

Maitri - opening out to the manifestations of space



The third Jamgön Kongtrül watching a student adopt a posture in a Maitri room

Chögyam Trungpa continually invented new ways of presenting the teachings we have just examined. One of the constants of his work was his ability to give a profound explanation of the path without using the usual Buddhist terms. He taught psychology, theater, and art, but the underlying approach was the same. Without allowing any concepts to impinge, he plunged his students into the nakedness of experiencing their own unfiltered reality.

One of the finest examples of this talent is the creation of Maitri Space Awareness practice. Buddhism is sometimes compared to therapy, and its relationship with Western psychology has often been studied. Indeed, both fields take a very pragmatic approach toward suffering, and neither has recourse to external solutions for solving people's problems.

But what was unique about Chögyam Trungpa's approach was the way he joined a *practical* therapeutic technique to the Buddhist description of the workings of the mind and confusion. This is Maitri, one of the most striking of Chögyam Trungpa's contributions, but also one of the least well known, whose potential for development has not yet been fully explored.

From an Experimental Therapeutic Community to the Development of Contemplative Psychology

The origins of Maitri go back to meetings that took place between Chögyam Trungpa and Shunryu Suzuki Roshi in May 1971 at the Zen Center in San Francisco. While discussing

1. Chögyam Trungpa, "Space Therapy and the Maitri Community" (March 1974), in *The Collected Works of Chögyam Trungpa*, vol. 2 (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2003), pp. 566–575.

their problems in presenting the Buddhist tradition in the West, they observed that dharma centers were attracting a certain number of people with serious psychological problems. For example, a young man who had never recovered from an acid trip had lived at Tail of the Tiger for a few weeks. The community had had a lot of trouble trying to help him and include him in their way of life.

For other people with severe emotional difficulties, the practice of meditation is not much use. Suzuki Roshi suggested to Chögyam Trungpa that they set up a community for people suffering from serious problems. But Suzuki Roshi died later in 1971, before it had been decided what form this community would take. Chögyam Trungpa was taken with the idea and decided to put the project into action.

He set up an “experimental community,” just like many others at the time. He considered that having people live together while taking into account the details of daily life would be a good way to help them: “I had the idea of quite possibly not using any form of therapies at all, just purely creating a living situation on the model of our community living situation, which brings up a lot of shit and all kinds of things.”² This is one of the main points in his teaching, which he and Shunryu Suzuki shared: the importance of meditation in action.

The creation of Maitri rooms

Setting up a community is relatively easy, but how then to present your specific vision? It was a great challenge. I feel that presenting meditation techniques or any particular techniques are not appropriate. We shouldn't present them at all. We should just purely be very discreet. Staff members there will practice and sit together, meditate, the patients or audience or guests, can take part in purely domestic matters, handling that. Something is lacking there I discovered. Only the judgment to rate how well they wash their dishes, how well they put a nail into wood and how well they brush their teeth. When you do that well then you are cured...I felt something is inadequate. I felt my own vision is challenged. Something is not quite right. In fact I found it slightly pathetic. We wanted to do something heroic and we ended up just purely doing grandma's job. . .³

These remarks allow us to see how Chögyam Trungpa thought and how he tried to find a form that corresponded to his vision. So how to begin? Tibet had no psychiatric hospitals or specialized institutions that could have been used as a model. Instead, Chögyam Trungpa set about analyzing his own education and some of the retreats he had done,⁴ such as the bardo retreat, during which the practitioners remain in entirely sealed rooms.

In December 1972, during the “Crazy Wisdom” seminary at the Snow Lion Inn in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, he had the idea of constructing a series of different rooms in which different postures would be taken. He thus came up with a new approach, even if it was still anchored in the most esoteric and traditional teachings of tantric Buddhism.

He explained the idea as follows:

I have been tossing around all kinds of ideas and approaches.... Little J. M. was

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*dancing and singing his Tahiti [hula dance], and he wanted all of us to sing and dance, and nobody would cooperate with him. I felt very uncomfortable at the time because somebody might complain downstairs, the lady trying to fall asleep, and there was a neighbor next door, and there was a world outside and above us. I felt that there would be a complaint coming from above and below and all quarters....I felt very claustrophobic, and at the same time I enjoyed his company and his beauty. Suddenly I realized myself in a box. All those complaints and paranoid ideas and everything....I felt it's a square world that you're living in and there is an exit of some kind. I suddenly remembered the bardo retreat techniques for relating with space. Relating with the light dawned on me.*⁵

He then dictated the following lines:

People with parental problems need a four-windowed house.

People with drug problems need a long tunnel with windows.

People with spiritual problems need underground windows.

People with suicidal problems need a tower with windows.

People with intellectual problems need a room without windows.

What we experience as psychological problems are in fact false relationships with space. From a conventional viewpoint, we consider our egos to be solid and the surrounding space as shifting and navigable. But from the Buddhist perspective, we are open and fluid while space is solid and indestructible. This is a threat to the ego. Chögyam Trungpa explained: “You cannot destroy space, but at the same time, space is very accommodating, nevertheless. Space also kills you, it is very uncompassionate—but at the same time, it is very accommodating, nevertheless.”⁶

In other words, if we open ourselves to space, we destroy our egos and work at the root of our emotional problems. Our relationship with space is fundamental to our being. Such is the practice of Maitri, which Chögyam Trungpa decided to call “space therapy.” By entering these different rooms, we discover different aspects of space, different ways of connecting with the world.

The Practice of Space Therapy

So how does this practice work?

You go into a room measuring about seven by seven, or forty-nine feet square. There are five different types of rooms: blue, yellow, red, green, and white. In each room, the carpet and walls are the same color. The shapes of the windows are each different and allow in colored light. In the green room the window is square and on the ceiling, but in the blue room large rectangles have been cut into two of the walls.

In each of these rooms, you adopt a specific posture, which you keep for about three-quarters of an hour. For example, in the yellow room you lie on your back with your arms open wide and your legs apart. The backs of the hands are placed on the floor, with the fingers open, thus causing a slight tension in the muscles, which must be maintained

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throughout the posture.

The practice quite simply consists in being open to everything that happens. Adopting a specific posture in a particular room profoundly changes our state of mind, though not by adding anything new. Instead it clearly brings out the particular characteristics of who we are.

Maitri

The aim of the practice can be seen in the name that Chögyam Trungpa gave to it—Maitri, a traditional Buddhist term that means “love,” or, in Chögyam Trungpa’s preferred translation, “loving-kindness.” Marvin Casper, who was in charge of Maitri at the Naropa Institute, explained: “At first that might sound very sweet, or maybe too sweet. Depending upon how cynical you are. Or how much Buddhism you have studied. But it is not sweetness in the sense of being nice, or being a good, socially minded citizen. It’s much bolder than that. It’s basically being open. Extremely open. Open first to your own energy, and to your own neurosis, and then as well to others.”⁷

Loving-kindness comes from a benevolent attitude toward everything that happens to us. It is thus linked to an absence of judgment regarding all of our experiences.⁸ It is a feeling of natural gentleness and friendship that frees us from the continual aggression that penetrates all we do. It arises from a dimension that is profoundly sane, open, intelligent, and warm, and which exists in everyone.

As opposed to the traditional medical approach, which aims at curing a problem, this sort of Buddhist approach is based on the conviction that no matter what the suffering person may be going through, their basic sanity is always at work. In other words, the approach is to work on the mind of the patient instead of concentrating on their problems: “A fundamental shift in allegiance away from fascination or intoxication with illness, toward sanity, can take place. It is a gentle recovery, a recovery based on the inspiration to develop oneself—to live and learn and work in the world and be useful to others.”⁹ It is not a matter of avoiding problems, but instead having the courage to dig down to their roots.

The tantric perspective: The five buddha families

These rooms reflect the principles of tantra, which distinguishes five main energies, called buddha families. Enlightenment is not uniform, but instead has a great diversity of appearances: “We are not, as we might imagine, expected to be uniform and regimented, to be ideally enlightened and absolutely cool and kind and wise,” explained Chögyam Trungpa.¹⁰ The five buddha families are expressions of fundamental sanity, which can be combined in numerous ways.

The buddha families are not limited to our personal psychology but also describe a particular *atmosphere* that can be found in all things: the seasons, the emotions, the five

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elements, and so on. This distinguishes them from the sort of psychological classifications that we have in the West.

The first family, associated with the color white, is called *buddha*. It is associated with the element of space, the primary openness of all experience. This openness is basic intelligence that is not limited by the ego. It can also become closed under the influence of doubt and insecurity, of anxiety and ignorance.

The second family is *vajra* and is connected with the color blue and the element of water. It is the clarity of pure, sharp vision. This wisdom is like a mirror because it reflects everything. When confused, it becomes aggressive.

The next family is *ratna*, “the jewel,” and is connected with the color yellow. The sense of richness that is associated with *ratna* can manifest as an ability to cope with anything. *Ratna* is linked to the element of earth. But when trust has been lost in this feeling of basic fullness, this energy turns into a sensation of constant poverty, of insufficiency and dissatisfaction, or else of stifling pride.

The next family is connected with the color red and is *padma*, the lotus—the flower that is born in mud, yet manifests a pure, delicate beauty. It is linked to the element of fire, which magnetizes those who look at it. It is the wisdom of discrimination. This knowledge derived from uniting with what we examine can take the appearance of compassion or else of fickle and wild seduction.

The fifth family, associated with the color green, is *karma*, action. It is linked to the wind, which has the quality of being active yet always goes in only one direction at a time. This all-accomplishing wisdom can be either highly effective or else a violent, aggressive competitiveness that can take the form of jealousy.¹¹ Inseparable from wisdom, therefore, is confusion. Through the development of a benevolent attitude toward ourselves, we discover that wisdom and confusion are coemergent—that we can’t reject anything of what we are. We need to learn to transform the mud of our confusion into the gold of wisdom, to open ourselves to things as they are.

The Maitri Center

Judith Lief, a senior student of Chögyam Trungpa’s who studied Maitri teachings with him in the early 1970s, remembers that in Boulder in 1972, when people wanted to study with Chögyam Trungpa, they were given a choice. They were asked if they wanted to join the Mudra theater group or the Maitri psychology group, which were then the main streams of Chögyam Trungpa’s teaching. While not all students joined one group or the other, many did.

When the Maitri group was founded, it had a dual purpose: understanding the workings of one’s own mind, and more specifically the structure of one’s ego; and founding a community capable of helping those with severe psychological problems. With this in mind, Chögyam Trungpa presented teachings on the six realms and the bardos. These are

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ways of understanding different psychological states and the contrasts between fundamental sanity and the confusion that conceals it.¹²

The activities of the Maitri group led to a conference in December 1973. Chögyam Trungpa gave an intensive presentation of the five buddha families. He also put the finishing touches on the design of the Maitri rooms, as they still exist today. He discussed at length the therapeutic angle of what he wanted to do in the project, especially emphasizing the possibility of applying the intuitions of Buddhist psychology to the various problems people suffer from in the modern Western world.

In 1973 some of Chögyam Trungpa's students moved into a farmhouse in Elizabethtown, New York, to set up the Maitri Center. It was directed first by Thomas F. Rich (who would later become Chögyam Trungpa's regent), and then by Charles (Chuck) Lief. In the spring of 1974, the project moved to a twelve-acre site donated by a rich benefactor in Wingdale, on the Connecticut border.

The idea was to live together in the community while working on the technique of "space therapy." When the community environment had been created, based on a minimal hierarchy, it allowed conventional roles to be cut through and in particular the usual therapeutic relationships. Everyone in the community had to work. The routine that was thus put in place provided a ground for relating directly to neuroses.

The rooms were built in 1974, but the Maitri community never grew very large and had only a few patients. Overall, the sangha was not ready, and it was difficult to find funding for a project that was so ahead of its time. As a result, there was neither enough money nor enough expertise to allow such a program to be developed. But, as with other Chögyam Trungpa projects, abandoning it did not mean that it was a failure. In retrospect, it is clear that the perspective it opened remains very much alive and a constant source of inspiration.

Sometimes, years later, like a seed that has awaited the right moment to sprout, a project that had apparently been long forgotten is reborn thanks to its striking coherence and accuracy.¹³ This is another sign of Chögyam Trungpa's profound genius and the depth of his teachings, which continue to bear fruit years after his death.¹⁴

In 1976 the land was sold and the money paid over to the Naropa Institute for capital development and to support the new master's degree program in Buddhist and Western psychology. Maitri practice had been presented at the Institute since 1974, and it developed considerably, becoming a specific training course for therapists. As part of their studies, students went into a group retreat for as long as twelve weeks to practice shamatha-vipashyana meditation and the various postures in the Maitri rooms.

In this way, the practice of Maitri became part of the training of psychologists, who can thus study how the ego is constructed and how it gives rise to a horde of kleshas or, in the language of psychology, neuroses. Basically, neuroses are linked to the way we solidify ourselves, the world, and the space between us and others. In therapeutic terms, the

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practice of Maitri allows us to understand the link between wisdom and confusion. It also provides a way to help patients who come to be freed of their neuroses. A Maitri-trained practitioner can help patients to enter into close contact with who they are and the logic of their confusion.

Furthermore, contemplative psychology is a therapeutic approach that unites the interpersonal discipline of psychotherapy with the personal discipline of working on oneself by practicing meditation. In this context, helping others can become an integral part of one's own path, and in return provide a profound existential solidity to one's clinical work.

A degree-granting program in contemplative psychology was started at Naropa in 1976.¹⁵ A review, *Journal of Contemplative Psychotherapy*, was also launched to present the work of the team of teachers. Chögyam Trungpa himself contributed a number of articles. In this way, hundreds of students have received training in contemplative psychotherapy.

Edward M. Podvoll (1936–2003)—a psychiatrist who received his M.D. at New York University, completed his residency at Stanford, and went on to become the head of the Institute's psychology department in 1978— wanted to go back to Chögyam Trungpa's original inspiration and use this practice to help those with psychological problems. In 1981, he started Maitri Psychological Services. The therapists use the Maitri rooms with their clients, either individually or in groups.

For over ten years, the discipline of Maitri was practiced only at the Naropa Institute and was largely confined to the psychology program. Although this practice was not a major focus for the rest of the community, Chögyam Trungpa continued teaching the principles of the five buddha families on various occasions and always in an entirely new way.

The Development of Maitri

Strangely enough, after a period of limited development, Maitri finally took off. First, after the late 1980s a large number of classes on the campus of the Naropa Institute featured this practice. Examples include “Teaching and Learning Styles” (Richard Brown), “Maitri Space Awareness: An Approach to Art Therapy” (Bernie Marek), and “Joining Heaven and Earth through Speech: A Meditation and Poetic Workshop” (Gary Allen). This list shows that Maitri was no longer oriented toward psychology alone, but now opened out to many other disciplines. Maitri practice allows students to enter into the world of qualities that reflect each experience or, in Buddhist terms, link us with the luminosity of all phenomena. This field is not encumbered by mental constructs but is very lively and personal. It is thus particularly suited to artistic practice: “By working with the five buddha families, we are trying to develop some basic understanding of how to see things in their ultimate essence, their own innate nature. We can use this knowledge with regard to painting or poetry or arranging flowers or making films or composing music....The five buddha family principles seem to cover a whole new dimension of perception. They are very important at all levels of perception and in all creative situations.”¹⁶

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While Chögyam Trungpa was presenting the five buddha families to the Maitri group in 1973, he also presented them to the Mudra group, as well as during a seminar devoted to the film he was making about Milarepa. In any artistic or psychological field, attention to the five buddha families opens up a new range of experience and fields to be explored.

Thanks to this new lease on life and to the deep experience of a number of teachers, Maitri practice moved beyond the Naropa Institute, which had long been the guardian of the practice. In the late 1980s, Ernst Liebhart, a psychology professor, had Maitri rooms built at his own expense and organized shorter programs in his native Germany, which were open to everyone. It was a huge success. It was observed that this practice could be of real help to its practitioners, even over a short period, and whether they were interested in psychology or not.

Other rooms were built at Karmê Chöling in Vermont and at Dechen Chöling in France, thus making it possible to organize a variety of different programs. In 1993, Allyn Lyon, who was one of the main teachers of Maitri at Naropa, started to teach Maitri programs in Europe, with glasses that provide a glimpse of the practice when it is not possible to build rooms. The practitioner adopts the posture while wearing colored glasses. It has thus become possible to make Chögyam Trungpa's wish come true and allow everyone to have a personal relationship with the five buddha families, even during a very short time such as a weekend.

Why did Chögyam Trungpa devote so many teachings to the five buddha families?¹⁷ They were at the heart of his teaching approach. As he never stopped explaining, the dharma is not religious: “We do not have to relate to teaching only in the religious context. We also have to read the symbolism connected with our situation. What we live, where we live, how we live—all these living situations also have a basic message that we can read, that we can work with.”¹⁸

Mahamudra, the “great symbol,” consists in bringing out the indivisibility of samsara and nirvana while listening to all the basic messages of our existence. It means entering into a relationship with the details of our daily lives, as they truly are. It is a genuinely personal experience. The five buddha families allow us to make contact with the texture of our existence and to experience the various styles that are at work all around us. The path is no longer based on fantasy but becomes real and anchored in our lives at their most intimate. Maitri practice teaches us to distinguish between times when we experience phenomena directly and those moments, all too frequent, when we are overly centered on ourselves and no longer perceive anything. The instant when we become separated from the reality of things as they are is the birth of conflicting emotions (kleshas), and it is then that we shut ourselves off from energy.

To take an example: you are driving, then suddenly become conscious of yourself and so lose your sense of oneness with the situation; maybe you have an accident. We do this sort of quick check all the time, again and again. You are talking with someone, and you suddenly wonder if the person likes you or not, whether you matter to them, whether

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what you're saying is clever enough. Automatically, you become separated from the person and the real situation. This is precisely how the ego works.

Everything you then do to reestablish your relationship with the person—ask them if they like you, try to make them tell, and so on—only deepens the initial duality. It is not possible to rediscover space by working from your ego.

So how to become more sane? The saner you want to be, the more neurotic you become, because it's the separation that creates the problem. Maitri practice does not aim to liberate the student, as Chögyam Trungpa stated: "Let me explain to you another principle connected with this space therapy. We are not particularly trying to cure them. Do you see that? We are trying to get them to relate with the intensity of what they are."¹⁹ Maitri practice leads to a process of abandoning our will to control everything, or the ambition to be perfect and avoid all suffering.

If the discipline of sitting practice teaches us how to be with our experience as it is, the practice of Maitri, like that of tantra, makes what we experience more intense. When we maintain the posture in one of the rooms and accept whatever comes into our minds, incredibly embarrassing or painful experiences can arise. Neurotic states that we have not always fully recognized seem to float up to the surface. We accept looking directly at who we really are, both our wisdom and the extent of our confusion. Quite simply, we remain open to what is, without drawing any conclusions: "The postures exaggerate psychological space in that they highlight it. It's like putting a spotlight on something that you had regular lighting on previously. It is a highlight in the sense of [experiencing] a pure type [buddha family]. You are doing [experiencing or expressing] a pure type. You are refining your perception. As you get experience recognizing the exaggeration, you begin to perceive subtlety. So we are refining perception, and at the same time, the room is bringing up that type. There is more vividness, so there is more to see."²⁰

For example, if we experience great anger on going into a room, we experience that emotion in a very direct way. The things that become obvious in this context are far less clear in our daily lives, when we tend to be angry *about* something rather than just being in a state of anger. It is difficult to present the depth of a practice with such varied ramifications.

Maitri is an approach based on the Buddhist principles of loving-kindness and compassion. It allows people's psychological problems to be worked with, and so takes its place in the overall work of Chögyam Trungpa in displaying the relevance of the Buddhist approach in confronting the difficulties of our times. For experienced practitioners, it becomes a means to communicate their experience and wisdom to the world and to help others by using a language everyone can understand. It provides an access to the sacred dimension of existence by showing that the world is a free play of energies. It is also an entrance into the nondualistic experience of tantra and thus allows wisdom and neurosis to be linked together in their basic unity.

This practice allows us to see ourselves as we are; it is like a microscope that opens a

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perspective on each aspect of our minds. Maitri has developed in many different directions. For instance, in her book *Enlightened by Design*, Helen Berliner has shown how knowledge of the five buddha families allows us to understand our environment and to transform it by adding peace, clarity, richness, warmth, and energy. By coordinating²¹ our homes according to the five basic energies, we enlighten our lives profoundly.

Maitri is helpful to practitioners of the sadhanas, who are trying to connect with the energies of the various mandala deities. Buddhist deities are the representatives of the buddha families and reveal the great wisdom of the emotions. Maitri is thus a useful practice that provides a sacred perspective of the world while entering the very heart of our own experiences.

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