

Shambhala Center of Milwaukee

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Historical Overview:

In 1939, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the 11th descendant in the line of Trungpa tulkus of the Kagyu lineage, was born. Chogyam Trungpa also studied the Nyingma lineage and was part of the rimay movement in Tibet. This movement was founded on the principle that all four of the Tibetan Buddhist lineages should be brought together. In 1959, however, Chogyam Trungpa fled from Tibet after it was invaded by the Chinese Communist party. At 20 years old, Chogyam Trungpa led a group of monks on horseback over the Himalayas and into India where he remained for the next four years.

In 1963, Chogyam Trungpa left India for Oxford University in England. During his time there as a Spaulding Fellow, Chogyam Trungpa studied religion, philosophy, and the fine arts. In 1967, he founded the first Tibetan Buddhist center in the west. 1970 brought many changes to Chogyam Trungpa's life including a car accident that left him partially paralyzed, the decision to give up his monastic vows, and his move to North America where he founded the organization Vajradhatu in Boulder, Colorado.

Over the next decade, Chogyam Trungpa dedicated his life to the expansion of Vajradhatu all across North America, setting up meditation centers, called Dharmadhatu, writing books about Buddhist practice, and founding Naropa University, the first Buddhist university in North America. However, in 1987, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche reached his Parinirvana and passed on from the earthly world.

In 1990, Chogyam Trungpa's eldest son, Sawang Ösel Rangdröl Mukpo was recalled from his studies in Nepal to take up as leader of Vajradhatu. He was named the Sawang, or Earth Protector in training, and his first major act was to rename the Vajradhatu organization Shambhala International. In 1995, the Sawang was enthroned as the Sakyong and renamed Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, and he set out to complete the vision for Shambhala that his father had started in 1970.

“According to the Shambhala tradition we are living through an age of greed and aggression. We harm ourselves, each other and our planet. The Shambhala teachings offer an antidote to this crisis. This was the basis of the legendary Kingdom of Shambhala, a society that fostered the inherent goodness of its people. Shambhala Vision tells us that we can experience a natural source of radiance and brilliance in the world, which is the innate wakefulness of human beings.” According to Buddhist tradition, however, to achieve that innate wakefulness, humans must give up their worldly possessions such as money, jobs, sex, and so forth. This is something that is easier to accomplish in monastic societies in Tibet as opposed to the bustling cities of the west. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche wanted to find a way for westerners, who had husbands and wives, children, and jobs, to be able to partake in Buddhist practices without feeling as if they should give up their lives. Shambhala Buddhism teaches that one can have a spouse, children, money, and so on and still uphold the teachings of Shambhala and experience the radiance of the world.

This view on the teachings of Shambhala appealed to many across North America, including those in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Beginning as just a group of friends gathering in the home of David and Jane Shapiro, Milwaukee Dharmadhatu soon moved into its first location in a North Ave storefront. After a few years of expansion and growth, Milwaukee Dharmadhatu moved again, this time to a space above what is now the Café Hollander on Downer Ave. In 1993, Milwaukee Dharmadhatu moved for the final time to its current location on Oakland Ave where they were able to have their own building. Shortly thereafter, Milwaukee Dharmadhatu became the Milwaukee Shambhala Meditation Center where it “continues to bring the distinctly contemporary and effective spiritual path of the Shambhala teachings to others.”

Currently, Shambhala International and Milwaukee Shambhala stand on shaky ground in the wake of the sex scandal involving not only the Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche, but also several members of the governing council of Shambhala International. Many centers have decided to split from Shambhala International, leading to questions on if these centers have the right to continue teaching Shambhala while unaffiliated. The Sakyong is currently on retreat in Tibet and has agreed to suspend active involvement in teaching or governing Shambhala International. He has not relinquished his title or position as the head of Shambhala teachings.

Annotated Bib:

Shambhala Center of Milwaukee, <https://milwaukee.shambhala.org/>

The Shambhala Center of Milwaukee does not have an active archive. The current Director, Jessica Bizub, created a poster board timeline with the center's history. All history is passed down through word of mouth, teaching books, and their website. This website is dedicated to Milwaukee's center but also links out to the Shambhala International website.