

Encounter

Twenty students sit at long tables and draw horizontal lines on sheets of newspaper with Chinese brushes and clear water. The room is quiet, with just the sound of brushes dipping, landing, moving slowly across the paper. We have been taught that the source of this brushstroke is the center of the body. This is the *t'an tien* in Chinese medicine located below the navel. As the strokes are made there is a shifting of weight from left to right, turning, leading the action from this center of the body. For three hours each morning we practice this movement, first standing then sitting at the tables, exploring where we are tense and holding, where to let go, drop down, allow energy to move through the body and onto the page.

This is the setting of the Grounding Brush workshop. It is 1981, at Naropa Institute in Boulder Colorado. Ed Young is the teacher and I am assisting him. For two weeks we gather each morning to make lines, horizontal and then vertical, slowly adding drops of ink to the water so the strokes become gradually darker. At the end of each class Ed writes out Chinese pictograms on the wall and translates their circular and ancient meanings. We copy down these forms, contemplate the distilled images of nature and the human world that combine in so many ways to express a range of experience. There is a time travel quality to this

study, opening a portal to an older deeper mind. And it feels like a universal language.

I had met Ed a year before when he came to Naropa to teach Tai Chi . Ed was a senior student and translator for the Tai Chi master Professor Cheng Man'ching who had arrived in New York City in the Sixties and established a school of Tai Chi Chuan, a Chinese martial art and philosophy. Ed was also a calligrapher and a book artist. Since I was teaching both at Naropa it had been suggested we meet.

One summer day Ed arrived at my small studio in downtown Boulder. The room was at half basement level, with windows looking out at the grass and the feet of people walking by. Ed was tall and slender, with a relaxed and grounded demeanor. We spoke about the straight line (*ichi*) practice that he had learned from Professor Cheng and he stood at my high drafting table and demonstrated the brush stroke. As he pulled the brush along his body turned and his weight shifted. It was an action that came from his core. Watching him I felt I was witnessing something deeply synchronized, a joining of eastern and western perspectives in the making of a line.

Ed was asked once if there was such a thing as a good line.

He had replied, "Every line is good, because it doesn't lie."

At the end of The Grounding Brush workshop that summer I decided to arrange a meeting between Ed and Chogyam Trungpa. It seemed like this would be a good encounter between two interesting people. They were my teachers, practitioners of Asian calligraphy - Tibetan and Chinese - both had traveled to the West and were bridging cultures in their teaching.

So I began the process of arranging an appointment and, after a lot of back and forth, a time was set and Ed and I arrived at A suite, Trungpa Rinpoche's private offices on the second floor of Karma Dzong and we were ushered into a side room to wait.

Ed lived his life aligned with Taoist principles. His style was simple, quiet, pared down. Trungpa Rinpoche's world was elaborately formal and unpredictable. There was an atmosphere of richness, colorful thangkas paintings and large framed calligraphies hung on the walls and elegantly dressed attendants moved in and out of the rooms.

The space where Ed and I waited had tall glass doored bookcases on all sides filled with stacks of sacred texts printed on long paper, held be-

tween wooden boards and bound with cords. We were surrounded by ancient Tibetan teachings.

Ed and I waited. People moved around, doors opened and closed on hushed conversations. It dawned on me that I had brought Ed into a world that he didn't align with. His demeanor was steady and contained, yet the contrast was jarring and uncomfortable for us both.

After some time an attendant invited us into the private office. Rinpoche was sitting behind the desk and Ed was offered a chair near him.

I sat across from them both.

I made introductions and then we sat - in silence. I had assumed all I had to do was bring them together and then I could relax and watch them interact. But no one was saying anything and I began to panic.

“Rinpoche, Ed has been teaching us Chinese pictograms these past two weeks.”

Rinpoche peered over his glasses at Ed and said in a quiet, high voice, “Oh.”

“It’s been really interesting studying these forms and copying them down.” I am leaning way forward now, scrambling to put together a coherent sentence. Ed is looking strained.

Another long silence.

Finally Rinpoche speaks softly, "I have been practicing some Japanese *kanji* characters myself recently."

Ed looks up, "I know a little about *kanji*. They are different from pictograms, yet still connected."

Another long pause.

Rinpoche looks up over his glasses at Ed.

"I'm not a very good calligrapher."

Ed looks down and murmurs, "Neither am I."

And then - we all laughed.

The vulnerability at the heart of the calligraphic act shining through, opening everything.

I don't recall what else was said that day.

Connection had been made.