

K. O. S. ENERGY

*Text and photographs by Bill Scheffel ©
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INTRODUCTION: The following reflections on the Shambhala teachings of Chögyam Trungpa (whom I refer to throughout the article as "Lord Mukpo", his family name and the name he often used when teaching Shambhala Training) were derived from extended periods of time I spent in Cambodia between 2004 and 2007. This is essay, in part a travel writing, is also a homage to the people and land of Cambodia. - *Bill Scheffel*

THE KINGDOM OF SHAMBHALA refers to a semi-mythical society that once existed in the Himalaya region of central Asia, an “enlightened society” that was based and organized on the principle of *awake* - that society could encourage and support the spiritual realization of every individual within it. Not that everyone was or would become enlightened or that the society was perfect, but that it’s constitution, so to speak, held this aim.

In the last decade of his life, Lord Mukpo sought to establish “The Kingdom of Shambhala” in Nova Scotia, Canada. This kingdom was often referred to simply as “K.O.S.” Lord Mukpo encouraged those students who could, to move there, which he eventually did himself, shortly before he died. This northerly, maritime province, agriculturally based with a long winter, and all too brief summer and a fairly depressed and less globalized economy was hardly a destination of choice for his largely American students.

The aims of this contemporary K.O.S. were to found a spiritually based but also spiritually inclusive society, one that would be a seat or home for the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition, but founded on “Shambhala” principles which would make it a potential home for other spiritual traditions as well. Lord Mukpo’s keen enthusiasm for meeting, respecting, understanding and supporting the “contemplative” heart of all human spirituality was demonstrated in every aspect of his life trajectory, in his friendship with, say, Tomas Merton (and the many other contemplative Christians he had the opportunity to meet especially during his time in England) and his founding of Naropa University. In Nova Scotia, Lord Mukpo would be delighted to imagine Christian and Buddhist monasteries side-by-side, as well as Shinto shrines and, no doubt, mosques and centers of Islamic study.

K.O.S. as blueprint or reality has an urgent imperative. Global materialism threatens not only our environment and the countless species we share the earth with, but it threatens our human lineages of spirituality and culture. The erosion and outright destruction of so many traditional cultural containers and ways of life makes *conservation* of our spiritual traditions a real and urgent necessity. Tibetan Buddhism is one obvious example. Countless native or indigenous communities – each with their own unique and uniquely beautiful spiritual expression – are already lost forever. In Lord Mukpo’s vision, K.O.S. was intended to be a safe, fertile and welcoming ground for preserving our spiritual traditions.

Lord Mukpo also spoke fervently about our relationship to environment and how people would need to live in Nova Scotia. So much so, that K.O.S might be considered as much an ecology as a society. The “setting sun world” – as he called it – is based on consumerism, its chimera, its endless seeking of entertainment, of distraction. A necessary underpinning of consumerism, is convenience, where every effort is made to make life merely comfortable and easy. He called this “warding off death”, a methodology of a thousand invented needs. Attenuated as consumerism-convenience have become, we exist in a vortex of speed, fundamentally aggressive and thoughtless. It is a literal disconnect from the earth.

Life in Nova Scotia, he told us, could not be this way. “As far as KOS goes,” he taught, “we all have to work on the earth, literally and properly.”

Since medieval times, the process of conquering the world has been based on conquering the earth instead of touching ground, touching soil properly. And the latest stage is designed to avoid altogether any possibilities of touching the earth. We are no longer allowed to drink raw milk or

eat raw meat... You might think we are about to create a genteel world of people who never have to watch blood bleeding or experience a genuine, bad nightmare. That is wrong, ladies and gentlemen. These principles are not particularly geared so that we could avoid earth. Without earth we cannot have heaven, and then we can't have our kingdom at all... Luxury is experiencing reality, ladies and gentlemen.¹

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I NEVER WAS NEVER ABLE MOVE TO NOVA SCOTIA, or even spend much time there (curiously, my grandparents on my mother's side are from Nova Scotia and Prince Edward Island). In spite of being part of the K.O.S. vision or idea from its inception, and my deep identification with it, perhaps I took, or was led to, a route elsewhere - but with a similar destination, or at

¹ 24-Oct:1979 KA Talk TWO. In this same talk, Lord Mukpo using the example of living on a farm: "It seems that our situation in general begins with our daily life situation, which is connected with farming, if I may say so. When you get up in the morning, what is the first thing you do?... We have ignored a lot of things in the process of getting up... you find out what kind of water system you have in your bathroom. We are talking about a farming situation, how we are going to experience the land properly, the real land. It is very important that our first incense is either cow manure or horse manure. We have to go back and experience how the earth works. As far as KOS goes, we all have to work on the earth, literally and properly. That is the best way to wake ourselves up. So many devices are presented to us. ten thousand types of gloves and a hundred thousand pair of shoes and millions of masks to ward off animals in the real world... All developed,, because we don't want to feel anything out. That is the purpose of the setting sun people, to ward off the world altogether."

least the glimpse of a similar vision. Between 2005 and 2007, I took five trips to Cambodia, staying there for two to five months at a time. Much to my surprise, I discovered the Kingdom of Shambhala in Cambodia. If not an entire kingdom, something, at least for me, of its flavor, intent and latency - something I called "K.O.S energy."

For virtually each of the more than four-hundred and twenty days I spent in Cambodia I was on "retreat", in that my day was centered around meditation practice, but also writing. So it was a meditation-artist's retreat. Or, I could say, I was the experiment of my meditation and art. We become the experiment or our spiritual practice, with no guarantee it will turn out successfully, though perhaps the more willing the surrender of our ingredients the more likely the experiment will succeed. I saw myself as an "experiment" of the drala principle and both meditation and writing were essential in the laboratory.

I began each day with a long session of meditation followed by writing (typically I would meditate at the end of the day as well). I would practice in my guest house room, leaving it to take breakfast and lunch at simple street-side restaurants. Only by mid-afternoon would I be ready to take up my other practice, "aimless wandering" which took the form of long walks through Phnom Penh (or the other towns and cities I stayed in). As foreigner, stranger and *other* these walks remained as pristine, remarkable and informative as, say, walking through an old-growth redwood forest or the Galapagos Islands might be. Every encounter was unexpected and all my learning was anecdotal and immediate (for I had no guides, no companions and read no books).

The politics and forces of the setting sun have produced a terrible pair of pliers: at one end exploitation and the poverty the majority of the worlds populations lives under; on the other, the ever heightening madness of the first world,

speeding, driven by amusements and alienation. The living-standard gap between us is grotesque, but both ends of the pliers inflict pain. And there is a kind of well-being we in the first-world are increasingly loosing that still exists in a country like Cambodia. In the grinding poverty there are priceless riches, even “the luxury of experiencing reality” as Lord Mukpo put it. One day, in a curbside restaurant I found an ingenious and curious example of simplicity, one I wrote about in my journal:

I adore the squat toilet, even as I've come to understand it. A hole in the floor and beside it water stored in a plastic bucket or pot, some kind of reservoir. And each reservoir has a ladle or bucket inside it. To scoop up the water and pour it down the hole (which is s-curved, a simple hydraulic that siphons itself) is almost a sacrament, serving water as it serves you. This restaurant has a cement reservoir next to the squat toilet. The reservoir is shared by the kitchen and divided in half by the bathroom wall. Inside it are fish, eighteen or twenty inches in length, swimming in confinement until they are ordered for lunch. Multiple needs are being met in the few cubic yards of this water-conserving intimacy.

THERE WAS A TIME IN SIHANOUKVILLE, shortly after I'd entered Cambodia on my second trip, that became my one of my strongest registering of what I began to call K.O.S. energy. Sihanoukville, a coastal town, became my first opportunity to really wander, and in that relaxation became the less self-conscious tourist.

One day, I met two boys on a path through the rice-fields. The older, maybe ten, could speak some English. "This path leads to a village, Sir. Would you like to go?" he asked. He was the kind of child whose head and face suggested a

grown man, even an old one. He was dark, handsome, a man of great politeness and enthusiasm inside a very small body. "How would I get there?" I replied and waited for his answer, half wondering if there was conman-ship at work, perhaps a fee to see the village. "You would walk!" he laughed, saying it with a certainly and carefree amusement than made him even more enthused. He and his smaller companion, silent and smiling, walked on.

A few days later, I was up early, showered, and stood on the second floor porch of the \$4 a night guest house I was staying in. Two large beetles lay dead on the cement floor, casualties of the incandescent light and picked at by ants. I walked down the stairs and out to a patch of leveled ground, red dirt waiting for a new building, someday. In the cool morning air, with a breeze moving the palm trees and the clothes-lines, with the sky filled with high clouds that would soon dissipate but were then variegated in blues and indigos, with the discothèque still blaring karaoke music in the distance, I expelled stale air and began the twelve *lujong*, or Tibetan yoga, postures I did each morning. Chickens rooted around me and in that moment I realized this is the Kingdom of Shambhala.

Of course, I could also have had this realization on a ranch in Idaho or even a park bench in New York City. What counted, for me, was the force of the realization. A complete inner conviction that one thing the Kingdom of Shambhala meant, quite simply, was a return to a more *elemental* way of life. This vision of Shambhala is more than a nostalgia, which can remain as daydream, or become conservative and reactionary. The “return” to simplicity is a return to the future, the necessary bend in the cycle, a returning to sustainability.

I use the word “sustainable” also in this way: even the way we walk is not sustainable. It was through walking for a long time among people who walked at a very different pace than I did

that made it clear to me that we no longer even know *how* to walk. The “ordinary” Cambodian” lives of life of intense nowness, doing simple work that is difficult and often grueling, is seldom if every *rushing*. Without haste, speed, anxiety, no yet severed from the “earth’s rhythm” – the way people walked impressed me most of all. They could work all day, walk all day - and a human being’s normal, languid and sometimes insouciant walk is a tremendous healthiness and joy.

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BESIDES THIS ELEMENTAL OR EARTH-BASED SIGHTING of the Kingdom of Shambhala, the *K.O.S energy* came to me in another way, with complimentary but differing implications. In presenting the Shambhala teaching, Lord Mukpo put great stress on the difference between “conventional mind” or experience and “unconditioned” experience. An unconditioned experience is the essence of basic goodness as well as the drala principle itself. When the world or our own being is glimpsed in the first moment – the “first thought” - before conceptual mediation and comment, we have an unconditioned experience, an experience of things as they are. To cut the rings of an onion with a sharp knife or hear a dragonfly before we see it – these, and all, perceptions, are first thought. In fact, everything we experience is first thought, but our conceptual, commenting process takes over so quickly we seldom realize it. Through a process of long, dedicated development, though both gentleness and courage, a person can come to live entirely in first thought or first moment. This is a fully realized warrior.

Someone who seeks unconditional experience or realization, which is to be fully human, must relinquish conventional mind. This does not mean becoming overtly unconventional (another form of convention) but moving beyond any and all of the ways we secure ourselves – i.e., our conventions. Convention exists to give us a

structure, such as a highchair for a baby to eat. Convention is natural and at its best, necessary for that time or station. Each convention is also a highchair we must one day set aside. Crucial to understanding convention is to see that all conventions are relative. Cultures that eat on the floor do not need a highchair. Conventions are relative inventions and are passed onto us. We thus *acquire* our conditioning – from parents, society, school, church, etc. – and behave accordingly. To the extent we are governed by hope and fear, our acquired conditioning becomes habitual - a cocoon or even a prison we are reluctant to leave simply because we know it.

The Shambhala path is based on decreasing, or *refraining* from, unnecessary, obsolete, inappropriate (and eventually all) acquired conditioning. What is to be nourished, restored or cultivated is our *unconditioned basic goodness*, our essential nature - which each spiritual tradition has its own names for.

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One of the most remarkable aspects of my time in Cambodia, indeed all of the traveling I did, was that I never felt closer to Lord Mukpo and my own spirituality and confidence. Farther, and for much longer periods of time, from my family, friends and spiritual community and institutions than I’d ever been, I felt far closer to them and to myself than I ever had. The sense of being able to continually touch my own human and spiritual strength and feel my teacher’s presence [the drala’s presence] in this simultaneity was a constant and striking phenomena.

Part of being alone as a wanderer meant I seldom if ever had conversations where I “explained myself,” the kind of conversations we share with our friends as a matter of course; talking about ourselves, our relationship issues, our job issues, our aspirations, neurosis, spiritual insights, and giving our opinion on a thousand topics. The conversation I had, in the little Cambodian I leaned to speak, or the minimal English those around me might speak, meant I could only

converse in simple and immediate ways; simply *bello* or *how-are-you*, names of the food I was served, jokes about the weather. I found these simple, minimal conversations delightful. I also found that I didn't miss "talking about myself" at all.

I began to experience more fully how we continually reinforce our acquired conditioning through our conversations, even those seemingly most sincere and of the best intent. It was a kind of "deconstruction" not to do this, which greatly reinforced and supported "being on retreat." Without the usual reinforcements of speech I become more open to the sights and phenomena around me, more reflective of my life and true direction. Less is the grip of anxiety. Perhaps more useful than being completely solitary and silent, I was with people each day – amidst thousands of them – without really saying much.

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The combination of being alone, being largely silent, being without reference points enhanced my meditation, my writing and my sense of perspective. In the thinning ozone-layer of my own conceptual mind, the Shambhala teachings, long my cherished central source of study and practice began to appear differently, larger in implication and scope. I began to see the meaning of Shambhala anew. Though I'd always sensed or believed in these implications and scope, now I was not so much my thinking this as *feeling* it – it was the "K.O.S energy" communicating its atmosphere.

I felt or sensed two things. First, a conviction in the reality of "Shambhala" as embracing countless traditions, or expressing itself in countless ways and that somehow these traditions and ways – and in particular the dralas connected to them – were "longing to meet each other." That Shambhala is a kind of universal curiosity seeking to *awake* and interested in creating bridges, dialogues, communications and

mutually supportive relationships between the myriad methods and traditions *of* awake. In the sense that dralas are agents of non-duality, of awake, Shambhala also represents dralas wanting to meet other dralas!

The drala principle is participatory and human beings are necessary participants. We not only must invoke drala in order to meet the dralas ourselves, but we have the potential, if we courageously follow the unknown auspicious coincidence of our own heart, to blaze paths where "dralas can meet dralas." If the drala principle is activated through the dynamic participation of human beings, creative and concrete benefit takes place - as it always has. The expression of this is through wisdom traditions meeting and mutually enhancing each other (even if each is represented by a single individual), or as one society exchanging with one another, opening both material and spiritual "trade routes" where cultural enrichment and healing could take place. Times of cultural flourishing or renaissance have always been times of such exchange (and invocation of drala). Is it too farfetched to infer that efforts to, say, reduce Middle East violence, mitigate global water crises, heal genocidal legacies or end the conscription of child soldiers could all be supported through dralas meeting dralas?

At the root of this sensibility - the reality of Shambhala as embracing (and thereby continually expressing) many traditions - is that Shambhala, by definition, cannot be owned, is not proprietary, is not the property of anyone or any one group. Shambhala is a quality, not a quantity. To say that one is "Shambhalian"- as we often do in the organizations founded by Lord Mukpo - should not imply membership but *attitude* - an attitude that is open-minded and curious to begin with, and also eventually daring and sophisticated.

In this very distinct, non-proprietary "K.O.S. energy" a basic principle of all "absolute"

teachings became clearer, even obvious. “Absolute” is another word for unconditional truth, which by definition is fundamentally ineffable, beyond relativity, reference point and any conditions or conventions. Shambhala is such a teaching. The “relative truth” is the putting of this experience into language, into teachings, and the forms that develop to support the teaching and the experience the teachings are meant to foster.

For example, in the very beginning of the Shambhala Training program, which was intended to be “secular”, we rented hotel convention rooms or other public spaces to hold the weekends in. We needed an environment without shins and the other Buddhist trappings that were part of the Dharmadhatus (the name of Shambhala meditation centers at the time). Even so, these convention rooms needed to be made functional and elegant; symbols and symbolism - relative truth – were a necessity. So we removed the chairs and tables, put down zafus and zabutans, flower arrangements and a speaker’s chair and side-table. Finally we hung banners, large ones that hung from nearly ceiling to floor. One was the “Great Easter Sun”, a gold circle with striped bands across the top. This one went in the front of the room, behind the director. The other was an *arhat*, an equally large banner with a silkscreened photograph of a statue from the Minneapolis Art Museum. The arhat, in meditation posture, somewhat stern, looking down in earnest and sincere diligence, was a Buddhist image, but it served simple to express the universal posture and potential of sitting meditation. For breakfast on Saturday and Sunday morning we served coffee with bagels, the latter being cheap, popular and easy to prepare.

These conventions worked well, worked beautifully. Through the personal instruction of Lord Mukpo, Osel Tendzin, the co-founder of Shambhala Training, and the others of us who become Shambhala directors, people began to sit

in meditation and study the teachings derived from the terma Lord Mukpo received. For many years, this motif is what Shambhala meant to many people, and what it meant to be a “Shambhala person,” including having the arhat banner hanging in the back of the room and eating bagels on Saturday.

The non-existent dividing line between absolute and relative truth, between the unconditional and conventions is never very clear in the beginning of one’s training. Later on, the confusion might become even greater, when the form becomes too aggressively insisted on, held on to - or even changed. In Shambhala Training we no longer hang the arhat banner, though we frequently still eat bagels, the former being long-forgotten, the latter a stubborn or endearing custom, depending on what one thinks of bagels. After thirty years of being taught, studied and practiced, as well as organizationally defined in varies and evolving ways, Shambhala means, most centrally of all, what it has come to mean in the experience of each individual, but also has come to mean all the ways in which we talk about it, agree or disagree on it, and so on.

If we go to the root of Shambhala Training and all that we call Shambhala, we find the terma Lord Mukpo received and the body of teaching he gave us to explain the terma. The terma, prophetic or revealed teachings, is the most direct expression of absolute truth (one could also say K.O.S energy), each word precise, potent with potential meaning and a durable ground of all future study. But even this terma is a relative expression of the absolute or unconditional truth it attempts to express. How much more so all the other forms and conventions that help developed around them. This is not necessarily to imply that even a single one of these forms is unnecessary or obsolete, but only that they *are* forms. In other places, in other times, myriad differing and diverse forms could have or will occur. This is only to make one point and raise one question. What we yet *know* of the Shambhala or K.O.S

energy may only be a small part of it. And in this knowing, might we not easily misinterpret the little we do know, as the blind men did with the elephant?

These now seem to me crucial points, to continually contemplate how little we might actually know about *Shambhala vision*. For instance, a person is reading *Shambhala: Sacred Path of the Warrior* for the first time (as I saw a man in the café I frequent seemingly doing this just last week). The book may be awaking things in the man that are unique to him, to his capacity. Perhaps a stunning awakening or metamorphosis is taking place in him that will also lead to great realization or accomplishment on his part – and that he might never study or experience anything further of Shambhala. His experience of Shambhala, occurring in relationship to the book, could be as profound, creative or far-reaching as my own or anyone else's – and just from the single encounter with the book. In this sense, even if exaggerated, Shambhala is an “organism” of everyone who has encountered Lord Mukpo's teaching, even if “only” through reading, even if only through a dream. This organism will be far larger and look quite differently than any “organization” that might call itself Shambhala. My point is not to diminish the importance of organizations and institutions, but to illustrate that an organization is only part of the organism, the latter being ever-growing and impossible to measure.