

Tibetan Yoga

[Steve James]: In this episode, I'm once again joined by Alejandro Chaoul, PhD, to discuss his latest book, *Tibetan Yoga: Magical Movements of Body, Breath and Mind*, published by Wisdom Publications. Alejandro tells the story of the creation of this book, describes its textual sources, and explains his decision not to include images of the sacred movements. Alejandro reveals the different uses of Tibetan yoga, including physical healing, clearing of obstacles, enhancing meditation, and spiritual advancement. Alejandro also discusses personality typologies, the flavor of Dzogchen awakening, the importance of the full lotus posture (Yungdrung posture), and compares Buddhist Tummo techniques to the inner heat methods of the "Iceman" Wim Hof.

So without further ado: Alejandro Chaoul, PhD.

Alejandro, welcome back to the podcast.

[Alejandro Chaoul]: Thank you. Thank you, Steve. Good to see you.

[Steve James]: Well, I'm so delighted to be talking to you again. And first of all, let me say congratulations on your new book, *Tibetan Yoga: Magical Movements of Body, Breath and Mind*, published very recently, actually November 23rd, 2021, by Wisdom Press.

[Alejandro Chaoul]: Yes, thank you. I'm really excited. As many books have many writers—it's something that takes a long time—and now that it's out, I'm really happy.

[Steve James]: And in our last episode together, which I will, of course, link in the show notes, we went in detail through your biography and through your practice journey, much of which contributes to this book. In fact, this book sort of draws together decades of both academic work but also work with the practice lineage itself. You're drawing from your PhD, which you completed at Rice University; you're drawing from all your excursions to India and your studies with the masters that you've been associated with in your career. It's very interesting—we were talking earlier, just before we started recording—about the uniqueness of this book. It's not like other books on *Trul Khor* or other books on movement practices. It's not picture-heavy, for instance; it's very textually sourced. The appendix at the end

includes two translations: the full Tibetan text as well as the English translation, which is quite unusual indeed. So there's a lot of interesting choices you made in this book, which I think make it quite unique. Could you talk a little bit about the story of this book, how it came to be, and what influenced these particular choices?

[Alejandro Chaoul]: Yes, thank you. As we spoke last time, in my previous book, it was more about opening Tibetan yoga for people that didn't know about it. It was textual, and yet it included some photos; it was something that we condensed with my teacher, Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, to make it more available as a practice that almost everyone can enjoy. We've been doing research at MD Anderson, which is a cancer center here in Houston, with these practices as well.

Now, textually, there are two different main texts here. One is the instructions of the *A-tri*. The other is from the *Zhangzhung Nyengyu* (the Oral Transmission of Zhangzhung). When I started learning these practices, the *Zhangzhung Nyengyu* was the one that I learned first and actually the one that Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche asked me to teach first, but it was also more complex. After teaching this for almost a decade—from '95 to 2007—Rinpoche, as he was teaching on the Tummo of the *A-tri* and mentioned the *Trul Khor*, said, "Oh, you've been trained in this too, right?". I said yes, and he suggested we do something with it to make it more accessible. That's how this book ended up coming out. It's a practice we've been doing at Ligmincha International and in various centers around the world.

This was also part of my dissertation, so it was left there as this thing that only a few people read because people feel it's too dense. And it's true. So what I wanted to do is: How can we bring this to a broader public in a way that is more accessible and, at the same time, not lose some of the values we have in academia, or for those who are in Tibetan traditions and want to know the source?

I feel incredibly blessed that I've been both trained in the oral tradition—meaning I've been trained with live teachers—and the textual tradition. To me, these teachers are so alive, both the ones that are actually alive and those who have passed away even centuries ago. I wanted to bring this "nectar" (*dütsi* or *amrita*), this lineage that is very much alive. That's why I brought the masters onto the cover and back cover, and inside, all the lineage masters (*tsakli*), all the way to Lopon Tenzin Namdak, who is undoubtedly the main teacher still alive in this tradition and to whom I dedicate this book. He was crucial in all my years of practice.

I wanted people to understand what this tradition is, what Tibetan yoga is, and how you can bring it into your practice, whether you are a Tibetan practitioner or not, as support for your spiritual growth.

[Steve James]: Yeah, I think it's definitely a must-have. There are three main source texts that you draw from, each with different sets of movements with very cool names and specific effects. Some are for clearing away obstacles, some for other diverse purposes. It's really interesting to see it laid out and explained in that way.

One thing you mentioned was that there are no "follow-along" pictures. When one thinks of a physical yoga book, one always expects to see photographs of somebody doing them, even if they aren't always helpful as still shots. But you opted not to do that, and that was a deliberate choice. What was the reasoning behind it?

[Alejandro Chaoul]: Let me answer both questions. First, I think you're giving me too much credit for "compiling" the sources, because it's really a root text and its commentaries. Knowing the sources and practicing them, I see the differences. The root text is from the *Zhangzhung Nyengyu* (11th century), and the commentary is by Shardza Tashi Gyaltzen (19th century). I thought it was useful for readers and practitioners to see those differences and why Shardza made some of those choices.

In terms of photos, I went through so many texts. Pictures exist, but not of all the movements. I have taken photos of myself or others doing them, and we discussed this back and forth, but then it would be a very different book. Partly, even if you have photos, these are movements; to capture the whole aspect, you would need multiple photos or drawings, and it still wouldn't capture it. Furthermore, you could run into problems if you think you can just grab a book like this and try and do them on your own.

Generally, these books are meant to get you interested so you go and find a teacher. "Who is teaching this in my area? Where can I go to learn?". Once you know the movements, then yes, the book supports you. That's why we chose not to go in that direction. What we do have is an updated translation—I had translated the original in 2006 for my dissertation, but I worked with Kurt Keutzer to update it—and a chapter where we go over every movement. That's where I tell the reader: "In the root text it says this, but Shardza does this, and this is how I do it." I bring in my own experience. I sometimes say this book was more than half-written on my mat, then brought back to the computer.

[Steve James]: Very cool. Maybe we could zoom out a little. In the last interview, you disambiguated a few terms: *Tsa Lung*, *Trul Khor*, *Kum Nye*, and other physical systems in the Tibetan tradition. In this book, you explain that *Tsa Lung

Trul Khor* appears in many different practice systems in Tibet. It's not just for spiritual means or for Tummo; it's also used as medical, psychological, or emotional remedies. Could you describe some of these different contexts?

[Alejandro Chaoul]: Yes. Another of my teachers, the late Menri Lopon Thinley Nyima, used to say how in ancient times—and even in many places in Asia today—you aren't close to health centers or hospitals. Yogis in their caves, as human beings, have imbalances (*nepa* in Tibetan medicine), physical or mental. By doing these practices, they found it was helpful for those ailments so they could meditate better. It was always thought of as supporting health so one can practice. The intention of enlightenment is always there; that's why you practice.

As a secondary benefit—a "positive side effect"—you get these incredible benefits at physical, emotional, and spiritual levels. They don't necessarily separate them. The text says, for example: "With this movement—the duck drinking water—you open your heart." As you open your heart, you connect to the element of space and reduce or "close the channel" of anger. There are these ways in which the text talks about understanding illnesses within the Tibetan medical system: the five elements and the three humors.

[Steve James]: Would it be fair to say these movements could be applied remedially? If you have an illness or a psychological disturbance while on retreat, can you apply them like a medicine? Or is it more of a general maintenance practice?

[Alejandro Chaoul]: A bit of both. I'm actually doing a workshop with Menpa Phuntsog Wangmo, the director of the Shang Shung Institute. She sometimes tells her patients: "For this, why don't you practice this particular movement," or she tells them whom to go to to learn it.

On the other hand, the way they were conceived is for maintaining health and well-being. That's why I called my last book that. It doesn't mean you won't get ill, but it means your whole "machinery" is well-oiled. The machinery is the body; the oil is the breath guided by the mind. Each movement "reboots" you. You start with an inhalation, bringing it into your central channel, connecting to your "pervasive breath," doing the movement to clear obstacles, and at the end, as you shake, you feel you are stirring from the depth of samsara—not just your own stuff, but everyone else's. Then you exhale through the nose, releasing everything, ending with the sounds *HA* and *PHAT*. The text says: "And now, as you stay...". You feel that all beings are luminous, enlightened beings because they have been freed from all obstacles, at least for a moment. The sitting part between movements is crucial.

There is another interesting aspect: in this yoga world, we often think of Kundalini awakening. This is present here because all movements focus on the central channel, but it's more of a "mandalic" approach (*kyilkhör*). Center and periphery. You come into the center, do what you need to do, expand back to the periphery, and clear your whole mandala. There is a Tibetan honorific way of asking how you're doing: "*Is your mandala clear?*". This sense of clearing your mandala with every movement is a beautiful way of reminding us of our natural state of mind. That's what got me into it three decades ago and what keeps me into it every day.

[Steve James]: That's very interesting. I'd like to ask you about what has interested you about these movements as a practitioner for all this time. You've done many practices—long *Ngöndro* and all sorts of things—but this seems to be a mainstay.

Mainly, you write about the idea of "*Geksel*" (clearing obstacles). To quote your book: "The purpose of clearing obstacles is to enhance the meditative state, because magical movement unblocks and opens the flow of the winds (*vayu* or *lung*). Magical movement serves as a gateway to a more clear, open, and stable experience of abiding in the natural state of mind." Could you talk about *Geksel*?

[Alejandro Chaoul]: Yes. There are two terms: *Geksel* (clearing obstacles—physical, emotional, mental, spiritual) and *Bogdon* (enhancing the meditation). These are two very important terms. It's about assessing where you are. If, when I'm sitting, I try to connect to my teachers—visualizing Tapiritsa as a union of all enlightened beings—and I feel I have a lot of "gek" (obstacles), I asked for support from the lineage. I do the practices with the intention of clearing my inner mandala, my body, energy, and mind. And slowly, each time, I'm touching back into that meditative state.

Maybe as I'm sitting, my clutter comes back. So I do it again. Slowly I'm enhancing that meditative state that has always been there but was cluttered. Other times—very uncommon for me, but maybe common for others—you might sit and already be in your natural state of mind. If that is the case, you use this as "prevention" from being cluttered, allowing you to stay there longer and longer.

When I was learning this in Triten Norbutse, Nepal, we practiced with the group in the morning and evening. We would start with prayers and try to stay in our natural state. Lopon Tenzin Namdak was teaching on *Trekchö* (cutting through conceptual thought). As your freshness diminishes or you go into agitation or dullness, midway through the practice, Khenpo Tenpa Yungdrung would guide a set of *Trul Khor*. It was like a reset button. We would do five or six exercises, then sit again. We removed the "rustiness" and were ready to stay with more clarity.

That's why I used it at the end of every *Ngöndro* practice. It is still important every day of my life.

[Steve James]: I'm wondering about two things. First, you mentioned the Tibetan medical system and typologies. Have you noticed a type of person that gravitates to these, or do different people get different things out of them? And also, does the use of these techniques add a particular "flavor" or valence to the resulting awakening? We often hear about a "Rinzai flavor" or a "Dzogchen flavor." Is *Tsa Lung Trul Khor* giving people something unique we might observe?

[Alejandro Chaoul]: First, I'm not a Tibetan doctor, although I work with them. Generally, these exercises are recommended for *Beken* (phlegm imbalance) people who need more movement. I am more *Beken*, so that might be why I was drawn to it. On the other hand, some people—like one student I had—find that doing these practices at night makes it impossible to sleep; he was more of a *Lung* (wind/vayu) person. For different people, it is slightly different.

It's also about how you practice. For some, it's useful to do one movement and sit. For others, they want to go "pah-pah-pah," do a few, and then stay. Some people find the "staying" part is the problem, so they want to keep moving to avoid it. In the trainings, I help them see what is helpful for them.

Regarding the "flavor": It's hard to say. All these *Trul Khor* texts (*Zhangzhung Nyengyu*, *A-tri*) are Dzogchen texts. The goal is that open awareness (*Rigpa*). Whether physical or less physical, it is about being in that state. In terms of flavor, it is that open awareness, but what is happening around it flavors the experience. For example, if I practice with Sherab Chamma—our golden, luminous female wisdom deity—my state of mind has a "flavor" of Chamma. It's method and wisdom (*thap* and *sherab*) together. Every deity has their quality—wisdom or loving-kindness—and that flavors the appearance.

[Steve James]: Fascinating. I had a couple of specific questions about the text. You mention the Yungdrung posture (cross-legged or lotus posture). How important is the full lotus? What are its unique benefits? And how have you seen people working to achieve it?

[Alejandro Chaoul]: At the beginning, I would always strive for that. In the monastery, the floor was cement, and there were no "stretchings"; it was just: "Get into the lotus." Coming back to the West and seeing the Indian-based yoga community with all these ways to prepare was fascinating. In our tradition, it is mentioned, but it's fine if you don't do it. For example, because I played rugby as a young man at St. Andrew's Scots School, I have old injuries popping up. I have a

bad knee now and cannot do full lotus, but I still do the practice. The movement is just a way of supporting the energy. If someone cannot do a specific movement, they do what they can.

Recently, when I presented the book at Tibet House, Bob Thurman said: "Oh, some of these movements are impossible!" But it's not about "doing" them perfectly; it's about bringing yourself *towards* that in whatever way your capacity allows. I tell those training to be instructors: even if you can't do it, say that is how it should be done so you point to the source and don't change the instruction based on personal limitations.

[Steve James]: There are a lot of other cool details, like the three levels of "Breath Hold" (*kumbhaka*): like a basket, like a vase, or like a massive fire. And the syllables *HA* and *PHAT*. It feels very dynamic.

[Alejandro Chaoul]: It is very dynamic. For example, when I used it for people with cancer, I adapted the first set to be done sitting down. You don't have to stand up. You can regulate how you practice towards your goals—enhancing meditation or clearing obstacles.

[Steve James]: I have to ask about Shardza Tashi Gyaltzen's 100-day program. Have you undertaken that?

[Alejandro Chaoul]: Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche asked me to go study further with His Holiness Lungtok Tenpai Nyima, the late Abbot of Menri. He said: "Okay, but you have to come for the 100 days; otherwise, you can't come." At that time, my youngest daughter was being born, and my wife said: "No way you're going for 100 days." We negotiated 60 days. I told His Holiness, and he responded: "When are you coming?"

So I did it in an intensive, reduced way. One thing that came up in a dialogue with Wim Hof was the aspect of cold. These practices are often paired with Tummo. His Holiness gave me a specific room because it was cold, and halfway through, he said: "I wanted to make sure you know I gave you that room because it's cold. I know there's other nicer rooms, but...". Generating that inner heat—*Trul Khor* heats you up. I jokingly call it the "Inner Bikram." You put your inner temperature up so the channels and body become pliable for the breath to support the state of mind.

[Steve James]: Regarding Wim Hof, what reflections did you have? He is famous for his version of inner heat practice involving breathing and movement.

[Alejandro Chaoul]: Elisa Epel was also in that dialogue. I've tried Wim's technique, been in the ice bath, and it's fun. But it's not Tummo, at least not the one I learned. The practice is very different, although both bring heat. In Tummo, heat is a secondary benefit; it's about focusing and allowing. If I focus too hard and am tight, the heat doesn't come. When I focus but relax, that's when heat arises. In the Wim Hof method, heat is a central goal. It is useful for people to know about, but the convergences with Tummo are more about the outcome of heat than the practice itself.

[Steve James]: It's been a fascinating conversation, Alejandro. To end, does an anecdote or two come to mind from your personal meditational journey with this practice?

[Alejandro Chaoul]: I have many. When I was training and trying so hard for the heat... it didn't arise until I was able to loosen up. You have to be "playful" as you do the practice—not in a pejorative way, but in a supportive way. One of my teachers said that if we are just doing the movement without the mind, it is "like children playing." But this is "magical movement."

When I learned this in Nepal and came back to Argentina, it really changed my practice. I told Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, and he suggested we bring it to others. I was impressed by how this physical practice helped me in my sitting and open awareness.

Regarding teaching: when I started, I taught the whole thing in a weekend because that's how I was taught. But people were overwhelmed and stayed "stuck." I learned about "dosage": how to teach in a way that makes sense. I've been "addicted" to *Trul Khor* for three decades; if I don't do at least one set a day, I feel weird. It's a very special practice.

I'm very appreciative of the support I've felt from the Tibetan communities in Menri and Triten Norbutse. They are very kind when they see a Westerner practicing. I'll share one final thing from the dedication of the book to Rinpoche: *"Through him I entered the teachings in 1991 and since then he has been a constant support. When I am in difficulties, I hear his words: 'Don't forget we're in samsara.' As I visualize him with his wonderful smile, those difficulties and obstacles seem to dissolve like a snowflake in the ocean. And when that is not enough... I practice these magical movements."*

That's how it comes together: the blessings of the teachers, the jumping and struggling through my own things, putting it all together, and always dedicating the practice for the benefit of all.

[Steve James]: *Tibetan Yoga: Magical Movements of Body, Breath and Mind*, available now from Wisdom Publications. Alejandro Chaoul, thank you very much.

[Alejandro Chaoul]: Thank you. Always good to see you.

[Steve James]: Thank you for listening to another Guru Viking podcast. For more interviews, visit www.guruviking.com.