala is a pedagogical tool that helps the practitioner begin to see the environment, the space around them, as an aid in realizing awakening:

> The idea is that reality is always there. The texture of the phenomenal world always plays with you and rubs against you, and whether you feel up or down does not really matter. That is the meaning of khor.[163]

In this view, maṇḍala is the intentional creation of self and other—a mental operation that occurs constantly in everyday life and yet it is the intentionality of maṇḍala creation that allows the visualizer to disengage, or as Trungpa might say, "disown," their projections thereby extinguishing grasping, the cause of suffering. The attitude that relates with phenomena or projections but does not identify with them is the attitude that produces one-taste (*ro gcig*)[164] in which "pain and pleasure alike have become ornaments which it is pleasant to wear."[165] The *best thought* here is an invitation to relate with one's environment, one's projections without judgement, or engaging with the three poisons (passion, aggression, and prejudice).

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[161] Trungpa, "1982 Talk 17: Mahayoga," in *Collected Vajrayana Seminaries 1973-1985,* 1174.
[162] Trungpa, *Tantric Path of Indestructible Wakefulness,* 318.
[163] Trungpa, *Tantric Path of Indestructible Wakefulness,* 319.
[164] For a discussion of one-taste, see chapter three of this thesis.
[165] Trungpa, *Tantric Path of Indestructible Wakefulness,* 320.

According to Trungpa, the quality of maṇḍala is that it also arises spontaneously. Maṇḍala, he writes is sometimes defined as *rangjung yeshe* (*rang byung gi ye shes),* "self-arising wisdom" which has two qualities: it is free from speculation; and unchanging. Because it is unchanging, he continues, it is "therefore spontaneous".[166] Here, FTBT both mirrors the operational pattern of the maṇḍala, and recalls one of its main qualities: spontaneity.

2.10 Conclusion

This chapter argued that to understand FTBT as an invention motivated primarily by an allegiance to the ideals of Romanticism, is to take a step too far: to unduly narrow what is actually a multivalent slogan — a slogan that expresses both the Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā views of the Kagyü-Nyingma schools and provides a map for arriving at that view.

As we have seen, Chögyam Trungpa attempted to re-define "spontaneity" for his students, nudging them to abandon their understanding of spontaneity as untrained and uncultivated. Investigating the context within which *first thought, best thought* was formulated, it becomes clear that Trungpa's slogan was designed to resist, or at least amend, dominant post-Romantic narratives rather than adopt them.

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[166] Trungpa, *Tantric Path of Indestructible Wakefulness,* 286. Ginsberg affirms this understanding of *first thought, best thought.* When he's asked about the relationship between FTBT and maṇḍala, Ginsberg explains: "As I've heard it explained, *kyil* would be just the first flash of space, or the fan [describing a fan], and the direct, physical perception of the appearance of universe in space. Then the kleshas, or *khor,* would be your own projections onto it and your reactions to it. Recognizing the space around, and then digging your own tendencies or reactions or kleshas would actually be another kind of *kyil,* in a way. See Trungpa, "1982 Talk 17: Mahayoga," in *Collected Vajrayana Seminaries 1973-1985,* 1179.

Locating a theme of spontaneity in both Tibetan literature and Trungpa's education in Tibet, I argued that the spontaneity implied by *first thought, best thought,* has precedent in a traditional Tibetan context. Furthermore, I found that the free verse which is a natural consequence of this style of spontaneous composition, also resonates with the Tibetan song tradition. Finally, I argued that *first thought, best thought* has heretofore unexplored layers of meaning that Trungpa deliberately tailored to his audience's Buddhist training and initiation. As such, *first thought, best thought* is not just a slogan for composing spontaneous poetry, but also a symbol and teaching tool designed to elucidate tantric Buddhist teachings.

3. Chapter Two: "Poetry Creates Environment": Mantra, Onomatopoeia, & Environment

"The guru's speech has a quality or pattern that transforms the environment around you into an environment that is an utterance or expression of the teaching. A body without speech does not create such an atmosphere or feeling of a complete world; that sense of complete reality comes particularly out of speech. If you see musical instruments just lying around on the floor, it is a very different experience than hearing musical instruments being played. However, if you have heard such musical instruments being played, and then you see the musical instruments lying on the floor, that still evokes an experience. So speech is not only words, or verbalization of the teachings alone, but speech is that which creates an atmosphere or environment of dharma."[167]

3.1 Introduction

This chapter investigates Chögyam Trungpa's overall approach to language, which is inseparable from his critical appreciation of poetry. Trungpa associated both poetry and ordinary language with mantra, onomatopoeia, and environment. As such, this chapter focuses on unpacking the relationship between these categories. To begin with, I detail the ways in which Trungpa built an association between these concepts in his lectures and writings. Next, I review the various dominant academic definitions of mantra. I find that for Trungpa, a crucial function of mantra is its power to create environment. Turning to the concept of onomatopoeia, I investigate the definition of onomatopoeia and find that the common understanding of the word *onomatopoeia* in English does not wholly account for Trungpa's use of the term. Instead, I argue that Trungpa employs a distinctly Tibetan conception of onomatopoeia. Overall, I argue that underpinning Trungpa's approach to poetry is a theory of language that is closely associated with Tibetan ideas of sound and ancient Indian conceptions of the power of speech and that these ideas manifest through the use and reimagination of Tibetan literary techniques like onomatopoeia in his English poetry.

[167] Trungpa, *Tantric Path of Indestructible Wakefulness,* 99.

3.2 Poetry, Mantra, Onomatopoeia, & the Environment They Create

For Chögyam Trungpa, an important element of poetry is that poetry creates an environment, which he associates with mantra:

> when you compose [a] poem or song, for that matter, you do it on the spot. And you also develop the tunes for it as well, at the same time. And that [is] supposed to enable [a] person to inspire the teaching, and to experience the abstract quality, the abstract level that we've been talking about. Not verbal, grammatical, metaphysical, but when somebody says something, quite possibly it doesn't make any sense to you. But it does something very strange: it creates environment. Although as far as conceptualization is concerned you have no idea what this is all about. But it said something, [it] created a state of mind of its own. We are getting to the level of mantra at this point.[168]

Moreover, Trungpa holds that language is "onomatopoetic".[169] He describes the poetry of the Kagyü lineage masters as "cosmic onomatopoeia"[170] and he associates onomatopoeia with mantra: declaring that mantra "should be an onomatopoeic sound."[171] This association is revealing for our purposes because it hints at a philosophy of language that is different from a contemporary Western understanding. I agree with Hugh Bredin who argues that a typical Western understanding of language follows Saussure's overall assessment that the relationship between linguistic signs and their referents is arbitrary and based on convention alone.[172] This contemporary understanding of language holds that words are not essentially related to the things they name, since to hold such a view would be absurd if just for the obvious fact that it would deny that language could change.

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[168] Audio of Chögyam Trungpa at event "The Tibetan Buddhist Path: Talk 12," 6 July 1974, Item 19740706VCTR1024, Series 4 Summer Session Founder's Course, Naropa Institute Fonds, Shambhala Archives, Halifax Nova Scotia, Canada.
[169] Gimian, "Introduction to Volume Seven," xli.
[170] Gamble, "'Cosmic Onomatopoeia' Or the Source of the Waterfall of Youth", 121.
[171] Chögyam Trungpa, *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa: Volume Nine* ed. Carolyn Rose Gimian (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 2017), 381.
[172] Hugh Bredin, "Onomatopoeia as a Figure and a Linguistic Principle," *New Literary History* 27, no. 3 (1996), 565.

In contrast to this view, Sanskrit, the language of mantra, is understood to be a language that is unchanging. Mantra is considered sacred and effective precisely because Sanskrit is understood to be essentially related to the world in a fixed and direct manner: its linguistic sounds are the same as the essence of its referents.[173] Similarly, onomatopoeic words are unlike non-onomatopoeic words in language where those word's phonemes are understood to be arbitrarily assigned. Onomatopoeic words sound like the thing they name. In other words, the relationship between an onomatopoeic word and its referent is strong. For example, the average English speaker considers the word "oink" to be directly related to the sound a pig makes, whereas this is not true for the word "glass" which is just a conventional linguistic sign. As such mantra and onomatopoeia enjoy a privileged status vis-a-vis other languages and words respectively.

Trungpa's understanding of onomatopoeia goes even further than this: he argues that all words can be understood as onomatopoeia and that this is true for every language.[174] For instance, the English word "sword" could be an onomatopoeic word. What is interesting here is that this assertion cannot logically be held at the same time as a commitment to the typical understanding of mantra and onomatopoeia as discussed. In fact, this assertion challenges the conceptual categories of both mantra and onomatopoeia. First, it challenges mantra because for mantra to be effective, Sanskrit is privileged to the exclusion of all other languages. The sound of the mantric phoneme is what is related to the world. If you change the phoneme you must necessarily change the relationship to the thing itself. To uphold this view, one must assert the original, primary, or

[173] This view belongs particularly to the Mīmāṃsā and Vyākaraṇa (grammatical) philosophical schools. See, for example, Gold, *The Dharma's Gatekeepers: Sakya Paṇḍita on Buddhist Scholarship in Tibet.* Albany: SUNY Press, 2008.
[174] Gimian, "Introduction to Volume Seven," xli-xlii.

transcendent status of one language— to assert that *all* languages enjoy this status would be tantamount to asserting that *none* do.

Second, it challenges onomatopoeia because the word "sword" for instance is not what is typically considered to be an onomatopoeic word: it doesn't immediately imitate the sound associated with the object it names. It is possible that Trungpa wasn't concerned with the conceptual difficulties that resulted from his challenge to the categories of onomatopoeia and mantra. However, I think he stretches these categories very deliberately. I argue that rather than upholding a conventional definition of mantra and onomatopoeia Trungpa is mapping out a terrain between them based on an altogether different understanding of both concepts. A deeper dive into mantra and onomatopoeia is important in order to parse Trungpa's meaning here.

To recap, for Trungpa poetry is "like" mantra and "like" onomatopoeia. Mantra and onomatopoeia are categories of elevated language in terms of identity of word and object. Language in general and elevated language in particular, creates meaning, but this meaning is not necessarily linguistic or conceptual. Therefore, language does not passively describe things, it actively enacts meaning. Trungpa argues that all parts of language and by that measure every language can function onomatopoeically/mantrically. In this section, I unpack the meaning of mantra and onomatopoeia in order to better understand how for Trungpa, poetry mirrors the two.

3.3 Mantra

Mantras are a ubiquitous if mysterious category of ritual practice. They are primarily rooted in Indic and Hindu religious traditions, but they are a central practice wherever esoteric Buddhism

is found — from Japan to Chile. Some mantras are as short as one syllable. In tantric traditions, these syllables (like *om* and *hum*), or seed (*bīja*) syllables, are regarded as the essence of a deity (*yi dam*) and their recitation both invokes that deity and binds the deity to the reciter. It is not uncommon in Tibetan Buddhist monastic settings to overhear a group of novice monastics preparing for an exam by reciting the syllable *dhih* at full volume, thus invoking the help of Mañjuśrī (*'jam dpal dbyangs*), the bodhisattva of wisdom. Likewise, the visualization of the *bīja* syllable *A* is an essential practice in Shingon Japanese Buddhist tantra. The syllable represents becoming and dissolving and all of existence in between; it is considered the most primary vowel that all other vowels build from. It is thought to be the source of being: as the source of all the other vowels, it is present in all being; and as the prefix indicating negation, it represents the end of all things as well.[175]

Whereas *bīja* syllables are generally understood to have little to no linguistic meaning, other mantras like, *OM gate gate pāragate pārasamgate bodhi svāhā,* which appears in the *prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) text, the *Heart Sūtra*, do have linguistic content. This mantra has been translated as roughly meaning: "Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone completely beyond, enlightenment *svāhā*".[176] However, mantras are most often untranslated because unlike classical Sanskrit, the Sanskrit of mantras are "grammatically illegible".[177]

[175] Richard K. Payne, "On Not Understanding Extraordinary Language in the Buddhist Tantra of Japan." *Religions* 8, no. 10 (2017), 1.
[176] Donald S. Lopez Jr., "Inscribing the Buddha's Speech: On the 'Heart Sutra's' Mantra," *History of Religions* May (1990), 356.
[177] Lopez, "Inscribing the Buddha's Speech: On the 'Heart Sutra's' Mantra," 358.

In fact, commonality among mantras are hard to find; while some scholars argue that mantras are language games, others argue that they are magical phrases and still others argue that they are not language at all but are more akin to music or a child's babble.[178] What are the commonalities of mantra, if any, and what are its salient features?

3.3.1 The Meaning of Mantra

The word *mantra* derives from the Sanskrit root *man* ("to think") and the suffix *tra* which indicates a means or instrumentality.[179] Mantra literally indicates a means of thought or an instrument of thinking and has been traditionally described as an especially potent word or sound uttered primarily in a ritual context— either spoken aloud or silently in meditation— that invokes and incants for the pursuit of both worldly (quotidian) and transcendent (soteriological) ends.[180]

In *Understanding Mantras,* Harvey P. Alper argues that arriving at a definition of mantra may not be entirely informative, since mantras encompass such diverse phenomena.[181] Some mantras have semantic meaning, and some do not: some mantras praise, some invoke, some supplicate, and some enact. As such, Agehananda Bharati presents an open definition of mantra as, "a quasi-morpheme or a series of quasi-morphemes, or a series of mixed genuine and quasi-morphemes arranged in conventional patterns, based on codified esoteric traditions, and passed on from one preceptor to one disciple in the course of a prescribed initiation."[182] In the Hindu Indic tradition,

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[178] For an overview of these views see: Patton E. Burchett, "The 'Magical Language of Mantra," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 76:4 (2008), 826-829.
[179] Patton E. Burchett, "The 'Magical Language of Mantra," 813.
[180] Harvey P. Alper, "Introduction," *Understanding Mantras* ed. Harvey P. Alper (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 4.
[181] Harvey P. Alper, "Introduction," 3.
[182] Quoted in Harvey P. Alper, "Introduction," 4.

mantras are efficacious to the extent that they are passed down orally from student to disciple, and "vocalized properly".[183] In fact, the power of mantra is believed by some to lie in their sound-vibrations.[184] However, as Donald Lopez has noted, this feature does not apply to the Buddhist context since some Buddhist mantras like the *Heart Sūtra* are primarily textual; they are preserved and transmitted in written form and are read as often as they are spoken.[185]

3.3.2 Mantra as Magic

The Western academic approach to mantra has traditionally characterized mantra as "'magical formulas' or 'spells'"[186] a definition that carries its own historical assumptions and prejudices. In Western academic discourse, magic has typically been contrasted with religion as a means of de-legitimizing magic: whereas magic is thought to be effective through the power of the individual, religion, it is reasoned, is pre-eminently subservient to the divine; whereas magic is a private affair, based on the whims of the individual, religion is social and communal; where magic seeks to exert control through coercion and manipulation, religion "utilizes invocation, supplication, and submission".[187]

Another popular contrast in academic discourse is between magic and science. Here magic is a kind of pseudo-science; a primitive attempt to affect change in the world based on a mistaken belief that the immaterial (i.e. sound) can cause a material effect.[188] Indeed, in his introduction to *Understanding Mantras,* Alper feels compelled to clarify his own intellectual commitments:

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[183] Burchett, "The 'Magical Language of Mantra," 808.
[184] For an excellent discussion of this view see Burchett, "The 'Magical Language of Mantra," 814-816.
[185] Lopez, "Inscribing the Buddha's Speech," 354.
[186] Burchett, "The 'Magical Language of Mantra," 807.
[187] Burchett, "The Magical Language of Mantra," 808.
[188] Burchett, "The Magical Language of Mantra," 808 n. 1.

"According to the standards of modern science, mantras are irrational" and, "Most of us who study mantras critically — historians, philosophers, Sanskritists — take the Enlightenment consensus for granted. We do not believe in magic."[189]

3.3.3 Mantra as Natural Language

In order to free the mantric utterance from this prejudiced framing, some scholars have argued that mantras should be considered a natural language, where a linguistic sign has an innate connection with its referent.[190] But as long as science, with its legacy of Cartesian dualism maintains a hard distinction between the individual and culture as rational, a mere substitution of terms like "natural" for "magical" can only act as a Band-Aid approach and "natural language" is bound to suffer from the same problems as before. Underlying the issue is an ontological disagreement between a scientific and a mantric worldview: mantric utterances presuppose an ontological interconnectedness that science does not.[191] This interconnectedness means that mantra can have an effect on the material world. Furthermore, the "natural language" argument fits a Hindu/Indic frame which upholds the unique superiority of the language of the Vedas but does not sit quite as easily within a Buddhist one.

In fact, the Buddha opposed the Brahmanic position vis-à-vis Sankskrit. Scholars within the Brahmanic tradition asserted the supremacy of Vedic Sanskrit, arguing that it was a primordial language, the source of all languages and as such, Vedic Sanskrit enjoyed an essential and fixed

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[189] Alper, "Introduction," 3.
[190] Burchett, "The Magical Language of Mantra," 829.
[191] Burchett discusses mantra's emphasis on the "mysteriously interconnected nature of reality and interrelations among all phenomena," and as such, argues that mantra as magic serves to resist and deconstruct the legacy of Enlightenment rationality. See: Burchett, "The Magical Language of Mantra," 836.

relationship with the world. By contrast, the Buddha and subsequent Buddhist philosophers disagreed that Sanskrit could be elevated over other languages, nor, they argued, did any language enjoy an original and fundamental relationship with objects in the world. Instead, Buddhist philosopher Dignāga (ca. 500 C.E.) reasoned that languages consist of arbitrarily chosen signs that operate based on communal consensus and a system of conventional rules.[192]

In Buddhist thought, one language could not be truer than another because one of the Buddha's most significant teachings was that of *anātman* (non-self), which argued that there is no such thing as a self, a soul or an essential nature of things since all things are impermanent and interdependent. Therefore, no fundamental relationship between the essence of a thing and a linguistic marker is possible. Whereas in many Hindu systems mantras are inherently powerful sounds regardless of whether or not they carry semantic meaning, in Tibetan Buddhist tantra, "mantras have no such inherent power. Unless they are recited by a person with a focused mind, they are only sounds.[193] For people with the proper attitude, however, they can be powerful tools that aid in the process of transformation."[194]

From an emic Tibetan Buddhist perspective, mantra is typically defined as mind protection. In this understanding "*man*" indicates "mind" and "*tra*" is interpreted as "protection."[195] Trungpa presents this definition of mantra to his students:

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[192] Richard P. Hayes, "Buddhist Philosophy of Language," *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* 1 (2004), 451.
[193] Likewise, Trungpa was careful to admonish the Western tendency to exoticize mantra, chanting, and Tibetan ritual music, arguing that there is "no independent magical power in the sounds [of ritual music] themselves." Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 708.
[194] Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism,* 267.
[195] This interpretation is a creative one and is an etymological interpretation of mantra held by most Tibetan masters.

> . . . here we are talking about what we might call the "first mind," or, using a similar phrase from the tantric tradition, the "ordinary mind." That is the mind, manas. *Tra,* "protection," is not so much that you have to protect the mind. In fact, if you try to protect it in the ordinary sense, you create further complications of it. The mind is already in a protected state if you leave it alone, simple, and ordinary, as it is. So the mind is already protected, and protection means acknowledging that protected state. That is mantra.[196]

He elaborates upon this theme, saying that another common term for *vajrayāna* is *mantrayāna*. In the mantrayāna he says, one cultivates the understanding of the three gates, the body, speech, and mind as sacred and holy *environments,*[197] an idea that this discussion will return to below.

3.3.4 Mantra as Performative Speech Act

In order to avoid the assumptions inherent in the "magical" language thesis and to account for the importance of intention or proper attitude when uttering mantra in a ritual context, some theorists argue that mantra cannot be considered true or false, instead, in order to understand mantra, one must treat them as speech acts examining what they *do* rather than what they describe. Theorists like Wheelock and Alper base their claims on speech act theory set out by J.L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* (1975). Austin argues that philosophy of language has been disadvantaged to the extent that it treats all sentences as declarative or in Austin's terms "constantive," as though they only deal with facts. He pointed out that under this rubric language is always strictly true or false based on whether or not a statement accurately represents a part of the world. Instead, Austin reasons, many statements cannot be rightfully considered true or false, rather they enact a reality; they act upon the world. For example, the statement, "I now

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[196] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Volume Nine,* 380. Trungpa emphasized environment and relating with space and environment throughout his various teachings. For a discussion of his presentation of theatre as working with environment and space and how this relates to tantra see: Fabri, "At Play in Paradox," 271-280.
[197] Trungpa, "1976 Talk Two: The Vajra Master," in *Collected Vajrayana Seminaries 1973-1985* (Halifax: Vajradhatu Publications, 2015), 599.

pronounce you husband and wife," is not a true or false statement and is not intended to describe an existent thing in the world, instead, given a specific context, the speaker's specific credentials and intentions, the statement *does* what it describes. Likewise, the act of promising is a verbal act, "I promise to wash the dishes" is not merely a descriptive statement but is the very act of promising.

According to Austin, speech acts may be felicitous or infelicitous depending on the speaker's intention and context. In other words, it matters whether or not the speaker is sincere. Incorporating intention, or what Austin refers to as illocutionary force, and context into the final appraisal of mantric utterances is desirable because as Coward and Goa point out: "Mantras spoken in ritual activity actually do something. Thus, even from their earliest conception in the *Ṛgveda*s, mantras are classical examples of what are now called 'speech acts'".[198]

Although speech act theory may allow for the analytical interpretation of mantras based on ritual context and the actor's intention or speaker's meaning, according to Wheelock, classifying mantras as speech acts is problematic because speech acts presuppose that something is being communicated, and communication presupposes an actor and an audience. However, in a tantric context, mantras are often uttered in a private worship service without audience, and some do not even assume a speaker let alone an audience. Wheelock argues that whereas speech act theory deals primarily in quotidian language which assumes the purpose is the communication, mantras in contrast are fixed texts that are meant to be repeated constantly, therefore their "intended

[198] Harold G. Coward and David J. Goa, *Mantra: Hearing the Divine in India and America.* 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 16.

effect can hardly be the communication of information"[199] and they can't be considered ordinary language in the final analysis.

3.3.5 Mantra as Machine for Thinking

Instead, Wheelock refers to mantra as "extraordinary language" and argues that mantra, as ritual is best understood as language that causes and facilitates involvement in a "known and repeatable situation".[200] Wheelock would like to stretch the category of speech act in order for it to include extraordinary language which he does not see as functioning to express thought. For example, the ritual expert does not spontaneously recognize an object's special qualities and express these qualities in the form of a mantra, instead the mantra provides an object's particular characteristics to the speaker who then confers (realizes or makes real) these characteristics upon the object through the ritual performance of the mantra.[201] In that sense, the mantric utterance acts but does not communicate.[202] In line with this point, Alper argues that because mantras are codified linguistic or sonic utterances that are fixed and passed down from a religious authority, their main purpose as "machines for thinking"[203] are intended to engineer a thought rather than merely communicate one.

3.3.6 Mantra as Ritual

Whereas Alper and Wheelock would like to stretch the speech act to accommodate the non-communicative function of mantra, Staal wonders why not just go a step further and realize that

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[199] Wade T. Wheelock, "The Mantra in Vedic and Tantric Ritual," in *Understanding Mantras,* ed. Harvey P. Alper (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 99.
[200] Wheelock, "The Mantra in Vedic and Tantric Ritual," in *Understanding Mantras,* 99.
[201] Wheelock, "The Mantra in Vedic and Tantric Ritual," in *Understanding Mantras,* 100.
[202] Wheelock, "The Mantra in Vedic and Tantric Ritual," in *Understanding Mantras,* 100.
[203] Cited in Wheelock, "The Mantra in Vedic and Tantric Ritual," in *Understanding Mantras,* 100.

mantras are not speech acts at all? In fact, Staal reasons that all language presupposes an objective function which expresses meaning. This objective function is the foundation for the second function of language the object*ifying* function which involves intention (or speaker force) which in turn allows for the communicative function of language.[204] However, Staal argues, if one considers the meaninglessness of *bīja* mantras, it becomes clear that mantras may not even be considered language, let alone speech acts. Staal ultimately proposes that mantra cannot be accounted for by philosophy of language because, he reasons, ritual predates language as evidenced by animals who engage in ritual, and mantra are inextricably linked to ritual and therefore must also predate language. In his estimation mantra are similar to "sounds animals make, bird songs, for example".[205] The most common assertions among these views is: 1) mantras as language or sound are somehow elevated or extraordinary; and 2) mantras are primarily performed in ritual; and 3) mantras enact meaning; they have the power to act upon the world.

3.4 Onomatopoeia

Turning now to the subject of onomatopoeia to further clarify the nexus of ideas involved in Trungpa's comparison of onomatopoeia, mantra, language and ultimately, poetry. For a definition of onomatopoeia I turn to Pharies who describes onomatopoeia as: "a word that is considered by convention to be acoustically similar to the sound, or the sound produced by the

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[204] Frits Staal, "Vedic Mantras," in *Understanding Mantras* ed. Harvey P. Alper (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 67.

205 Staal, "Vedic Mantras," in *Understanding Mantras,* 72. It should be noted that more recently Ronald Davidson points out that Staal's argument, which assumes that bīja mantras are meaningless, is based on an outdated understanding of what constitutes meaning. Davidson's project has been to apply a historical pragmatic approach to the study of mantra. For more see: Ronald Davidson, "Studies in dhāranī literature II: Pragmatics of dhāranīs" Bulletin of SOAS, 77 (2014), 5-61.

thing to which it refers."[206] Under this definition onomatopoeia are relatively straight-forward: onomatopoeic words in English like "meow", "woof", and "zoom" recall the relatedness of the word to its object.

Hugh Bredin argues that the general consensus in philosophy of language following Saussure is that verbal sound is primarily meaningful to the extent that it is distinguishable from other non-verbal sounds and therefore confers a "sensuous and communicable existence" to what would otherwise be nonsensuous (for the intellect), non-communicable sounds.[207] In contrast, onomatopoeic words elevate the importance of this verbal sound because their meaning is related to how they sound. In fact, in ordinary language verbal sound operates "transparently"; it is not typically an important factor in grasping the meaning of a word, so it is often not consciously attended to by a speaker. But in contrast, onomatopoeia is considered "opaque" language because one's consciousness of the verbal sound of the word is a factor in grasping the word's meaning.[208]

In this way, by emphasizing the onomatopoeic-ness of language in general, Trungpa recommends that his students begin to pay special attention to the verbal sounds of words, thus turning the concept of onomatopoeia into a pedagogy of meditation in action. By contextualizing language as onomatopoeia Trungpa suggests a technique of mindfulness practice in everyday life which advocates that the practitioner begin to pay attention not just to the content of speech, but

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[206] D.A. Pharies, "*Sound Symbolism in the Romance Languages*" (PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1979), 84.
[207] Bredin, "Onomatopoeia as a Figure and a Linguistic Principle," 565.
[208] Bredin, "Onomatopoeia as a Figure and a Linguistic Principle," 557.

to sound as well, thereby enhancing awareness of those aspects of speech (and of our everyday life) which usually go unnoticed.

Bredin concludes that the category of onomatopoeia is larger than Pharies' definition claims. He demonstrates that words can take on an onomatopoeic "aura". Words that are not onomatopoeically derived but over time gain an onomatopoeic aura, like "boil" and "steel", Brendin argues, confer significance upon the things they name so that a pot of water that boils on the stove, takes on the sound of "boil." Equally, the material that is in part an alloy of iron and carbon, takes on a steel-*ness*; the word begins to suit the material in some intuitive way. In this way, he argues, onomatopoeia both articulates meaning and instantiates it.[209] Onomatopoeia do not merely mimic the sounds of their referents, they enact meaning upon them.

Ultimately, Bredin concludes that verbal sounds are not arbitrary, and that onomatopoeia are the product of a natural human desire to align things with words. "In fact sound *does* matter in language, and one constituent of our consciousness as language users is an awareness of the fit between sound and meaning. Onomatopoeia is one species of such a fit."[210]

As we've seen onomatopoeia like mantra elevates the importance of sound and again like mantra, it enacts meaning. However, the meaning that onomatopoeia confers whether conceptual or associative is, in conventional usage, typically located within a semantic or lexical field. Therefore, linguistic meaning is still a necessary precondition for understanding onomatopoeic words. Now, if we recall that Trungpa insists that poetry like mantra does not have to be

[209] Bredin, "Onomatopoeia as a Figure and a Linguistic Principle," 568.
[210] Bredin, "Onomatopoeia as a Figure and a Linguistic Principle," 566.

comprehended in order to create meaning (i.e. environment), we can see that a strict definition of onomatopoeia cannot conceptually account for the environmental creative power that Trungpa suggests poetry and mantra (and even onomatopoeia) possess.

Turning to an example of Trungpa's discussion of the power of the mantric sound to create environment[211] might help to elucidate this point:

> Question: ...some people have suggested that the power of mantra lies in the vibration of the sound.
> [Trungpa] Rinpoche: I don't think it's just a vibration of sound, like the vibration of the floor, or of your wooden pillar. But it's a psychological state; it has its own meaning. Such types of meaning actually exist in your ordinary language; there are a lot of onomatopoeic sounds in American culture as well. But they are usually in very silly forms. None of them are particularly threatening; all of them are very playful. But you could develop threatening sounds or creative sounds as well — which is what is developed in the mantras. A mantra changes your psychological state at once, as soon as you hear that particular sound. *The closest thing to mantra I have heard is coyotes. They are constantly making mantric sounds. During certain parts of the day they do their sadhana — and you're haunted by it.*[212]

For Trungpa, mantra and onomatopoeia are significant as elevated sounds with the creative power to enact meaning, indeed to create a reality. This view is committed to the idea that the immaterial can affect the material world. This, of course, is a view that challenges the materialist scientific worldview commonly held in contemporary modern thought. The next question might

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[211] I would argue that the creation of environment as a routine mental operation is strongly associated with tantric Buddhist practices overall. The tantric practice of deity yoga is based on the understanding that our ordinary perception of the world as mundane is a result of past karmic seeds that produce a propensity for deluded perception. The perception of the world in the mundane experience entails a habitual projection, or confused overlay, when in fact Buddhists argue, reality is devoid of this confusion. Deity yoga which makes use of maṇḍala visualization and mantra recitation is predicated upon the idea that rather than habitually projecting a mundane reality, one could become habituated to projecting (i.e. imagining) a more enlightened reality and thus more likely to produce and sustain such a perception spontaneously or automatically. In other words, deity yoga is not just concerned with a subjective turn inwards, but also with the projection and creation of an environment.

[212] Emphasis mine. Chögyam Trungpa, "1974 Talk Nineteen: Approaches to Tantra," in *Collected Vajrayana Seminaries 1973-1985* (Halifax: Vajradhatu Publications, 2015), 185.

be how far does Trungpa's commitment to this view extend? If a significant facet of mantra is that it functions to generate an environmental experience for the audience or even the speaker, what is the quality of that environment? In other words, to what extent is that environment intangible and therefore both non-conceptual and vague? In fact, Trungpa emphasizes the *tangibility* of sound thereby urging his students not only to grapple with the reality of the environment mantras manifest, but also to alter their ordinary assumptions vis-a-vis sound itself.

3.5 Chögyam Trungpa's Presentation of Sound as Corporeal

Trungpa's claim with respect to the corporeality of sound is an interesting one, the implications of which I attempt to unpack here. To begin, the Buddhist doctrine of the *trikāya* (three bodies) in which there are three[213] levels of reality and of Buddhahood is an important conceptual framework in this discussion. Briefly, according to the trikāya, the *dharmakāya* (reality body) is the basis for the other two *kāyas*: the *saṃbhogakāya* (enjoyment or bliss body); and the *nirmāṇakāya* (form body). The difference between the *kāyas* is the difference in the realization of the group of beings who perceive them. Ordinary beings only perceive the form body, which is where the physical form of the Buddha, the *nirmāṇakāya,* manifests and they mistakenly equate the Buddha with this form. However, bodhisattvas on the ten *bhūmis* (levels) perceive not only the *nirmāṇakāya* but also the *saṃbhogakāya* in which the Buddhas emanate as celestial beings. Finally, the *dharmakāya* is perceived by the Buddhas who have achieved complete realization, thus the *dharmakāya* here is considered to be the exclusive purview of the Buddhas. In this context, the *saṃbhogakāya* is sometimes described as a mid-way point or a bridge

[213] Most commonly Buddhists hold that there are three kāyas. However, some schools of thought posit four (*dharmakāya*, s*aṃbhogakāya*, *nirmāṇakāya*, and *svābhāvikakāya*) and even five *kāyas* (*dharmakāya*, *saṃbhogakāya*, *nirmāṇakāy*a, *svābhāvikakāya*, and *mahāsūkhakāya*).

between *nirmāṇakāya* and the *dharmakāya*. Speech is associated with the *saṃbhogakāya* and is likewise treated as a bridge between the body and the mind. As such, speech is both tangible and intangible, body and mind, form and emptiness, at the same time. In this way, like *evam,* speech is another symbol of the union of two-fold phenomena. However, in order to see sound in this way, one must recognize not just its intangibility, but its corporeality as well. In this way, when mantra is described as the echo of space, the implication is not just that mantra is a symbol of emptiness, but also that emptiness resounds: it manifests as form.[214] This symbolism is not theoretical, Trungpa argues, it is reality.

> On the whole, understanding the vividness of the energy of the universe in terms of symbolism, in terms of patterns, colors, and shapes, is not a matter of imagination or hallucination for the real tantric practitioner. It is real. It is similar to a person hearing music that is very moving to him and feeling that he could almost carve statues out of it, that he could almost hold it, handle it. Sound becomes almost as a solid object, almost a color or a shape. If a person is able to see the energies of the universe as they are, then shapes and colors and patterns suggest themselves; symbolism happens. That is the meaning of *mahāmudrā,* which means "great symbol." The whole world is symbol—not symbol in the sense of a sign representing something other than itself, but symbol in the sense of the highlights of the vivid qualities of things as they are.[215]

Elsewhere, Trungpa makes a stronger claim about the corporeality of sound. Here, he claims that there is a fundamental interconnection between sense perceptions. He argues not only that sound is tactile, but that the visual is acoustic, the acoustic visual, and so on.

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[214] Trungpa describes a shift in focus from sūtrayāna to tantrayāna from an emphasis on emptiness (śūnyatā) to focusing on luminosity, which emphasizes the "isness" quality of nonduality. "You see beyond the negation aspect of shunyata, the negation of duality." Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Three,* 163.
[215] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Three,* 289.

> According to the traditional pattern,[216] beginning to see something visually is a process that has many levels. First we see with our eyes, then we smell with our eyes, then we hear with our eyes, and then we begin to touch the object with our eyes. Each particular sensory perception has those same aspects taking place. For instance, at the auditory level, when we hear something, we see it first, then we hear it, then we smell it, then we touch it.[217]

What Trungpa is demonstrating here is a certain commitment to the idea of synesthesia, that there is a systematic interconnection between the aural and the visual fields and between the other sense fields as well. This is the idea that an auditory experience necessarily triggers a visual experience and vice versa. If this is the case, verbal sounds, indeed all sounds, carry not only conceptual meaning, they also trigger tactile, visual, olfactory, and taste experiences too.[218] In other words, they create a full sensory experience: an environment. The understanding of the interconnectedness between the acoustic and visual fields is also found in Tibetan literature.

3.6 Tibetan Literary Onomatopoeia

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[216] It's unclear what is "traditional" about this view, since to my knowledge traditional Buddhist Abhidharma literature does not hold that sense consciousnesses (or the āyatanas) overlap. More scholarship is needed to establish where this understanding has come from.

[217] Trungpa, *Dharma Art,* 86.

[218] Although it is outside the scope of this thesis, it may be fruitful in future studies to examine the extent to which Trungpa's understanding of language aligns with sound symbolism. Sound symbolism is detailed by Jackobson and Waugh who argue that there is an "inmost, natural similarity association between sound and meaning" (cited in Bredin, "Onomatopoeia as a Figure and a Linguistic Principle," 567). Their theory is based on three premises: 1. The semantic meaning of verbal-sounds is not inherent but is conferred in lexical (text) context, 2. It's not that verbal sounds are related to objects, but that verbal sounds are related to other verbal sounds. As such, it is the relationship between verbal sounds which corresponds to the relationship between objects, not the verbal sound that corresponds to the object. For example, the difference between "O" and "A" recalls the difference between light and dark or between big and small rather than significance residing in the isolated verbal sound itself; and 3. Sound symbolism is grounded in synesthesia, the idea that there is an interconnection between the sense fields. Synesthesia has a very narrow definition in contemporary neuroscience and is only found to occur in a small number of people. However, phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty is one figure who took the possibility of universal synesthesia seriously. He believed that synesthesia was an unconscious and undiscovered fact of the human brain. See: Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* trans. Donald A. Landes (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 237-239. Bredin argues that if synesthesia is an unconscious neurological fact, the logical result is sound symbolism. See Bredin, "Onomatopoeia as a Figure and a Linguistic Principle," 567.

> "The most significant quality of Tibetan *dmangs glu* (folk songs) is the height of their melody created to match the height of the mountains and the sky."[219]

Syllables like: *a li li,* or *ya yi ya yi,* or *he he,* are a common Tibetan literary device found throughout the Gesar epic, *gur, lu*, and terma literature.[220] The term used for these syllables, *tratsik* (*sgra tshig),* literally translates as "sound word" and is often referred to as "onomatopoeia". However, the use of the word "onomatopoeia" may have created some conceptual confusion, ultimately reducing the understanding of how these syllables function.

In her study of Kalden Gyatso's poetry, Victoria Sujata names these syllables "interjection" and finds that they indicate a range of meaning: some, like *kye* function as calling sounds which can be translated as "hey" or "uh oh" (In the case of Gyatso's poetry Sujata finds that *kye* typically expresses a warning or disapproval).[221] Some interjections like "*a li lo mo a li*"[222] and as "*ya yi ya yi,"* are "pure sound"[223] and inject an extra-linguistic sense of place, emotion, or context into the verse.

In his study of Lama Zhang's writings, Carl Yamamoto finds strings of "chant or song-like syllables that appear to be interjections, onomatopoeia, or perhaps simply rhythmic devices: 'shō li la li e e,' 'ha ha ha ha ha ha ha,' 'la lo e lo la la na ha lo ō'". Yamamoto argues that these syllabic strings bear a resemblance with "some of the devices found in oral epic poetry and in

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[219] Quoted in: Wendolyn Craun, "Nomadic Amdo Tibetan *Glu* Folk Songs Within the Setting of Tibetan Culture, History, Theory, and Current Usage" (master's thesis, Bethel University, 2011), 45.
[220] See Kapstein, "The Indian Literary Identity in Tibet," 764-67.
[221] Sujata, *Tibetan Songs of Realization*, 236.
[222] Sujata, *Tibetan Songs of Realization*, 235.
[223] Sujata, *Tibetan Songs of Realization*, 241.

ancient Tibetan verses found, e.g., in the Dunhuang texts"[224] Yamamoto, citing Stein, finds that the syllables in Lama Zhang's text and the overall technique of onomatopoeic syllables in Tibetan verse are merely onomatopoeia-*like* because rather than imitating natural sounds, these syllables are intended to describe "specific *appearances* or *situations.*"[225]

Lama Jabb argues that these syllables are lexically rooted; he confirms that they are not just a device to add mere acoustic dimension to a verse, instead they contribute visual images as well.[226] This linguistic device makes use of the synesthetic nature of the senses; it treats the acoustic and visual/spatial fields as overlapping and inseparable. As such, *tratsik* includes a visual element that the English word "onomatopoeia" doesn't wholly account for.

Trungpa's interpretation of onomatopoeia is consistent with a Tibetan conception of *tratsik.* He thought that the pronunciation of a word and its meaning could be inseparable.[227] Compare, for example, the following sound cycle exercise that Trungpa introduced to his students with Lama Zhang's strings of syllables:

> Sutra "Sssoo Sssoo Soot Soot Sootr / Sootr Sutra Soootra Sutroom / Sootroom Sootree Sootro-EE / Oo Ay Oh Oh Ay Oh Ee . . ."[228]

[224] Carl Shigeo Yamamoto, "*Vision and Violence*: Lama Zhang and the Dialectics of Political Authority and Religious Charisma in Twelfth-Century Central Tibet" (PhD dissertation, University of Virginia, 2009), 160.
[225] Emphasis mine, qtd. in Yamamoto, "*Vision and Violence,*" 160.
[226] Lama Jabb, "An Act of Bardo: Translating Tibetan Poetry," Keynote Address (Boulder: The Lotsawa Translation Workshop, Tibet Himalaya Initiative, Oct. 6, 2018).
[227] Gimian, "Introduction to Volume Seven," xli.
[228] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven*, 598-99.

Trungpa had students recite these syllables with a focus on using their entire body to produce the sounds. He was primarily concerned with the clear enunciation of the syllables, "thereby letting the sound convey its own content."[229] Discussing sound cycle exercises, Trungpa said:

> What we are trying to do here is to work with words as definite things. Vowels especially are definite. It's like reciting poetry or almost like some kind of speech therapy. There is an awareness of the vowels at the absolute level. And the rest is just improvisation . . . It's simply a useful way of working with yourself; it's not particularly extraordinary . . . The idea is to explore the fundamentality of the space, which I'm afraid is not emotional or entertaining especially. It's an attempt to relate to the rebounding of sound around your body, around the wall, in the space between your body and the wall. Then space begins to send messages back to you. The sounds form some kind of shape in the space. So we're using these Sound Cycles to develop a very extensive relationship to vowels, the sounds: a, e, i, o, u, and also a relationship to space or how the body relates to it.[230]

3.7 Chögyam Trungpa's innovation of *Tratsik*

Turning to Trungpa's poetry, we can see how he uses *tratsik* as the conceptual framework for his writing wherein he blends Tibetan and western literary devices seamlessly. Trungpa plays with the visual possibilities of the written word in his concrete poem, *Full Moon, No Clouds* (c. 1972).[231] Written in England, using a Western literary form, this poem creates the visual image of a Tibetan night scene and employs inflections of syllabic strings, reminiscent of the sound-cycle exercises. Using a typewriter, Trungpa positions the letters of the poem across the width of the page so that the words "full moon" are suspended at the top, below are the words "no clouds" and "but snow." These are repeated with the letters spaced out and arranged descending down the page. Each letter of the phrase "empty sky" spreads across the middle of the page, and on the bottom right-hand corner are cluttered letters with the repetition of "monastery" and "monk"

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[229] Gimian, "Introduction to Volume Seven," lix.
[230] Transcript of Chögyam Trungpa's *Sound Cycles,* 19 February 1973, record number 1417 transcript, series Mudra Theatre Group, Nalanda Translation Fonds, Shambhala Archives, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.
[231] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven*, 283.

culminating in a block stanza of "mmmmmmmmmmmm." Beneath this block an image of a continuous string of 'OOOO' evoking the earth.

The solidity of the monastery's consonants contrasts with the earth's string of vowels. The effect is a written poem that acts as a sketch of a Tibetan landscape, evoking the outline of a monastery, the gentle drift of falling snow, and the spaciousness of the cloudless night sky. The author reminds the audience of his conviction that rather than conceived as an activity or occupation, poetry should be understood as environment.[232]

The concrete poem is particularly suited for presenting the thesis that poetry acts as environment. The concrete poetic movement was a movement that treated the written word as significant for its visual properties. Using text to express a design or picture, concrete poetry primarily "communicates a spatial rather than a discursive syntax".[233] In the year before Trungpa penned his first concrete poem from 1967–1968 there were three anthologies of concrete poetry published capturing the flourishing of the genre in the mid-century.[234] It is likely that Trungpa encountered this form of poetry around the same time.

The first concrete poem that we find in Trungpa's collected works is called *Life Was as It Was* composed some time in 1969. This poem is simpler than *Full Moon* with just a few words placed

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[232] See Appendix A.
[233] Jamie Hilder, *Designed Words for a Designed World: The International Concrete Poetry Movement, 1955-1971* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016) 8.
[234] See: *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry,* ed. Emmett Williams, (New York: Something Else Press, 1967); Bann, Stephen, comp. *Concrete Poetry: An International Anthology* London Magazine Editions, 13. (London: London Magazine, 1967); Solt, Mary Ellen, Joe Lucca, David Noblett, and Timothy Mayer, *Concrete Poetry: A World View,* trans. Augusto De Campos and Marco Guimarães (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970).

on the page. The words “moon” “me” “rock” are placed on the upper, middle, and lower regions of the page respectively. From top to bottom and left to right the poem reads:

> moon
> me
> rock
> rock, grassssssssssssssss windgrass
> rock
> but it’s cold coooooooooooooooooooooool ling
> and rockieeeeessssssssssssssssssssss but waterrrrrrrrrrrr[235]

The title of the poem indicates a nostalgia and the sparsity of the words contribute to its directness. The use of the word “but” adds tension between the nouns on the page. Additionally, the separation of “coooooooooooool” and “ling” suggests a Tibetan-English pun with the English gerund verb “cooling” and the Tibetan noun “*gling*” indicating a “region,” “an island,” (but waterrrrrrrrrrr), or even the region “Ling” in Kham, Trungpa’s home country. In a performance of this poem, Trungpa rolls the final ‘r’s’ in Tibetan fashion playing with the hybridity of the poem.

Although I am not aware of any equivalent concrete poems in Tibetan verse, there are forms of acrostic poetry in Tibetan literature that are considered extremely difficult to master. The form of these “auspicious circle” (*kun bzang ‘khor lo*) poems vary, but one example is a grid of squares eighteen by eighteen, each square is meant to contain one syllable. Because Tibetan syllables can be read as words in their own right and are also combined with other syllables to create new

[235] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Volume One,* 397.

words, the poem can be read in various directions, from left to right, or top to bottom, and so on.[236]

To my knowledge, Trungpa's archives do not hold such a poem but we can see how Trungpa's concrete poetic style which takes the letter of each English word separately might resonate with the literary values of the acrostic form. Like an acrostic poem, *Full Moon* can be read in several directions: the word "monastry" [sic] is written forwards and back, reading left to right, and right to left. The words "snow" can be read across the page both horizontally and also diagonally. The letters "n-o" of a diagonally placed "snow" forms a new thought: "no monk."

In *Full Moon* the word "monk" appears in red which mirrors the common typographical convention in Tibetan texts of highlighting some words with red ink (*snag tsha dmar po*) produced from ground cinnabar (mercuric oxide) in a text otherwise produced in black ink (carbon). Because cinnabar is rarer than carbon, the material used for black ink, it is considered more meritorious to produce text in red. For this reason, the Dergé Kangyur (*sde dge bka' 'gyur)* was reprinted in red ink under H.H. the 16th Karmapa and is known as *tsalpar* (*mtshal par*) or the "red print."[237] Moreover most Tibetan texts make use of red paint on their edges.[238]

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[236] An example of this type of poem written by Gendun Chopel can be found in: Gendun Chopel, *In the Forest of Faded Wisdom: 104 Poems by Gendun Chopel* ed. and trans. Donald S. Lopez Jr. (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009) 2; 40.

[237] Philip Stanley, "The Tibetan Buddhist Canon." *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to East and Inner Asian Buddhism,* Accessed March 15, 2019. http://www.thlib.org/encyclopedias/literary/canons/index.php#!essay=/stanley/tibcanons/s/b13)

[238] I'd like to thank Tony Duff for calling my attention to this version of the Dergé Kangyur. (Personal communication to the author, March 4, 2019).

Thus, the red inked "monk" is elevated in here and it is reduplicated from left to right in the heart of the "monastry" [sic] but one "monk" is displaced outside the monastery's walls. This lone word's letters are arranged on different planes as if drifting apart, dissolving into space. Although the red ink suggests this monk's belonging with the other red "monks" in the monastery, it is ambiguously preceded by the black letters "n-o" which cast a lingering shadow over it. In 1972 when this poem was written, Trungpa had renounced his monastic vows, and was married with a family. Thus, the displaced monk strikes an autobiographical note, situating this poem in Trungpa's past (as he remembers a Tibetan scene) and his present simultaneously.

Another convention in Tibetan poetry that resonates with "Full Moon, No Clouds" is the practice of using the syllables of a person's name literally, dispersed throughout and therefore somewhat hidden in a text. For instance, a poem that makes use of this convention featuring Trungpa's given name, Chökyi Gyatso, which is literally "ocean of dharma" (*chos kyi rgya mtsho*), would make use of the nouns dharma (*chos*) and ocean (*rgya mtsho*) separately, weaving them into the verse. A similar effect is achieved by H.H. Dilgo Khyentse, in an excerpt of a poem that uses his own name, "Brilliant Moon", and Chögyam Trungpa's name "Ocean of Dharma" as images, entitled *Brilliant Moon Spreads Cool Light, Ocean of Dharma Smiles*:

> Graced by Brilliant Moon's light, free from clouds
> Ocean of Dharma, profound and vast, is difficult to fathom
> Dharmadhatu's light of appearance penetrates all realms
> Is this not the expanding joyful spring of the world?
>
> Brilliant Moon waxing, spreads joy and delight
> Ocean of Dharma is a brimming summer lake which cleanses torment
> These verses which connect metaphor, meaning and name

> Were written on a journey through a spacious forest solitude in a range of rock mountains.[239]

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Chögyam Trungpa associated poetry with mantra, onomatopoeia, and environment because his understanding of language is rooted in traditional Indo-Tibetan ideas of the power of sound. Unpacking the definitions of mantra and onomatopoeia, I found that Trungpa understood both to be examples of elevated language with the power to create reality, not merely describe it. This understanding I found to be consistent with both tantric ideas about the power of mantra as well as Tibetan ideas *vis-a-vis* the scope of onomatopoeia. Turning to an example of Trungpa's English poetry, I argued that his understanding of onomatopoeia acts as the conceptual basis of his concrete poetry.

[239] H.H. Dilgo Khyentse, "Brilliant Moon Spreads Cool Light, Ocean of Dharma Smiles," in *Garuda V* (Barnet & Boulder: Tail of the Tiger and Karma Dzong, 1972), 90-91.

4. Chapter Three: Ordinariness, Loneliness, & Transcendence

4.1 Introduction

A common trope in modern poetry is the use of quotidian details. This ethic is enshrined in poet William Carlos William's famous maxim, "no ideas but in things." As such modern verse marks a turn towards the ordinary, the everyday. Chögyam Trungpa's English poetry is replete with examples of this. Take for example Trungpa's poem *Glorious Bhagavad-Ghetto* which remarks, "Glory be to the rain/ that brought down / Concentrated pollution / On the roof of my car / In the parking lot."[240] As Jackson notes, the ordinary—pollution, cars, and parking lots— as the legitimate subject of poetry is all but absent in pre-modern Tibetan poetry.[241] In fact, significant for McMahan's conclusion that FTBT conforms to (indeed, originates from) a modernist worldview is the extent to which FTBT, with its commitment to spontaneity and simplicity, entails the valorization of the mundane in such a way that it "harmonizes with the Modernist attentiveness to the mundane." As evidence for this claim, McMahan points out that "Ginsberg thought of poetry as an articulation of the uncensored ordinary movement of the mind, a 'spontaneous transcription' of thought in all its particulars".[242]

However, any discussion of the ordinary in a Buddhistic context requires a second look. The assumption that Ginsberg's understanding of the ordinary mind before his training with Trungpa was the same as his understanding of the ordinary mind after, muddles evidence to the contrary. For instance, in his introduction to *First Thought, Best Thought,* Ginsberg celebrates that

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[240] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 348.
[241] Jackson, "'Poetry' in Tibet," 386.
[242] McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism,*143.

Trungpa's poetry "records the ordinary mind of the poet," but this ordinary mind is quickly marked as anything but since Trungpa's "speciality as Eastern Teacher is Ordinary Mind."[243] Ginsberg flags the phrase, elevating it with capital letters because in fact he is referencing the Mahāmudrā view of the essence of awakened mind. This essence of mind is traditionally described as ordinary awareness (*tha mal gyi shes pa*), [244] which is considered to be very close, and therefore so familiar that it is typically unrecognized. That is why it is described "ordinary." However, for most practitioners discovering the essence of awakened mind requires training as well as other conditions like a having a living teacher and receiving the blessings of the lineage.

Although it is the case that Trungpa's poetry heavily features the mundane details of life, which was doubtless inspired in part by Western modernism, any nuanced reading of his corpus must include an understanding of the ordinary in a Buddhist context. Therefore, in this chapter I turn to the understanding of the ordinary in the teachings of Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā in the Nyingma and Kagyü streams and argue that this new conception must be used to contextualize Trungpa's understanding of the ordinary. I find that his use of the mundane in his poetry is likewise informed by the Buddhist narratives of nonduality, one-taste, and renunciation. Next, I examine how innovation and the transcendence of tradition may be derived from a traditional Buddhist context. I conclude that these themes, along with the terma tradition, ultimately inform Trungpa's poetic work.

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[243] Ginsberg, "Introduction to *First Thought Best Thought,"* 723.
[244] Ordinary awareness is "a Mahamudra term describing the enlightened essence, the natural/ basic state . . . not the ordinary state of mind of an enlightened person but 'ordinary' in the sense of one's present wakefulness not being fabricated, altered, or corrected in any way." "Tibetan and Himalayan Library -THL." The Tibetan and Himalayan Library. Accessed July 16, 2019. http://www.thlib.org/reference/dictionaries/tibetan-dictionary/translate.php. Indeed, ordinary awareness is described as uncontrived, unmodified, direct knowing. See: Tayé, *The Treasury of Knowledge: Book Six, Part Four,* 426.

4.2 The Ordinary

Dzogchen is the highest level of the Nyingma system and a non-tantric practice that entails a meditational technique of recognizing the nature of mind itself. At this stage of practice, the visualization and meditational aids typically used in tantric practice like maṇḍalas and iconography are abandoned as inferior methods for the attainment of realization. The view is that the nature of mind is clear light which is beginning-less, self-existent, and free from defilement. "All of our experience is merely a series of ripples on the surface of the primordially pure mind, which is unproduced and unchanging."[245] Dzogchen texts make a distinction between the mundane mind (*sems)* of an ordinary being which is confused by dualistic thinking, and the mind itself (*sems nyid*) which is synonymous with buddha-nature and is unstained by adventitious delusion. Nevertheless, the mind itself is the basis upon which the mundane mind arises. The quality of the mind itself is *rigpa* (*rig pa*)*,* "pure awareness," or insight.[246]

4.2.1 *Rigpa*

Trungpa uses *first thought, best thought* to symbolize *rigpa*, "insight; awareness; or knowing." Here, *rigpa* is defined as "the pristine nature of mind that transcends ordinary dualistic mind".[247] Discussing the difference between *rigpa,* and mind (*sems*)*,* Trungpa explains that *first thought, best thought* is a synonym for *rigpa* (here rendered "rikpa"):

> Rikpa is the clearest and most precise discovery, which we have been talking about lately as "first thought, best thought." Before sem even begins to work, rikpa has a first glimpse of reality. Traditionally, rikpa, or *vidya,* means a discovery other than ignorance, beyond ignorance; when you wake up from ignorance, then you discover

[245] Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism,* 388.
[246] Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism,* 388.
[247] Trungpa, *Tantric Path of Indestructible Wakefulness,* 848.

> rikpa, you have rikpa. That is the first notion of wakefulness, not necessarily in the sense of enlightenment, but as contrasted to slothfulness or confusion. So rikpa is a sort of spark as opposed to dullness and sleepiness. It is intrinsic sharpness and penetratingly bright.
> S: It is also dualistic.
> V: Not necessarily at all. It could see everything. But rikpa is very hard to get ahold of—that is why it is placed very high.[248]

Rigpa is "hard to get ahold of" because it is considered so basic to our ordinary experience that one rarely recognizes it. Powers explains:

> It is even more subtle than air and space, which are also all around us, although we are seldom consciously aware of them. Pure awareness is not something that exists on a rarified plane of mystical awareness; rather, it is the most basic element of all experience. It is closer than one's own heart, closer than the breath, more fundamental than any feelings, emotions, or perceptions. It is the basis of consciousness and of every moment of awareness. It is the space in which all conscious life takes place, and like the physical environment, we only begin to recognize it when our attention is drawn toward it for some reason.[249]

As such, *rigpa* pervades the ordinary. In his book *Mudra,* Trungpa included his own translations of Jigme Lingpa and Patrül Rinpoche's writings. An examination of Jigme Lingpa's description of primordial insight (*rig pa*) from *Mudra* further casts light on our discussion.

> Primordial insight is the state which is not influenced by the undergrowth of thoughts. It is a mistake to be on guard against the wandering mind or to try and imprison the mind in the ascetic practice of suppressing thoughts.
> Some people may misunderstand the term *nowness* and take it to refer to whatever thoughts happen to be in their mind at the moment. *Nowness* should be understood as being the primeval insight already described.[250]

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[248] Chögyam Trungpa, "1981 Talk 21: Transcending Mental Concepts; Prostrations and Vajrasattva Mantra," *Collected Vajrayana Seminaries 1973-1985* (Halifax: Vajradhatu Publications, 2015), 1092.
[249] Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism,* 389-90.
[250] Quoted in Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. One,* 370-71.

Here, primordial insight is distinguished from conventional insight— it is not influenced by subconscious thought— but it nevertheless is present in the midst of a conventional wandering mind since it is all-pervasive. As such, it is not necessary to suppress thought but to merely recognize the freshness of insight in its midst. Recalling Trungpa's denial that conventional thought produces true poetry, we can compare Trungpa's slogan for creating poetry *first thought, best thought* to Jigme Lingpa's description of primordial insight. For Trungpa *first thought* is "awareness" which "brings you into sanity altogether".[251] Moreover, *first thought* arises along with conventional thoughts and yet it shouldn't be mistaken as such:

> The term *first thought* does not literally mean the first thought you have when you get up in the morning. It refers to any first fresh thought that comes at the end of some babbling. At the end of a string of little babblings, you have a fresh beginning, a new first thought happening. You have the conceptuality of *blobbidy bla,* and then you have first thought— *tshoo!* — coming out of that. So first thought could happen at any time.[252]

4.2.2 Mahāmudrā and Dzogchen

Like many Rimé masters before him, Chögyam Trungpa considered the Mahāmudrā of the Kagyü system and the Dzogchen of the Nyingma system to be complementary. Like Dzogchen, the practice of Mahāmudrā involves directly recognizing the nature of mind, which is said to be luminous and empty at the same time. There is a doctrinal basis for this style adopted by the Kagyü lineage. Central to the Vajrayāna view in the Kagyü school is Mahāmudrā (Tib. *phyag rgya chen po*) or "Great Seal". "Mahā" means "great" and "mudrā" is a "seal", "sign", or "symbol". In this case, mudrā is sometimes understood as that which seals phenomena. It is considered "great" because it is the mark of all phenomena. Thus, Mahāmudrā expresses the

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[251] Trungpa, *Tantric Path of Indestructible Wakefulness,* 318.
[252] Trungpa, *Tantric Path of Indestructible Wakefulness,* 318.

non-dual ultimate reality. It is also a pedagogical approach to realizing that reality. The most important realization, in this view, is the realization of the nature of one's own mind (*sems kyi ngo bo*) which, the Third Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje (*rang byung rdo rje*) (1284–1339) points out, is the essence of enlightenment; it is "ordinary awareness".[253]

The nature of mind however, can only be recognized with the help of a teacher who points out the student's mind and helps her "see" it. The encounter with the teacher that results in this insight must happen in-person: it cannot be conveyed through texts. Kagyü master and lineage figure Gampopa (sgam po pa) (1079–1153) developed this method which is often referred to as "pointing at the nature of mind" (*sems kyi ngo bo ston pa*).[254] Gampopa presented a "stripped down path of practice, shunning complicated techniques and intellectual elaboration" and no special knowledge, tantric initiation, or training is required on the part of the student.[255]

In *Resting in Nowness,* Trungpa discusses the quality of the ordinary at this stage of the path:

> When the teacher has instructed you and pointed out the ordinary quality of the world to you, the texts say that it is like meeting an old friend. You realize that it is no big deal. It is simply nice to meet an old friend again. There is nothing extra happening, and you do not have to analyze anything. It is just natural and straight and ordinary.[256]

4.2.3 One-Taste

An adept who trains in Mahāmudrā develops "one-taste" (*ro gcig*) such that all thoughts, emotions, and phenomenal experiences are of "one taste with the essential emptiness of

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[253] Tayé, *The Treasury of Knowledge: Book Six, Part Four,* 426.
[254] Yamamoto, "*Vision and Violence,"* 121.
[255] Yamamoto, "*Vision and Violence,"* 120-121.
[256] Trungpa, *Tantric Path of Indestructible Wakefulness,* 594-95.

mind."[257] Dharma art presenting a view of one-taste is expressed nicely in one of Trungpa's notecards from a 1980 dharma art lecture. It reads:

> ART!?
> Arising from the twelve āyatanas
> Free from self-grasping
> Free from aggression
> Transcending a beautiful disposition
> When this has been produced [there is] ART[258]

Dharma art transcends *even* a beautiful disposition. In other words, it doesn't cling to categories of beauty or ugly.[259] The concept of one-taste is present in the higher Buddhist tantras and it describes the equality of every experience from an ultimate view. Non-duality entails the erasure of concepts of pure and impure as well as concepts of "good" and "bad". As such, each experience devoid of dualistic view or hope and fear is equal in essence.[260] One-taste serves as the doctrinal basis of the collapse of the spiritual and secular realms. At this stage of training, the adept no longer exerts energy in meditation. Instead "at this stage meditation becomes a spontaneous experience of the nature of mind, and one no longer even thinks of meditating. Since one is always meditating, there is no distinction between meditation and non-meditation".[261] Here, as Powers explains, even the effort put into meditation is an obstacle to realizing the "natural, spontaneous, free-flow of mind".[262]

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[257] Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism,* 422.
[258] Notecard from: Chögyam Trungpa, Notecard, 12-14 December 1980, B62 "Unknown", Box B, Series: Tibetan Writings, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche Manuscript, Private Papers and Office Papers Fond, Shambhala Archives, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The note card reads: ART!? *Skye mched bcu gnyis/ las byung zhing/ de yang bdang 'dzin bral ba/ zhe ldang bral ba/ zhe zhing 'dzes [mdzes] las thar ba/ byung bas na* ART. This is my own translation, done in collaboration with the Nalanda Translation Committee.
[259] For more on Trungpa's discussion of "one taste" in dharma art practice see: Trungpa, *Dharma Art*, 42.
[260] Braitstein, "Saraha's Adamantine Songs," 55.
[261] Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism,* 432.
[262] Powers, *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism,* 432.

At the highest realization in the Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā teachings, the mundane world is affirmed, and the dharma transcended. This state of realization is the culmination of the Buddhist path and Trungpa describes it as the state of "total flop" or "old dog". "This state is dealing with the earth with ultimate simplicity, transcending following the example of anyone."[263] The image of the dog is echoed in the poetry of Za Patrül Rinpoche (*rdza dpal sprul rin po che*) (1808–1887),[264] a Tibetan spiritual master who lived as wandering vagabond, without affiliation to monastery or sect and was renowned for his profound realization. As the title "Old Dog in the Wilderness" would suggest, Patrül Rinpoche refers to himself at the end of his path as an "old dog" wandering in the wilderness.[265] Likewise, Khenpo Gangshar, an important teacher to Trungpa, describes himself as an "old dog" vomiting up the "gold" dharma.[266] Elsewhere, when Trungpa recounts Milarepa's development from murderous black-magician to enlightened master wherein Milarepa was "no longer dependent on someone else", Trungpa describes Milarepa's realization as arriving at the "old dog stage, Milarepa's highest attainment."[267] Whereas Milarepa, Paltrül Rinpoche, and Khenpo Gangshar are "old dogs,"

> Chögyam is merely a stray dog.
> He wanders around the world,
> Oceans or snow-peak mountain pass.
> Chögyam will tread along as a stray dog
> Without even thinking of his next meal.
> He will seek friendship with birds and jackals
> And any wild animals.[268]

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[263] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. One,* 427.
[264] It may be interesting to note that Patrül Rinpoche was a figure that Trungpa Rinpoche frequently referenced. In *Born in Tibet*, he particularly recalls a story that Sechen Kongtrul's liked to tell about Patrül Rinpoche displaying antinomian behavior. The moral of the story seemed to be to remind the reader that the genuine practice the dharma is more important (and more startlingly strange) than modeling conventional ideals of spiritual awakening. Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. One,* 50-51.
[265] Patrül Rinpoche, "Old Dog in the Wilderness," in *Songs of Spiritual Experience: Tibetan Buddhist Poems of Insight and Awakening*, ed. Thupten Jinpa and Jaś Elsner (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2014), 78.
[266] Khenpo Gangshar Wangpo, "Vomiting Gold," Lotsawa House, accessed July 16, 2018, https://www.lotsawahouse.org/tibetan-masters/khenpo-gangshar/vomiting-gold.
[267] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 642.
[268] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 288.

Whether an old dog or merely a stray dog, for Trungpa the animal symbolizes the transcendence of doctrine and freedom of expression attained at the highest level of the Buddhist path. We are now in a position to see how even the most secular of Trungpa's poetry might be persuasively interpreted through a Buddhist framework. In the state of the old dog, any expression becomes an expression of dharma.[269]

From this point of view, the naturalness, simplicity,[270] and uncontrived style of Trungpa's secular poems both emerge from and remain under the umbrella of the Buddhist path. From Saraha onward, the tantric teachings emphasize themes of non-contrivance, naturalness, commitment to this world, and recognition of the innate. In this way, all of phenomena, and every event that occurs are a symbol— an expression— of the innate reality.[271] The poet's task is to engage with their world and experience, and to abandon the dualistic mental operation of privilege and disdain, instead cultivating an outlook of sacred world and one-taste.

In an ode to the non-distinction between the categories of sacred/ordinary, Trungpa's poem *Love's Fool* explores the multi-faceted experience of love: "love is full of charm, love is hideously in the way, love creates the unity of heaven and earth, love tears apart heaven and earth,"[272] but never arrives at an answer to the question, "what is love?" Soon the question

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[269] Indeed, Patrül Rinpoche's "Old Dog in the Wilderness" upsets conventional assumptions vis-a-vis spiritual realization. Each stanza reflects Patrül Rinpoche's changing point of view throughout his life: as a youth when he encountered "pith instructions" he experienced a boundless enthusiasm for them, yet, "when I hear the instructions now, I feel a sense of revulsion, like a man made to eat his own vomit. The desire to listen no longer exists". Whereas he once relied on his disciples, he now chases them away "with stones in my hand". Patrül, "Old Dog in the Wilderness," 178-183.

[270] Recall that Trungpa sometimes translated lhundrup (spontaneity) as "simplicity". See page 46 of this thesis.

[271] Here we are reminded of Mahāmudrā, the Great Symbol. For more on symbolism in dharma art see: Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 44.

[272] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 402.

becomes a statement: "what is love." As the poem explores the texture of love: its highs and lows, its glory and claustrophobia, the verses become short and staccato:

> Is love gentleness.
> Is love possessiveness.

By exploring, but not becoming attached to the multifaceted textures of love, the question opens up onto itself: "Who knows?" the author asks. Finally, as if in answer, the poem discovers the beauty of an ordinary rock:

> Maybe the rock knows
> Sitting diligently on earth
> Not flinching from cold snowstorms or baking heat.
> O rock,
> How much I love you:
> You are the only lovable one.
> Would you let me grow a little flower of love on you?
> If you don't mind,
> Maybe I could grow a pine tree on you.
> If you are so generous,
> Maybe I could build a house on you.
> If you are fantastically generous,
> Maybe I could eat you up,
> Or move you to my landscape garden.
> It is nice to be friends with a rock.[273]

4.3 Sacred or Secular?

Trungpa said that Tibetan folk songs shared a kinship with the freedom of contemporary Western poetry.[274] As we've seen Trungpa found the genre of the *gur* to be uniquely suited for expressing Buddhist teachings over formal literary verse. The suitability of folk songs as a means for

[273] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 402. This poem is also an excellent example of three-fold logic. It begins with a statement/question: "Love. / What is love? / What is love." Then it explores the texture of that first thought. "Love is full of charm. / Love is hideously in the way." Finally, the narrative shifts undercutting the whole project—what Trungpa calls elsewhere the "so-what" of the ultimate, or heaven principle: "Who knows? Maybe the rock knows."

[274] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 636.

expressing awakening owes not only to the spontaneity associated with their creation, but to the collapse of boundaries between sacred and secular, high and low, profound and profane, entailed in their context.

Any narrow definition of Tibetan Buddhist art that makes strict divisions between religious and secular art, will not capture the fluid reality.[275] In fact, as we have seen, much of what might be considered secular art in Tibet, like the Epic of Gesar, has extensive religious symbolism in its own right. Moreover, in the nineteenth century the Rimé masters set a precedent for reading secular folk literature as texts with soteriological possibilities.

Therefore, in pointing to the secular content of Trungpa's English poetry as evidence of a modernist worldview, we mistake the nature of Trungpa's understanding of secularism. In fact, any theory that posits a division between secular and sacred cannot account for Trungpa's creative work because the erasure of such a boundary was a foundational concept in his life and for his overall philosophy and teaching method.

Lessons about the need to abandon distinctions between the sacred and secular are scattered throughout Trungpa's autobiography. A brief recounting of the most significant of these here will serve to elucidate this point. As Trungpa grew to adulthood, he was consistently navigating the degree and severity of the threat that the Chinese People's Liberation Army posed. He resisted fleeing his homeland, but word of his talent as a spiritual teacher had spread throughout the region and as his reputation grew, the threat of his arrest became inevitable. Before

[275] For more on religious themes in the folk song tradition see Craun, "Nomadic Amdo Tibetan Glu Folk Songs," 102.

completing his studies, Trungpa travelled with Khenpo Gangshar to Mount Doti Gangkar, a holy pilgrimage site, where caves in which Guru Padmasambhava meditated are located. A legend prophesized that in the golden age, the peak of Mont Doti would be covered with glistening crystal-like snow. In the following age, this snow would begin to melt, and in the third age, the snow would vanish completely, rendering the mountain iron-like in appearance. This would be a signal of the dawning of the dark age, and the end of Buddhism in Tibet. When Khenpo Gangshar and Trungpa climbed to the summit, they saw the snow was melting and vast expanses of black rock were visible.

For weeks before the trip, Khenpo Gangshar had been ill with an undiagnosed sickness. However, upon seeing the crest of Mont Doti, he was overcome; he seemed to recognize the severity of the political upheaval they were facing. Returning to Surmang, he quickly regained his health and began teaching with a newfound urgency. He decided that in order to ensure the survival of the dharma in Tibet, he would stop giving teachings to monks exclusively, instead he began instructing everyone, monastics and lay people alike. He taught in the most straightforward and simple terms and urged people to integrate Buddhist ideals of compassion and awareness into their lives.

He visited local meditators in strict solitary retreats and urged them to give up their retreats, return to the world, to learn how to “retreat within themselves”. He encouraged senior Buddhist lamas to develop stronger relationships with the lay community in the district, focusing on aiding these people in their spiritual understanding and practice. News spread of Khenpo Gangshar’s initiative, and although at first he was met with resistance from some of the more conservative

religious officials, the gathering of lay people who came to hear teachings grew so large that few dissenters could deny the benefit of these gatherings. Soon Khenpo Gangshar found addressing the ever-growing crowd alone impossible, so he deployed some of his pupils, including Trungpa to give teachings to the larger community, under his supervision. Trungpa remembers this time as "very good training".[276]

Later, after Trungpa had escaped from Tibet and had emigrated from India to the United Kingdom to study at Oxford, he was involved in a bad car accident. The accident left him with severe injuries; his throat was badly cut, and the left side of his body permanently paralyzed. In the epilogue to the 1977 edition of *Born in Tibet*, Rinpoche wrote that this accident was a powerful message and despite his injuries, he:

> felt a sense of relief and even humor . . . When plunging completely and genuinely into the teachings, one is not allowed to bring along one's deceptions. I realized that I could no longer attempt to preserve any privacy for myself, any special identity or legitimacy. I should not hide behind the robes of a monk, creating an impression of inscrutability which, for me, turned out to be only an obstacle. With a sense of further involving myself with the sangha, I determined to give up my monastic vows. More than ever I felt myself given over to serving the cause of Buddhism.[277]

Relinquishing his monastic vows was a controversial decision and was met with tremendous resistance from Trunpga's students and peers. However, Trungpa's decision echoes Khenpo Gangshar's urgent directive to retreatants to enter the world and "retreat within themselves" as well as his dissemination of the teachings to the lay community in Tibet. Trungpa's practice of renunciation extends to his monasticism, he renounces even his robes, thereby becoming an ever more accomplished renunciate.

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[276] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. One,* 122-124.
[277] *Ibid*., 264-265.

Further adding to Trungpa's resolve to challenge the traditional barriers between the secular and spiritual was a conviction that arose in his mind in 1968, during a retreat at Taktsang in Bhutan. Supplicating Padmasambhava and the Kagyü lineage, Trungpa recalled feeling a great sense of devotion towards Karma Pakshi (*karma pakshi*) (1204-1283), the Second Karmapa and spiritual leader of the Kagyü school of Tibetan Buddhism. There, Trungpa received the terma text, *The Sādhana of Mahāmudrā which Quells the Mighty Warring of the Three Lords of Materialism*[278] *and Brings Realization of the Ocean of Siddhas of the Practice Lineage.* Along with this text, Trungpa describes a dawning conviction with respect to teaching Buddhism in the West: "the message that I had received from my supplication was that one must try to expose spiritual materialism and all its trappings, otherwise true spirituality could not develop."[279]

Spiritual materialism, Trungpa explains, refers to a theistic attitude which he worried pervaded the practice of spirituality in general and Tibetan Buddhism in particular. He thought that the spiritually materialistic attitude led to the pursuit of spirituality as a way of fortifying and aggrandizing the self. He described the theistic attitude as one that made fundamental distinctions between the spiritual and the mundane, the sacred and profane, and as an attitude that was fundamentally aggressive, arbitrarily privileging one side of duality and repressing the

[278] The Three Lords of Materialism are the lord of form, the lord of speech, and the lord of mind. These lords symbolize the individual's desire to accumulate material and immaterial wealth, whether in the form of riches, ideology, or spiritual practices. The intent is to fortify the ego, and ultimately make ego real. For more see: Chögyam Trungpa, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism,* ed. John Baker and Marvin Casper (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2008).
[279] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. One,* 264.

other. This type of thinking, Trungpa argued, has corrupting and corrosive influence on the practice of genuine spirituality.[280]

Trungpa's commitment to blurring the categories of sacred and secular is exemplified well by his 1977 poem *Meetings with Remarkable People*:[281]

> Banana aluminium,
> Wretched secondhand pressure cooker,
> Crucifixions made out of plastic,
> Jumbo jet,
> Iron grid that is fit for cooking but not for eating, with a permanent garlic stain,
> Rooster with its feathers and flashy crest and waddles of elegant pink flashy brocade—
> Sometimes we wonder whether we should be one of those,
> Or else should completely fake the whole thing.
> The gentleman with slim mustache and notepad under his arm
> Told us that we shouldn't fake anything,
> Otherwise we are going to run into trouble with BDS[282] as well as IRS.
> The gentleman with belly button, weighing 300 pounds,
> Told us that if we're going to fake anything,
> We had better cut our aortas first.
> A lady too told us the same thing;
> She was wearing a tigerskin skirt,
> She had a giant smile but one tooth,
> She had turquoise hair but elegant gaze
> From her single eye,
> She was drooping,
> She seemed to be wearing some kind of lipstick and powder makeup,
> Her earlobes were big,
> She was wearing giant gold earrings—
> She told us they were 24 carat
> And she complained that they were sometimes too heavy on her head;

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[280] Chögyam Trungpa, *Devotion and Crazy Wisdom: Teachings on the Sadhana of Mahamudra* (Halifax: Vajradhatu Publications, 2015), 52.

[281] It should also be noted that the title of this poem is a reference to G.I. Gurdjieff's autobiography "Meetings With Remarkable Men". In his memoir, Gurdjieff eulogizes the men who were spiritual examples for him. Gurdjieff is careful to point out that these men shared a common approach to their spiritual paths; instead of rejecting their mundane lives, they used their daily experiences as a means for cultivating their character and achieving awakening. See: Terry Winter Owens, "Meetings with Remarkable Men: Commentary," *A Reading Guide*: 3rd Edition - 2004: Edited by J. Walter Driscoll." Gurdjieff. Accessed July 16, 2018. http://www.Gurdjieff-Bibliography.com/.
Trungpa would have been aware of G.I. Gurdjieff as early as 1968 when he formed a close personal friendship with Mr. James George, the Canadian High Commissioner to India, who was a follower of Gurdjieff and who believed that Gurdjieff had travelled to Surmang. Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol.1,* 264.

[282] According to David Rome, "BDS" likely stands for "Buddha, Dharma, Sangha" (Personal communication, March 10, 2018).

She also told us that her hair was unmanageable,
That her neck muscles have too much blood power;
However, she stood there telling us all those things.
She brought along a companion of hers,
A lovely maiden wearing a necklace of pearl,
Smiling, with a light complexion,
Riding on a white lion.
Then she brought a third friend who was very peculiar:
One wonders whether he was a man or woman, human or animal;
He had a most gaping mouth opening at his stomach,
With somewhat polite gaze;
He possessed nine heads,
All of them expressing certain expressions
And wearing conch-shell rings in their earlobes;
When you look at him, his faces have the same expressions,
But with seeming distortion in every face of delight.
Can you imagine seeing such people and receiving and talking to them?
Ordinarily, if you told such stories to anybody, they would think you were a nut case;
But, in this case, I have to insist that I am not a nut case:
I witnessed these extraordinary three friends in the flesh.
Surprisingly, they all spoke English;
They had no problem in communicating in the midst of American surroundings.
I am perfectly certain that they are capable of turning off the light or turning on the television.
What do you say about this whole thing?
Don't you think meeting such sweet friends is worthwhile and rewarding?
Moreover, they promise me that they will protect me all along.
Don't you think they are sweet?
And I believe them, that they can protect me.
I would say meeting them is meeting with remarkable men and women:
Let us believe that such things do exist.[283]

Meetings begins with a list of the waste of a post industrialized, late capitalist American society, the ruins of materialism: jumbo jet, aluminium, second-hand pressure cooker. Plastic crucifixes imply the simultaneous cheapening and commodification of religious symbols in this milieu. Still, authenticity requires identifying with this American scene rather than rejecting it. In fact, to

[283] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 459-61.

reject this reality would be "to fake the whole thing" garnering disapproval from both religious (BDS) and secular (IRS) authorities alike.

Here we meet three tantric deities: Ekajaṭī, the one-eyed, turquoise locked, protectress of Surmang monasteries and the terma tradition; Rahula the wrathful protector of the Dharma with nine-heads, a serpent's tail, and a face in his stomach; and a more mysterious figure, possibly Tseringma, who rides on a snow lion and is a peaceful protectress from the Kagyü and Nyingma lineages.[284] In *Meetings* these figures are real people— they are described as existing in the flesh: Ekajaṭī wears makeup and complains of her heavy earrings. They are at home in American environs: they speak English, they understand electricity, and television. The corporeality of these "sweet" Tibetan friends who are powerful enough to protect the author, creates a juxtaposition with the aforementioned cheap (ineffectual?) Christian crucifix.

Moreover, in *Meetings* we see an unwillingness to "fake anything". "Faking" in this case is the desire to only associate with the pure, spiritual, sacred, and the transcendent and to discard the profane materialism that pollutes the secular sphere.

4.4 Innovation

There is however, one circumstance in which "faking it" might be acceptable: that is if one has cut one's own aorta first. The image of cutting the aorta is a metaphor often found in the iconography and supplication of these wrathful protectors or *dharmapālas*. Cutting one's own

[284] Thanks to Larry Mermelstein for helping to identify these figures. Personal communication March 10, 2018.

aorta in this case indicates conquering the ego. Once that is accomplished, Trungpa implies, one may legitimately dabble in "fakery."

The idea that there is freedom for legitimate personal expression and innovation (i.e. fakery) built into the Buddhist tradition is an important point because it exposes the narrative field in which Trungpa often operated. Trungpa locates a space within the Buddhist tradition wherein innovation and creativity are not only encouraged, they are required. This space is carved out of the meeting of three factors: the non-conceptual nature of awakening that leads to the understanding that the Buddhist teachings are provisional and therefore transcended once awakening has been achieved; the creativity of the tertön; and the responsibility of the lineage holder. Trungpa associates these three points with the genuine artist, the *dharma artist.*

As we have seen, the scope of dharma art is vast. Trungpa associates the enlightened mind with the activity of art.

> [The] experience of enlightened behaviour itself and its perception generally could be said is artistic talent, basically. Anything that is operated within a situation of openness and mindfulness creates a beautiful work of art in itself. So, in this case we are talking about a cosmic art.[285]

Discussing the artistic discipline required to reach the heights of creative freedom Trungpa outlines the similarity of such a process with the training and maturation of the lineage holder. Like a lineage holder, the genuine artist needs to commit themselves to their discipline, such that that discipline becomes integrated into their very being. At that point, the artist is free to act according to their own impulse.

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[285] Audio recording of Chögyam Trungpa at event, "Dharma Art," 4 April 1975, Item 19750404VCTR1024, Series 3 Dharma Art event, Nalanda Foundation Fonds, Shambhala Archives, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.

> In exhibitionistic art, until you begin to realize that the discipline and training you have received is your possession and you can do what you like with it, until you have that sense of ownership, you will be regarded as halfhearted. That goes with any kind of artwork. The training and discipline you have received is completely inherent; you possess it completely and thoroughly, and it's now up to you how to present it. It's the same as the wisdom of the lineage, which is handed down to a particular lineage holder, and that lineage holder exercises his own authority as to how to present it to his particular generation.[286]

Annabelle Pitkin finds that the narrative of a lineage, rather than merely constraining the behaviour of its members also affords them significant room for innovation and independence. Lineages, it turns out, are a locus for creative personal expression in a traditional context, thereby problematizing the distinction between the past and present, tradition and modernity:

> it appears that the structure of lineage relationships, and the ways in which lineage structures encourage Tibetan Buddhists to relate to the inherited past, play a crucial role in the dynamic relationship between tradition and change in the Tibetan Buddhist context. Lineage structures turn out to be pivotal sites both for continuity with tradition, and for the emergence of the individual agency, intellectual independence, potential for innovation, and freedom from institutionalized authority.[287]

4.4.1 Terma

For Trungpa the terma tradition is a significant locus of innovation. As a Buddhist canonical textual tradition, terma is widely accepted as authoritative while also representing a tension with the orthodoxy since "treasure is an alternative and a challenge to the religious teachings being propagated in institutionalized, monastic circles".[288] As a result, tertöns can suffer social consequences because of their role in revealing treasure — additionally, treasure revealers are

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[286] Trungpa, *Dharma Art,* 26.
[287] Pitkin, "Like Pouring Water into Water," 29-30.
[288] Janet B. Gyatso, "Drawn from the Tibetan Treasury: The gTer ma Literature," in *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón and Roger R. Jackson (Ithica: Snow Lion Publications, 1996) 155.

typically not celibate and live outside of the monastic system. Often required to keep their discovered texts secret, they often express ambiguity with respect to this outsider positionality. For example, the treasure revealer Jigme Lingpa grappled with loneliness; he struggled with the required secrecy of his terma, and yet he also affirmed a sense of unorthodox independence.[289]

> The discoverer himself is an autonomous, maverick figure, typically declaring his independence from received tradition and study; rather, the discoverer focuses on his own mind, his own visions . . . his own predestined revelation that he propagates to his own circle of disciples.[290]

Despite a feeling of alienation that the discoverer may experience, this alienation is also hopeful and even joyful since it is itself a convention of the terma tradition: Janet Gyatso argues that the treasure revealer is simultaneously afforded the privilege of acting in their own authority; interpreting everything that appears as religious text; acting freely with "great roomy spontaneity;" and disregarding criticism and praise alike. As Gyatso comments, further throwing light: "To be a Treasure discoverer is to be an author par excellence, translator of everything into teachings, maker even of rocks and air into sacred scripture."[291]

In *An Honest Lie*, Trungpa supplicates the Buddhas, bodhisattvas, "Karmapaists," "Khyentseists," and "Dudjomists," and great vajra masters, asking them what they think of the terma he has revealed. He worries that they either do not know the extent of his terma revelations or that they will not approve of them. The poem features a series of questions and enigmatic answers:

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[289] Janet Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary*. Princeton, (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 227-29.
[290] Gyatso, "Drawn from the Tibetan Treasury," 155.
[291] Gyatso, *Apparitions of the Self,"* 228-29.

> "We endorse you and what you are doing."
> "Do you know what we are doing?"
> They say, "We know you are doing good,
> It is good for all sentient beings."
> We say, "Can we quote you?"
> "Quotation doesn't matter."

Aspects of the terma Trungpa has discovered, they go on to say, would be "crazy" to reveal to the public. "Is our craziness actually legitimate?" he worries. "We don't know," they respond.[292] In the final lines of the poem, Trungpa's anxiety turns into an ambiguous celebration of the liminal space he occupies. Somewhat mysteriously, he invites the lineage figures to be "heroic" with him. They respond positively to the invitation, remarking that no one has requested such a thing from them since they left Tibet: "If you're really serious, / If you're really serious, / If you're really serious, / That's what we are looking for." Together they rejoice, and yet the poem ends with a collective cry for help. "We all say, Yes. / But we also say in unison, / Help!"[293]

The ambivalence Trungpa expresses here echoes an ambiguity he feels with respect to the provisional nature of the Buddhist teachings as a whole. The Buddhist teachings are traditionally described by the metaphor of the raft or boat which ferries one across a river but is no longer needed on the other side. Another traditional metaphor for the relationship between the teachings and awakening is that the teachings are a finger pointing at the moon which in this case is awakening. The finger is not the moon, and the dharma can only direct the gaze towards the moon, it can't describe it. As such at the level of the tenth *bhūmi*, the highest realization, wisdom is:

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[292] Chögyam Trungpa, "An Honest Lie," 1978. Held in the Shambhala Archives, Halifax, Nova Scotia, private collection.
[293] *Ibid.*

> nonidentification with the teaching, nonidentification with the path, nonidentification with the technique. The bodhisattva doesn't identify with the path any longer because he has *become* the path. He *is* the path. He has worked on himself, trod on himself, until he has become the path and the chariot as well as the occupant of the chariot, all at the same time. He is vision, energy, skillful means, generosity, knowledge, panoramic awareness. It is unspeakably powerful, and yet at the same time the bodhisattva is powerless when he is in the tenth bhumi, because he is completely programmed by the Buddha's way. This might sound paradoxical, but it is so.[294]

This space of freedom that Trungpa locates has already been described as spontaneous but here we see that it is paradoxically free and unfree; the freedom that one may express after a thorough training is not based on a notion of freedom that undercuts training or limitations from the start. It is freedom that has been cultivated through internalizing Buddhist training, and as such exists within a Buddhistic frame. Trungpa often expresses this paradox with respect to spiritual freedom. "The spiritual path is not fun" he writes, "better not begin it."[295]

4.4.2 Contextualizing Desolation and Loss

Trungpa associates the Buddhist path and the death of the ego entailed in the culmination of this path with the desolate, uncompromising reality of the natural world:

> Quite possibly there is no such thing as spiritual practice except stepping out of self-deception, stopping our struggle to get hold of spiritual states. Just give that up. Other than that, there is no spirituality. It is a very desolate situation. It is like living among snow-capped peaks with clouds wrapped around them and the sun and moon starkly shining over them. Below, tall alpine trees are swayed by strong, howling winds and beneath them is a thundering waterfall. From our point of view, we may appreciate this desolation if we are an occasional tourist who photographs it or a mountain climber trying to climb to the mountain top. But we do not really want to live in those desolate places. It's no fun. It is terrifying, terrible.[296]

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[294] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Three,* 267.
[295] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Three,* 283.
[296] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Three,* 285.

Another narrative that informs the feeling of desolation and loss, and ultimately transforms it, is the imperative for Buddhist adepts to develop renunciation.[297] In "Song of Separation" Trungpa, who wrote this poem during his escape from Tibet, grapples with the loss of his family, teachers, and homeland, by recontextualizing this loss as an opportunity to practice renunciation. As such, the events that forced him to become a refugee, which rendered him helpless, become a catalyst for practice. He reframes his narrative, embracing the loss, restoring his agency and praying to lose more: "Sever me from those who speak for sect or party / Sever me from the mind-made guardian deities / sever me from samsara's local gods / Sever me from the hatred roused by patriotic war".[298] Finally, Trungpa renounces everything:

> I want to leave everything behind me,
> Even if I'm ignorant of the dharma.
> Even if you're ignorant of the dharma,
> Chögyam, just you surrender everything.
>
> My guide the hidden, joyful light of the teaching,
> May the blank darkness round about me disappear.
> Living the life of a young wandering mendicant,
> May I guide the world to a world beyond itself.[299]

The scope of Trungpa's renunciation here is all-encompassing. The imperative to embrace renunciation fully means that one must even renounce the dharma. And yet in the next lines the

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[297] In fact, for Trungpa poetry is something that properly occurs only after one has developed renunciation of samsara. Once renunciation is properly established the possibility of free creative expression arises.
One of Trungpa's note cards preserved from a dharma art talk given in 1982, reads: Turning the mind away from samsara / longing for liberation / poetry arose. (*'khor ba las blo ldog pa/ thar pa la 'dod pa/ syan ngag byung*). This is my own translation in collaboration with the Nalanda Translation Committee. Notecard from Chögyam Trungpa, Notecard, 22 June 1982, B46 "Dharma Poetics (Naropa Notes)," Box B, Series: Tibetan Writings, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche Manuscript, Private Papers and Office Papers Fond, Shambhala Archives, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.
[298] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. One,* 376.
[299] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. One,* 377.

"hidden, joyful light of the teaching" is a constant, a guide in the act of renunciation. Renunciation, it seems, cannot ultimately abandon that which birthed it, the dharmic context within which it came to be. The ability to reframe one's experiences as an opportunity for practice opens up the possibility of freedom and ultimately joy. As such, in Trungpa's poetry loss is consistently followed by a sense of celebration. For example, in a 1965 poem, Trungpa embraces desolation and turns it into song:

> The lonely child who travels through
> the fearful waste and desolate fields,
> And listens to their barren tune,
> Greets as an unknown and best friend
> The terror in him, and he sings
> In darkness all the sweetest songs.[300]

In fact, desolation and loss are an integral part of the Buddhist path. These feelings are, for Trungpa, a mark of the realization he has discovered through his Buddhist discipline.

> It is possible to make friends with the desolation and appreciate its beauty. Great sages like Milarepa relate to the desolation as their bride. They marry themselves to desolation, to the fundamental psychological aloneness. They do not need physical or psychological entertainment. Aloneness becomes their companion, their spiritual consort, part of their being. Wherever they go they are alone, whatever they do they are alone. Whether they relate socially with friends or meditate alone or perform ceremonies together or meditate together, aloneness is there all the time.[301]

4.4.3 Transcendence

In *As Skylarks Hunt for Their Prey* (1981) the metaphor of the skylark recalls the loneliness, freedom, and ultimately the playfulness (creativity) of the Buddhist path. Skylarks are not

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[300] *Ibid.,* 381.
[301] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Three,* 285.

particularly beautiful birds, their appearance is somewhat ordinary— their plumes are typically dull, varying shades of brown. However, they are remarkable in that rather than singing perched on a branch, they deliver their song in mid-flight. The image of the homely skylark proudly singing in the vast sky recalls the role of the genuine spiritual practitioner who embraces desolation and turns it into song. Likewise, it reminds us of the treasure revealer, the lineage holder, and the dharma artist: both lowly and exalted at once, issuing a proclamation in the radical expansive space beyond reference point.

> As skylarks hunt for their prey,
> I am captured by their stillness.
>
> I experience neither thirst nor hunger,
> But skylarks captivate my memory.
>
> Whistling arrows on the battlefield remind me of my general's bravery:
> Should I run away or should I stay?
>
> Buddhism neither tells me the false nor the true:
> It allows me to discover myself.
>
> Shakyamuni was so silent:
> Should I complain against him?[302]

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Trungpa's use of the mundane and the secular in his English poetry was not motivated wholly by his esteem of Western modernist poetry. Instead, I argue that the concepts of the ordinary, the mundane, and the secular, already held significant meaning for him as Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā concepts. As such, Trungpa's adoption of the ordinary resonated

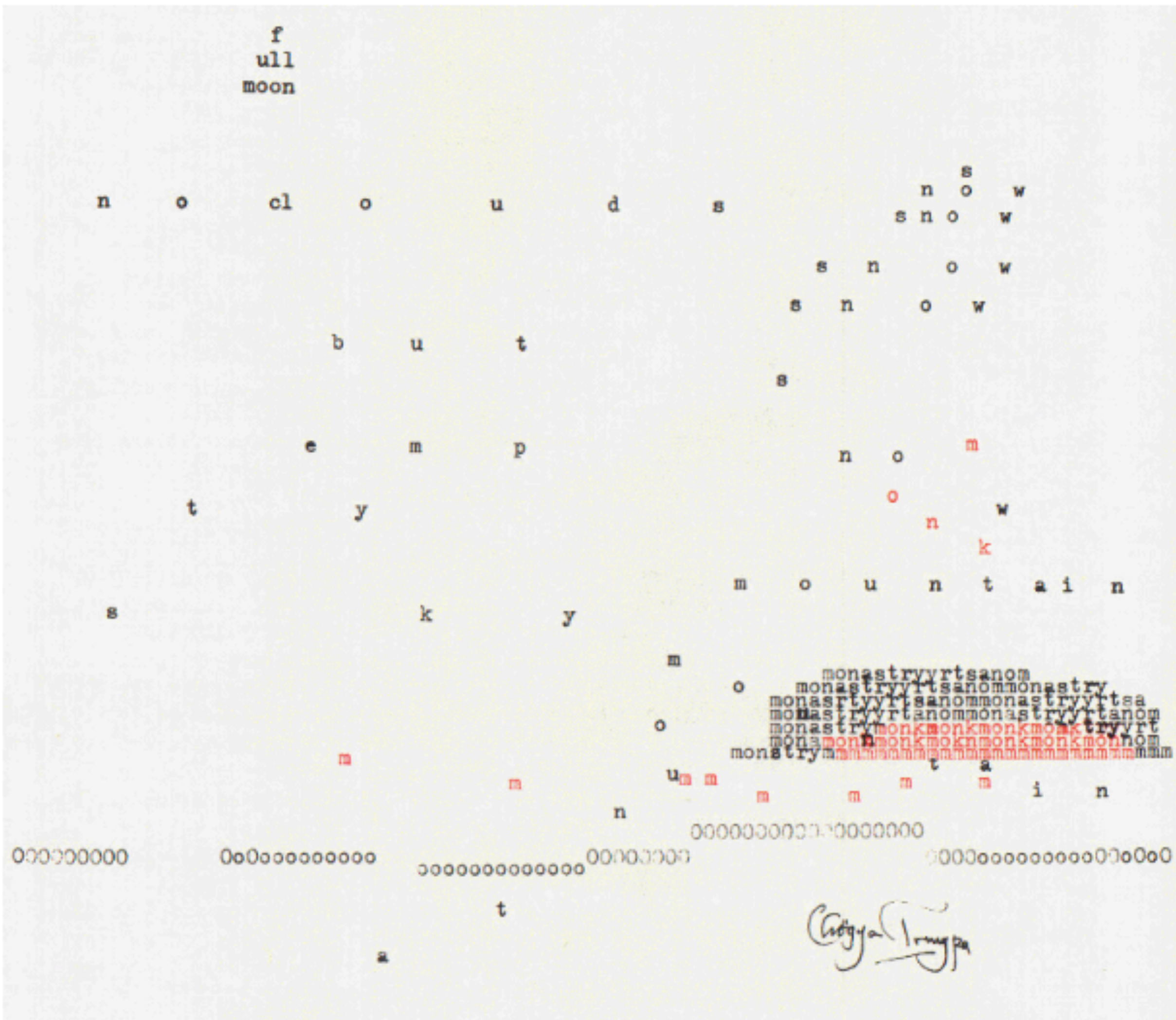
[302] Trungpa, *Collected Works: Vol. Seven,* 564.

with his pre-established worldview, which was of course informed by his Buddhist training. Even innovation and transcendence of doctrine I argue, are entailed in the Buddhist tradition within which Trungpa is so rooted. As such, any reading of Trungpa's corpus must include a Buddhist understanding of the ordinary, innovation, and transcendence.

5. Conclusion

To begin with, this thesis takes the position that Chögyam Trungpa's poetic corpus needs further study. I argue that because Chögyam Trungpa willingly embraced non-Tibetan forms of art and culture his personage and his creative work have sometimes been characterized as wholly modern or Westernized. However, problematizing this view, I argue that this approach doesn't account for the "traditional" conventions that are present in his work. In fact, critical approaches that rely too heavily on a traditional/modern conceptual framework with respect to Trungpa's work are at risk of producing a reductive analysis. Trungpa's poems have a traditionally soteriological dimension. As such, the modernist label is inappropriate for Trungpa's poetry because the term "modern" sets up a problematic dichotomy between the categories of traditional/modern and sacred/secular. The sacred/secular, traditional/modern dilemma obfuscates the complexity and hybridity of Trungpa's poetry and moreover, these categories do not apply in, and therefore cannot account for, a Tibetan context. While it is clear that Trungpa's compositions are something of a departure from traditional Tibetan poetry, this thesis has argued that that deviance is superficial. Instead I argue that *first thought, best thought* supports and encompasses a worldview based on the Kaygü-Nyingma teachings of Dzogchen and Mahāmudrā and that Trungpa employs Tibetan literary conventions like spontaneity, ordinariness, and transcendence as a way of remembering his culture, rather than abandoning it.

Appendix A



Full Moon, No Clouds (c. 1972)

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