

San Francisco Chronicle

The Largest Daily Circulation in Northern California

★★★★★

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 18, 1989

415-777-1111

Sex, AIDS Scandal Forces Buddhist Leader Into Retreat

*By Don Lattin
Chronicle Religion Writer*

Amid allegations that he had sex with his disciples after being exposed to the AIDS virus, the leader of one of the nation's largest Buddhist sects has gone into retreat in Southern California to consider requests that he resign.

Osel Tendzin, the American-born leader of an international network of Tibetan Buddhist centers, already has apologized for his "ignorance" and "clouded vision" in letters to his students and in meetings at his Vajradhatu meditation centers in Berkeley, Boulder, Colo., and elsewhere.

"There are individuals in the sangha (congregation) who would like to see me remove myself from the sphere of Vajradhatu," Tendzin wrote in a recent letter to his disciples. "If I were to do such a thing it would violate the oath I took with my guru, and it would also violate "my heart."

Tendzin's guru is the late Chgyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who came here from Tibet in 1970 to found one of the nation's most successful and infamous Buddhist empires, which includes "Dharmadhatu" meditation centers in San Francisco, Berkeley and Palo Alto. Long before his death last year at age 47, Trungpa named Tendzin his "vajra regent" and successor to lead his free wheeling 3,000-member sect.



OSEL TENDZIN

He apologized for 'ignorance'

Charles Lief, a member of the Vajradhatu board of directors, would say only that board members have asked Tendzin to "withdraw from teaching and administrative responsibilities," and that Tendzin has gone "on retreat" to consider the request.

Board members are reluctant to discuss the specific allegations against Tendzin, especially in light of this week's \$14.5 million verdict granted to the ex-lover of the late Rock Hudson, who was sued posthumously for allegedly concealing that he had AIDS.

Rick Fields, a noted "New Age" writer and editor of the sect's Boulder-based newspaper, The Vajradhatu Sun, said he knew of at least two cases of AIDS among members there. "People are getting tested," he said, "but it's not like we're having an AIDS epidemic."

Infamous Lifestyle

Like Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, the "free sex" Indian guru who made headlines with his now-defunct Oregon commune and personal fleet of Rolls-Royces, Trungpa was infamous for a lifestyle that merged esoteric Buddhist practices with the worldly pleasures of the West.

Past and present members say the sect's national headquarters and Naropa Institute in Boulder, along with its international command post in Halifax, Nova Scotia, were both serious Buddhist study centers and guilt-free playgrounds of sexual nirvana.

"Trungpa was like Daddy giving everyone permission to have sex and still feel spiritual about it," said one longtime member who left the group two years ago and asked that his name not be used.

Sexual Freedom

Another longtime member of the San Francisco congregation, who is still in the sect and also asked to remain anonymous, said sexual freedom was practiced openly and widely accepted in the inner circles of Vajradhatu.

"The regent had no secrets about who his consorts were," he said. "They were usually men, but not exclusively. Most of the guys he was attracted to thought of themselves as straight. It was like kids sleeping with rock stars. It was done as an act of devotion, not because they were gay."

The student, a gay Buddhist who was present at a December meeting in Berkeley when Tendzin tried to explain his actions, said there's a lot of "denial" about AIDS by both the regent and his students.

At the December meeting at the Dharmadatu center in Berkeley, Tendzin "apologized for the situation and said it arose from his own ignorance and delusion. He said he somehow believed that he and the people in contact with him were protected from AIDS, and said that was a particularly grievous fault on his part."

Letter to Disciples

But in a January 17 letter to members of the sect, Tendzin quotes "Lord Buddha" as saying "there is no fault so grievous that it cannot be purified." He writes that he is going on retreat to continue his spiritual practice and improve his health.

"My fundamental conviction is that in working with disease, dharma is the best medicine," said Tendzin, born 45 years ago in Passaic, N.J., as Thomas Frederick Rich.

Several members said Tendzin and the board are most concerned about a particular "consort," a 21-year-old disciple from Vermont who has tested positive for the AIDS virus and whose parents are longtime members of the sect. Neither he nor his parents could be reached for comment.

AIDS 'Panic'

Ted Petrella, a leader of the Buddhist AIDS Network, a Los Angeles group that tries to educate both American and immigrant Buddhists about the dangers of AIDS, said he has counseled a half-dozen Vajradhatu members about the AIDS panic and leadership crisis in the sect.

"People are in a state of panic," he said. "If the regent steps aside, who will lead them. It's like the pope dying and having no cardinals to elect a successor."

Glenn Dorskind, a former sect member who now lives in New York, said he is "concerned about the physical and psychological health" of friends still in the sect.

"If in fact Osel Tendzin was aware he had the virus and continued to have unprotected sex, he has broken the trust and hearts of many human beings," Dorskind said.

Lawrence McKinney, a Buddhist student and founder of the Institute of Mindfulness in Boston, which offers meditation class with another Tibetan lama in Boston, said "Osel Tendzin's error is without parallel in the history of Buddhist practice in America."

Issan Dorsey, spiritual leader of the Hartford Street Zen Center in the Castro area, warned his fellow Buddhists about being too quick to point fingers at Tendzin.

"He's a human being. He said he was ignorant and made a mistake," said Dorsey, a gay Zen priest. "It's not my sense you have to kick a teacher out when he screws up."

'Financial Crisis'

Meanwhile, it appears that the scandal is taking a fiscal toll on the sect. In a January 23 letter to longtime members, Trungpa's widow, known as Lady Diana Mukpo, writes of a "financial crisis" that threatens the operation of her plush residence and regal "Kalapa Court" in Halifax.

Fields, the newspaper editor and author of "How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in American," said, "The important thing is to separate this from the teachings of Buddhism."

"Buddhism is 2,500 years old," he said. "There have been lots of mistakes and scandals, but they're little raindrops in a very deep, very broad lake. Hopefully, Buddhism is a practice that develops compassion, but there are no guarantees."