

ON APRIL 4, 1987, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche lay dying in the old Halifax Infirmary. He was forty-seven. To the medical staff, Trungpa likely resembled any other patient admitted for palliative care. But, to the inner circle gathered around his bed and for tens of thousands of followers, he was a brilliant philosopher-king fading into sainthood. They believed that, through his reconstruction of “Shambhala”—the mythical Tibetan kingdom on which he’d modelled his New Age community, creating one of the most influential Buddhist organizations in the West—he had innovated a spiritual cure for a post-modern age, a series of precepts to help Westerners meditate their way out of apathy and egotism.

Standing by Trungpa’s deathbed was Thomas Rich, his spiritual successor. Rich was joined by Diana Mukpo (formerly Diana Pybus), who had married Trungpa in 1970, a few months after she turned sixteen. Also present was Trungpa’s twenty-four-year-old son, Mipham Rinpoche. While the cohort chanted and prayed, twenty-five-year-old Leslie Hays listened from outside the door. Trungpa had taken her as one of his seven spiritual wives two years earlier. After being called in to say a brief goodbye, Hays walked out into the evening, secretly relieved Trungpa was dying. She would no longer be serving his sexual demands; enduring his pinches, punches, and kicks; or listening to him drunkenly recount hallucinated conversations with the long-dead sages of medieval Tibet.

Trungpa stopped breathing at 8:05 p.m. His attendants bathed his body in saffron water; painted prayers on small squares of paper and fixed them to his eyes, nostrils, and mouth; then wheeled the gurney into an ambulance to bring him home for a ritual wake. The cortège drove south, through the chilly night, toward Point Pleasant Park, the forested tip of the Halifax Peninsula. They pulled into a circular drive at 545 Young Avenue, a mansion dubbed “The Kalapa Court” after the fabled Shambhala seat of power.

SOCIETY

The Wrong Side of the New Age

Survivors of Shambhala International, a worldwide Buddhist community, reveal decades of abuse

BY MATTHEW REMSKI

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JAMES LEE CHIAHAN

Devotees rolled Trungpa’s body into the living room, which had been mostly cleared of furniture except for a Tibetan throne. They dressed the body in gold brocade and wrenched its legs into a crossed position to prop it up in a final meditation. In his death notice to the community, Rich stated that the guru had attained “parinirvana”—a transcendent state in which he would be free from the cycle of rebirth. (Years later, Trungpa’s personal doctor would cite liver disease from alcohol abuse as the cause of death.) “We vow to perpetuate your world,” Rich wrote.

Following Trungpa’s death, his Halifax congregation and hundreds of pilgrims flocked to Kalapa for five days of visitation. Temple guards in full military uniform admitted mourners around the clock. They filed in to the dim room, through clouds of juniper incense, to chant, meditate, and bow in prostration. They believed that Trungpa’s consciousness was expanding into the infinite. One group member recalls throwing the windows open to the cold, wet air as a funk set in.

Some mourners knew Trungpa from his lectures on meditation. Others had been enthralled by his 1973 book, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, which has sold 200,000 copies. Others still had likely attended the opening of his Naropa Institute, in Boulder, Colorado, in

summer 1974, when 1,500 spiritual seekers had arrived to listen to him lecture beside countercultural heroes like Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs. Many in the room in Halifax had uprooted their lives to live close to Trungpa, to work in his centres or transcribe his teachings. Some had pledged him their present and future lives through the ritual bonds central to Tantric religion. However they’d come, and for whatever reason they’d stayed, they were the core of what would become Shambhala International, a thriving network of more than 200 meditation centres and retreat destinations in dozens of countries. Headquartered in Nova Scotia, the organization’s motto is “Making Enlightened Society Possible.”

These days, Trungpa’s kingdom presents less like an “enlightened society” than it does a longitudinal study of intergenerational abuse and of how thin the line between religion and cult can be. In the thirty-three years since her husband’s death, Leslie Hays has felt her relief sharpen into fury. She has now emerged at the forefront of a movement of ex-followers who say that Trungpa’s public image as a spiritual genius has been used to hide a legacy of deception, exploitation, behavioural control, and systemic abuse. Their activism

