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Johanna Demetrakas' 'Crazy Wisdom'

Sophia Stein · Thursday, August 2nd, 2012

Chogyam Trungpa, the brilliant "bad boy of Buddhism," fled the invasion of Tibet, studied at Oxford, and shattered Westerners' notions of how an enlightened teacher should behave. Was it crazy wisdom when he renounced his monastic vows, eloped with a sixteen-year old aristocrat, openly drank alcohol, and founded a military order to dismantle aggression? Renowned director Johanna Demetrakas (Womanhouse, Right Out Of History: The Making Of Judy Chicago's Dinner Party, Revolution In Four Part Harmony) discusses her latest documentary Crazy Wisdom with Sophia Stein.

Sophia Stein: What inspired you to make *Crazy Wisdom*, the story of Chogyam Trungpa?

J**ohanna Demetrakas:** I did study with him, so I knew how far out he was. I think he was a genius basically, as far as intellect goes, and talent. But what made him so interesting and important, is that he was an authentic teacher.

S2: What does that mean to you, authentic teacher?

JD: First of all, what it means is that, in a political way he was recognized. Although the Tibetan Buddhist hierarchy was a little bit appalled at what he was doing when he took his robes off, and married a young English woman, and drank and everything. But then, when His Holiness Karmapa, who was the leader of that particular lineage, one of the four great Tibetan lineages, came to American and saw how Trungpa was teaching and how he had penetrated the American psyche, so to speak, or adopted it, or was somehow able to communicate with it on a very high level, they sort of came around.

S2: How did you discover Trungpa?

JD: Well, it was the early '70s and I was, as he would say, guru shopping. I was looking for something; I had always been looking for something. It wasn't so much that I wanted even something *spiritual*, I was just interested in getting into philosophy again. And I read one of his very first books called, *Meditation in Action.* A friend of mine was traveling with him and she called me up and she said, I'm coming to LA, and you must see this guy. And I said, "Wow, I just read his book, so I'll see him."

S2: Do you meditate? Is there a daily spiritual practice that you have in your life that is a remnant of that encounter?

JD: Well, I do practice. I tend to practice more in fits and spurts and occasional retreats and things like that. But for a long time, for fifteen or twenty years, I practiced very, very regularly. Practice is just one of those things — once it enters your life, it never quite leaves, even if you don't do it as often. And then you hit these stretches, and then you do it a lot. It never leaves you.

S2: Is there a central teaching that you walked away with?

JD: It's the Buddhist teachings. The Buddhist teachings are not easy, they're complex, they're profound. The way you really get the Buddhist teachings is through practice. There are a lot of people who read books, and that's great because it's an intelligent communication, but to really get it, you have to do some practice.

S2: Trungpa shattered Westerners' notions of how an enlightened teacher should behave as you so powerfully document in your film — he renounced monastic vows, eloped with sixteen-year old aristocrat, died of alcoholism, had relations with women students, and founded a military order to dismantle aggression. What do you make of all that?

JD: That is sometimes shocking. One of those guys from the '70s who was writing books about all this sort of thing, after he had been around it a while, studying and trying to figure out what was going on, he said: "It was a crazy scene. I really wasn't sure if [Trungpa] was crazy. But I was learning so much. I couldn't just walk away." And that is kind of it, you know. When you are in front of a really great teacher, if you're not learning, something's wrong. And Trungpa really conveyed the complexity of Buddhist teachings brilliantly. He put them in a language that not only we could understand, but that we could grok it. We could absorb it. You could make jokes about it. That's how well you understood it. So no one else was doing that thirty-something years ago. Trungpa died twenty-five years ago. There was just beginning to be a trickle of Tibetan Buddhists coming over from India or so forth, those first five or ten years that Trungpa was teaching. And, of course, now there are some fantastic teachers in this country. Brilliant. There is a guy in the San Francisco area called Anam Thubten. He has a center in Richmond, California. He's the kind of person who, just being around him, makes it work. There is a fabulous teacher called Tulku Rinpoche. A teacher called Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche (Khyentse Norbu) who made the film "The Cup," about eight years or so ago. There's a woman Rinpoche, which is very rare, who lives in America, Khandro Rinpoche, in Virginia. She's a great teacher. They're coming and they're here. But [back then], Trungpa was kind of laying the groundwork.

S2: Trungpa's intent was to wake people from their blind addiction to materialism. Do you think that he succeeded in doing that?

JD: Yes, I do. I think he succeeded with a lot of people. In the sense that materialism isn't just about money, the way he's speaking of it — it isn't just about reputation. It's about ego, the materialism of the ego.

S2: That the ego tries to hold onto its formed identity and its status in the world?

JD: Yeah, that's going on all the time. All the time. Obviously, he was very specifically talking, as well, about money and about *solidifying* money — making it the most important thing — at the cost of nature, at the cost of the planet and so forth. He was talking about all those things too. But materialism is also solidifying anything. Like solidifying your point of view and not being able to hear anybody else's. So from that perspective, yes, I think he did. With people who he encountered, people who studied with him, people who wrote about him, I think he did break through in that way.

S2: *Crazy Wisdom* evokes this very specific time in history — the upheaval of the '60s & '70s — the Vietnam War and the invasion of Tibet. What do you make of aggression and materialism in the West in the present time, versus in the '60s & the '70s?

JD: Well, one of the reasons that Tungpa moved his headquarters from Boulder to Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada, was because he predicted that America was moving towards solid materialism. Solidifying it even more – politically, economically, and of course, environmentally. And having to do with war, and having to do with class structure. Trunpa basically predicted even what we're talking about now in terms of class in America, that has been happening in the last ten years even more so. I think materialism and aggression are more intense, more widespread today. It's kind of

a wall. What happened to the economy, how complex and corrupt it has been for so long, when something gets that corrupt, it's almost like someone needs to burn it down and start over. So when you think about the planet and the environment being compromised in such a complex way for so long, how is it possible to rebuild it? I think it's worse. That's a simple answer right there. I think it's worse.

S2: You are a director who has very successfully bridged the documentary and narrative genres of filmmaking. What do you make of the relationship between these two forms? Do you prefer one or the other?

JD: I love them both. I'm not doing so much dramatic stuff anymore. I think that the last time that I directed a narrative project was about six years ago. I am really, really into documentaries now. What I loved about working in dramatic non-fiction is that I can use that kind of truth that you go after in documentaries. I can use my sense of being with people all over the world and interviewing them or being with them as they do whatever it is they do. Getting to know people on that level and what it's like when they're in front of the camera, that helps me work with actors. That helps me really be able to see good performance — realistic, believable performance, I should say. And then when I'm working in documentary, then I can use my sense of when a character really comes alive on the screen and what characters don't. Sometimes you're doing a documentary subject and you come up with people who just don't do well on the screen. They don't have any energy or something.

S2: *Crazy Wisdom* features interviews with such a diverse array of spiritual and intellectual titans. How did you decide who to interview for this documentary?

JD: Gosh, that was a long, interesting process. It happened as I went along in the making of the film. I knew I was going to interview certain, obvious people – like Pema Chodron and eventually Robert Thurman, and a couple of the other big time Trungpa people. I had wanted to interview other people that I couldn't get like Joni Mitchell, who was influenced by Trungpa. I wanted to go to England. I didn't know any of the people in England, so I tracked them down and met all those wonderful people and more of them. In many ways, I didn't know who was going to be next. But then I knew his teachings enough to know that when it comes to something like the military, I knew who I needed to talk to. When it comes to something like dharma art, I knew who I needed to talk to.

S2: In the past you were fortunate to work with Haskell Wexler as a DP on *Bus Rider's Union.* Now, on *Crazy Wisdom,* you were working with your son, Pablo Bryant, who did such a beautiful job of making visual some very esoteric material. How was that? What was your approach?

JD: I loved it. Sometimes it was difficult because we were mother and son / son and a mom. His father, Baird Bryant, a wonderful DP also, and I were both Buddhists together for the first fifteen years. So, he grew up with it around the house. So he had a lot of sensitivity towards it and was interested in it. So it was interesting for Pablo on a very personal level. We don't have exactly the same aesthetic, so sometimes our aesthetics would rub up against one another, but we understand each other's aesthetics. It was great.

S2: In the wake of new economic realities since the crash of the market in 2008, how are you making a living as a filmmaker?

JD: Pretty much like I have for the last twenty years or so. First I taught at CalArts and then I taught at USC, I'm still there. But that has always only been peripheral. It's really not how I make my living. A lot of my living I've made editing films. Like right now I'm editing a film for Renee Tajima-Pena, who is a really well-known, very, very good PBS documentary filmmaker. So I sort

of edit in between, and then I raise money.

S2: Where did the financing come from for *Crazy Wisdom?*

JD: Everywhere I could possibly get it. We did fundraising events. We did kick-starter. We've submitted to grants. And we had half a dozen fundraising things in the Buddhist community. And then outside of the Buddhist community, we had a handful of people who just believed in me and believed in the film. And we made it. And we made it so that it is beautiful. But we made it for very little money compared to most documentary budgets.

S2: Tell me a little about your distributor, Kino Lorber?

JD: Kino Lorber has been around a long time, and they're really good. I'm happy to have a distributor, because without a distributor, you have to do the distribution yourself. And that's a whole, long business thing that … I need to make a new film!?! So Kino Lorber has a division that's called Alive Mind. That's about films, not just spiritual films, but films that are about subjects that are not cut and dry, let's say. So Alive Mind Cinema is the division that is distributing *Crazy Wisdom,* and they're doing great.

S2: What are you working on currently?

JD: I'm working on a film about feminism. Buddhism and feminism have been two of the major subjects of my life, in a way, because they both sort of exploded in the "70's. My very first film was a film called *Womanhouse.* So in the beginning, there were a couple of feminist art films that I did –particularly because I had been a painter before I was a filmmaker. I studied at Rhode Island School of Design and had that sort of connection to art. I hadn't planned on being a filmmaker.

S2: Does your feminist film have a title?

JD: The story of the film is triggered by or inspired by a book of photographs that came out in the mid-late '70s by an actor/photographer woman, her name is Cynthia MacAdams, and she felt that the revolution was so huge that women actually looked different. So she went around and photographed very informal photographs of women, all kinds of women, to see if it could come out in the photo. And it's a beautiful book, and I want to make a film about that generation of women. I imagine that your generation would be like the next group down the line. You probably didn't go through what I went through — which is to be an adult and to have grown up in a completely sexist society, and then have an awakening. So I want to take these photographs and get into the personal awakening that happened with every person. How did her life change? How did she look at her husband and her son and her cousin? That way. The book is called *Emergence.* So for now we're calling the film *Emergence,* and some of the women in the book are: Laurie Anderson, Judy Chicago, Jane Fonda, Gloria Steinen. I'm having a meeting with Lily Tomlin tomorrow. The challenge of the film is to get this personal awakening thing and then bring it to the present moment and see what's going on now. Because we live in such complex times. So it's going to be interesting. So I hope to make that film.

S2: Trungpa is quoted in your film as saying: "The heretic and bandits of hope and fear are transformed into crazy wisdom." What does this mean to you?

JD: That's his wonderful use of words: "the heretics of hope and fear." It means that when you're hoping, you're not in the present moment. When you're fearing, you're not in the present moment. And so, a "crazy wisdom person," according to Tibetan Buddhist understanding of it that I have, and I'm just a white girl …

S2: …Who has been studying Buddhism for twenty-five years?!

JD: Yeah, I have been. The "crazy wisdom person" who is part of the tantric aspect of Tibetan Buddhism (which is sort of magical), is a person who is totally in the present moment all the time. Their consciousness is right here. And so the heretics and bandits of hope and fear don't go anywhere with that person.

S2: What do you think is the best way to build the enlightened society of all our dreams?

JD: Oh, yeah. Um … (LOL)
S2: That's a question for Trungpa! (LOL)
JD: Oh, God. The simplest thing is to get everybody to meditate. I think, if you meditate — true meditation, not just like "I want to meditate so I can feel better" or "I want to meditate because I'm uptight and I want to calm down" — where you finally just sort of give all that up and sit. That's where you start to … have compassion. You know how Buddhism is always talking about compassion? That's enlightened society. If you can imagine if everybody actually had compassion. That it was part of your make-up, it was there. It would be very difficult to have wars. And difficult to do damage for no good reason at all.
Photos: Top, Johanna Demetrakas; below, Chogyam Trungpa, from the film.

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