

Magical Movements Of Tibet - Dr. Alejandro Chaoul

[Steve James]: In this episode, I'm joined by Alejandro Chaoul, PhD, author, meditation teacher, and Huffington Foundation Endowed Director of the Mind-Body-Spirit Institute at the Jung Center of Houston. Alejandro is an expert in *Tsa Lung Trul Khor*, also known as Tibetan Yoga. In this episode, we discover the practices and encounters that kindled Alejandro's fascination with this subject: his travels through India and his encounters with gurus such as U.G. Krishnamurti, Namkhai Norbu, and the exorcist and weathermaker Nagpa Yeshe Dorje. Alejandro reveals the details of his path and practice, his entry into academia, and recounts stories of his personal relationships with many great teachers. I also ask him about specific dietary recommendations for yogis and the tantric practice of breath retention.

With you: Dr. Alejandro Chaoul.

Alejandro Chaoul, welcome to the podcast.

[Alejandro Chaoul]: Thank you, Steve. Thank you very much.

[Steve James]: You are well known for your work in popularizing *Tsa Lung Trul Khor* under the Ligmincha banner, as well as your work in *Chöd* and other topics. We'll touch on those later. I'm curious: How did you become interested in these topics, in meditation and so on? Can you tell us something about your background?

[Alejandro Chaoul]: Sure. And we'll get back to that word "popularizing" later. My interest began with meditation when I was in high school back in Argentina (where I'm originally from). Then I traveled to the US as a transfer student during college. That's when I started realizing all the different kinds of meditation, like Zen, and I met a group of Hare Krishnas who taught me to cook vegetarian and their mantras. But I also started noticing more about yoga, Tai Chi, and Qigong—movement practices that became quite useful for me.

It was through Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche—one of my Tibetan teachers who came to Argentina (we actually have a center there, Tashigar Sur)—that things really opened up. Through one of his students, Fabio Andrico, they started teaching what

he called *Yantra Yoga*. It was a kind of Sanskritization back from *Trul Khor*. The text he used was the *Nyida Khajor* (The Union of Sun and Moon). I got really interested in that, particularly because the movements were related to the meditation I was doing. It was difficult for me to do Tai Chi and then a Tibetan meditation, or Hatha Yoga and then do it—for me, it made sense to have movement-based practices that were related to my main practice.

Later, in a retreat that Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche did in Nepal in '91 or '92, I went to visit my other teacher, Lopon Tenzin Namdak, whom Namkhai Norbu had sent me to study with. He has a monastery, Triten Norbutse, in Nepal. I went to visit him at the Vajra Hotel, and he said, "You need to stay with us at the monastery." While I was staying there, a monk came from Amdo to teach *Trul Khor*. Four of us from the Namkhai Norbu retreat joined. In four days, he went over the whole text—40 movements of the *Zhangzhung Nyengyu* (the oral transmission of Zhangzhung). It was very different from doing yoga in the West: no mats, hard floor... That was another eye-opener into this tradition.

[Steve James]: That's fascinating. You've written that you were born into a Jewish family in Catholic Argentina, went to a Presbyterian school, and married a Catholic woman. Then you ended up being Buddhist, but now you're Bönpo. What was it about the Bön lineage that clicked for you? You were with Namkhai Norbu for some time and studied the *Ngöndro* of Dudjom Tersar with Nagpa Yeshe Dorje, but you ended up primarily in the Bön tradition.

[Alejandro Chaoul]: That's a good question. I always felt a need for that teacher-student relationship, which I had studied in philosophy with the Greeks—Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. When I went to India in 1989 looking for a teacher, my first incursion was in Hinduism. I met U.G. Krishnamurti (not J.D., but the "infamous" one). He was really instrumental in dismantling and crumbling my whole philosophical ideas of "being right." He said, "Just be." But I didn't know how to be, so I left.

Then I met the Tibetans. In 1989, I saw in the Indian newspaper that the Dalai Lama had recently been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The moment I saw that, I was as happy as if my own father had won it. I went to meet him. The Buddhist tradition was always very important. The shift from Buddhism to Bön didn't feel like a major religious shift for me—it was all part of that same lake of wisdom.

When I started practicing the *Ngöndro* at home, I was part of the group that brought the Dalai Lama to Argentina. I remember when people asked me "Are you Buddhist?", I would say "No, I'm Jewish, but I practice Buddhism." The first time I said I was Buddhist was thanks to Cardinal Quarrachino in Buenos Aires. We were

organizing an interfaith meeting for the Dalai Lama at the main cathedral. I was about 25, and he looked at me and said, "***Bóth piwe***" (Argentine slang for "Hey, kid!"), "Are you a Buddhist?". I said, "Yeah, I am." I always say I took refuge with the blessing of Monseñor Quarrachino.

Later, Namkhai Norbu Rinpoche told me in '91 that I needed to meet Lopon Tenzin Namdak. When I saw Lopon and Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche teaching together in '93, that whole teacher-student lineage lit up for me. It was like finally reaching water after digging many holes.

[Steve James]: Could you say more about your encounter with U.G. Krishnamurti? Your account of being dismantled by him is in keeping with his reputation.

[Alejandro Chaoul]: I was in Srinagar when I read about the Nobel Prize. I went back to Delhi, and an Indian guy told me I should meet his teacher, U.G. Krishnamurti. We went to his apartment; it was a small group of about twenty. I stayed three days. The initial part was great—the dismantling of the burden of philosophical stuff—but he didn't give me any techniques. "Just be," he'd say. I'd ask "this way or that way?" and it felt like bouncing a ball against a wall. That's why meeting the Tibetans and learning the ***Ngöndro*** was such a relief. Many Westerners find it a burden, but for me, it was a path: "Jump into the river, it will reach the ocean eventually." They gave me a way to slowly understand what it is "to be."

[Steve James]: How did you meet Nagpa Yeshe Dorje, the Dalai Lama's weathermaker and exorcist?

[Alejandro Chaoul]: Another coincidence. My first trip to India was supposed to be three months and lasted a year. I had no agenda. Dharamsala was my base. Someone mentioned a room for rent at a monastery—it was Nagpa Yeshe Dorje's monastery. He wasn't there, but his son was. They were doing a three-year retreat. I became friends with Karma Lundrup.

When Nagpa Yeshe Dorje came back from the States, they invited me for lunch on Losar (New Year) at 4:00 AM. We had ***Chang*** (warm rice beer). He impacted me immediately: incredible smile, long hair with a text tied to it... He didn't speak English or Spanish, so it was mostly eyes, hands, and lots of smiles. A group of Westerners asked for the ***Ngöndro***, and he told us he'd only teach it if we committed to finishing it—the long version, not the short one. That became my main daily practice for seven years.

[Steve James]: What about your relationship with Namkhai Norbu? He was such a popular teacher that it was often difficult for students to have personal contact.

[Alejandro Chaoul]: I was very fortunate. He came to Argentina for his second visit when they bought the land for Tashigar (Tanti, Córdoba). I ended up translating for him. He had a very interesting Italian accent, and since Argentina has a lot of Italian influence, we understood each other well.

At the end of the retreat, they were choosing the Ganchakyil (the administrative volunteers). They put my name in a bowl, even though I'd just started. Rinpoche looked at me with a devious look and said, "You pick." I picked... and it was my own name. He was very strict. I was a vegetarian since India, and he would frequently grab a piece of beef (typical in Argentina) and put it on my plate, saying "Go beyond limitations." Once he cooked *Chapshale* (like a meat empanada) for Fabio Andrico and me. He constantly pushed my boundaries.

[Steve James]: You mentioned your relationship with Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, with whom you now have a professional collaboration. How do you view that teacher-student relationship?

[Alejandro Chaoul]: I feel incredibly fortunate. We lived together in Virginia, cooked together, washed dishes together. We became friends and would share a glass of wine, but for me, he was always "Rinpoche." I was surprised when I came to UVA that people called Dr. Hopkins "Jeffrey." To me, my academic teachers are now peers, but Rinpoche is always Rinpoche.

We had arguments, like humans do. Often it was organizational—how to organize retreats, what should be free—or culture clashes between Western and Tibetan viewpoints. Rinpoche jokes that Argentines (especially from Buenos Aires) are known for our ego. Much of it was "growing pains" that we overcame, but it's important to keep in mind that even if we aren't having coffee together, he remains my teacher.

[Steve James]: Could you disambiguate the terms *Tsa Lung Trul Khor*, *Yantra Yoga*, *Kum Nye*? Is it all the same?

[Alejandro Chaoul]: *Tsa Lung Trul Khor* is the broader category: "Magical movements of channels and winds." *Tsa* is channels, *Lung* is breath or prana. Doing *Trul Khor* without *Tsa Lung* is, as one teacher said, "like children playing." You can jump in the air, but it doesn't make sense if you aren't working with the energy.

Tummo* (Inner Heat) is a practice within this, often preparatory. It means "Fierce Woman." It's our "Inner Bikram"—you raise your own temperature so your channels become pliable for the breath to guide the mind. *Kum Nye* comes more from the medical tradition and is seen as either a massage or very slow movements (like those taught by Tarthang Tulku).

[Steve James]: I have three "wildcard questions": dietary regimes, sexual practices, and semen retention.

[Alejandro Chaoul]: On dietary regimes: my teachers didn't give many explicit restrictions, except for specific retreats in Menri where we avoided garlic and onion, or meat and alcohol on certain days. There is the area of *Chulen* (essence extraction). I have a spoon of a garlic and ghee *Chulen* every morning (prepared by Phuntsog Wangmo). My teachers mostly suggested not eating heavily before practice, but not practicing on an empty stomach for strenuous exercises either. Tsampa or oats in hot water are typical recommendations.

On sexual practices: I've never been introduced to them. My teachers come from a monastic background, so these weren't included. Regarding semen retention: it's another way of controlling energy. If Tibetan yoga is "pneumatic" (working with breath), this sounds more "hydraulic," but the principle of bringing energy into the central channel is similar. Again, it's not a practice I've learned.

[Steve James]: Alejandro Chaoul, thank you very much. Where can people reach you?

[Alejandro Chaoul]: My website is alechaoul.com (Ale for Alejandro), but probably ligmincha.org or mbsihouston.org (Mind-Body-Spirit Institute) are best.

[Steve James]: Thank you for listening to Guru Viking. Visit www.guruviking.com for more interviews.