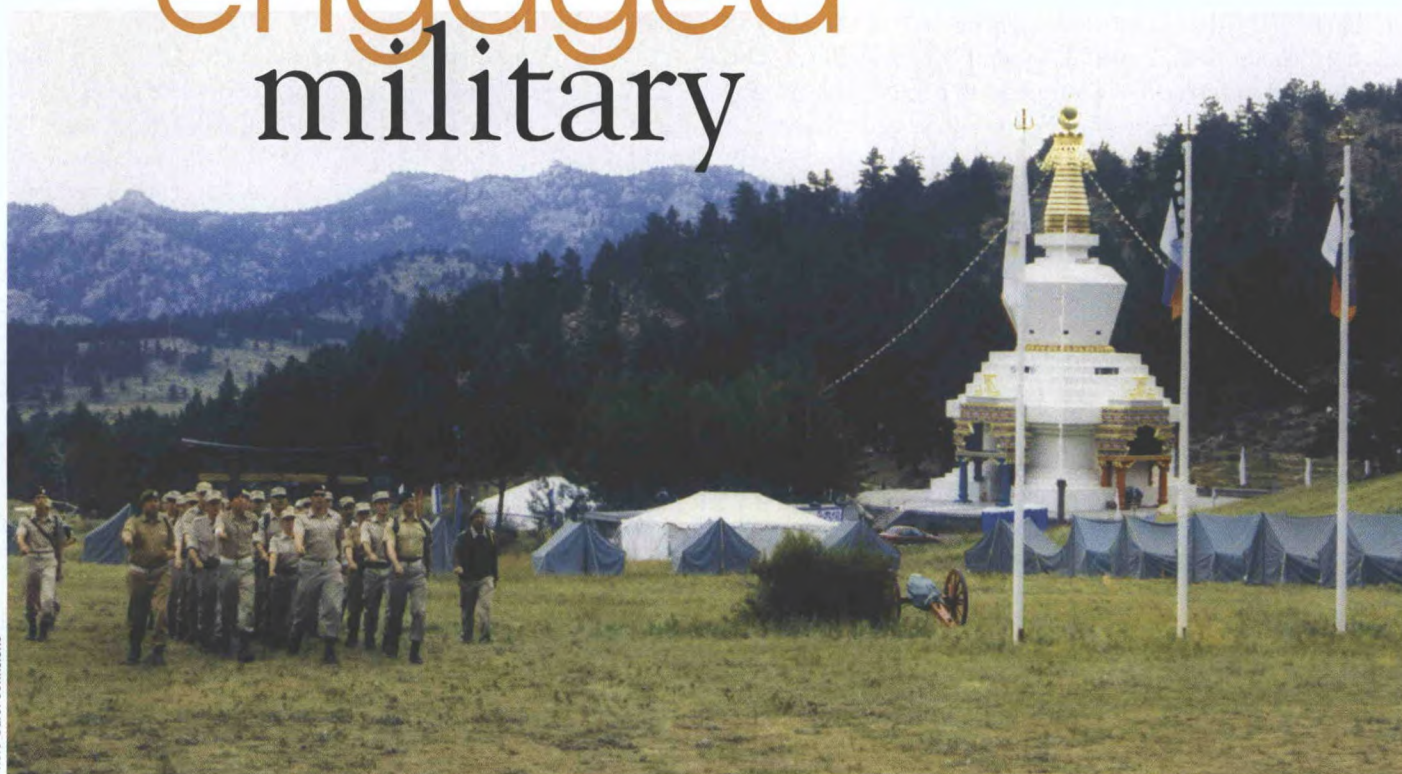


an engaged military

Photo Carol Johnstone



Dorje Kasung members at parade near the Dharmakaya stupa

DORJE KASUNG, a synonym for the Dharma protector Mahakala, was the name given by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche to the Shambhala military he started. How does it work? MARK THORPE speaks to JAFFA ELIAS about his 23-year involvement with Kasung practice.

Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche started Dorje Kasung in the mid-1970s. In those days things were “cooking” – Naropa Institute had started, hundreds of new students were showing up, many were connecting with the Dharma in a fresh, open, and naïve way, and inevitably a number of crazy people were attracted as well.

In that level of wildness and distraction, Trungpa saw, I think, a need and an opportunity for further understanding. He had a lot of respect and appreciation for Western forms and particularly saw military forms as potential skillful means to bring ‘protector principle’ into our practice and to engage the world in a practical way. Kasung practice therefore came out of that need for worldly protection with a genuine Dharmic understanding.

Buddhism and protection are totally linked. On the last night, just before attaining enlightenment, Buddha Shakyamuni experienced the maras — waves of distraction, seduction, and outright attacks. Because he kept his pure connection to unconditional mind, the attacks were followed by waves of insight – powerful energy could be transformed and used. That is the idea of protector principle behind the Kasung. In sitting practice we find a quiet place to meditate, to protect ourselves against distraction so that we can cultivate peace, which protects against further discursiveness. It’s not really different in our everyday practice in the world – to protect against distraction, against getting caught in hope and fear, and against our confusion.

The Kingdom of Shambhala and the legendary epic of Gesar of Ling inspired Trungpa Rinpoche. The teachings and prophecy of Shambhala concern overcoming the future dark age. Gesar of Ling was responsible for overcoming the past dark ages in Tibet. Gesar, an emanation of enlightened mind, was a wrathful, compassionate warrior completely dedicated to overcoming aggression and the obstacles that keep beings from waking up to their true nature. In the Shambhala tradition a *warrior* is one who overcomes aggression and warfare, as opposed to the normal idea of being one particularly adept in waging war.

Military elements are neutral and can be used in either good or bad ways, yet we usually think of “military” as aggressive. In traditional Western military, there are examples of skillful means, discipline, and mind training and, in many cases, humor, appreciation, and devotion to others. These elements are not inherently aggressive at all. The problem with traditional Western military lies in the view of what’s being protected — protecting me, mine, my country, my territory

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against “other,” something seen as not me, protecting that against attack. This view is culturally egocentric and limits compassionate outlook to just me and mine — otherwise the forms themselves are powerful and effective. It’s the same idea with Buddhism spreading from India to Tibet. For Buddhism to become Tibetan Buddhism, Padmasambhava and other great Indian teachers didn’t completely reject the forms of Bön, Tibet’s indigenous religion, but instead distilled the power of its forms and incorporated that energy. In a similar way the power inherent in Western military forms, when mixed with the view of egolessness and non-aggression, has a lot to offer — discipline, surrender, and putting the needs of others before those of oneself. Military training is also effective in teaching one to cut hesitation and act with direct intelligence.

I got involved with Dorje Kasung about 23 years ago. I was at a meditation program at Rocky Mountain Shambhala Center. Trungpa Rinpoche was leading a ‘dual’ program — teaching students down in the main area, and camping out with the Kasung in a meadow above. Many at the public program were more or less suspicious of the whole thing, but I was really curious. I joined a week later.

Before that, as a teenager, I had had some military training in the cadet program with the Civil Air Patrol. I loved drill practice, uniforms and the discipline involved, but the perspec-

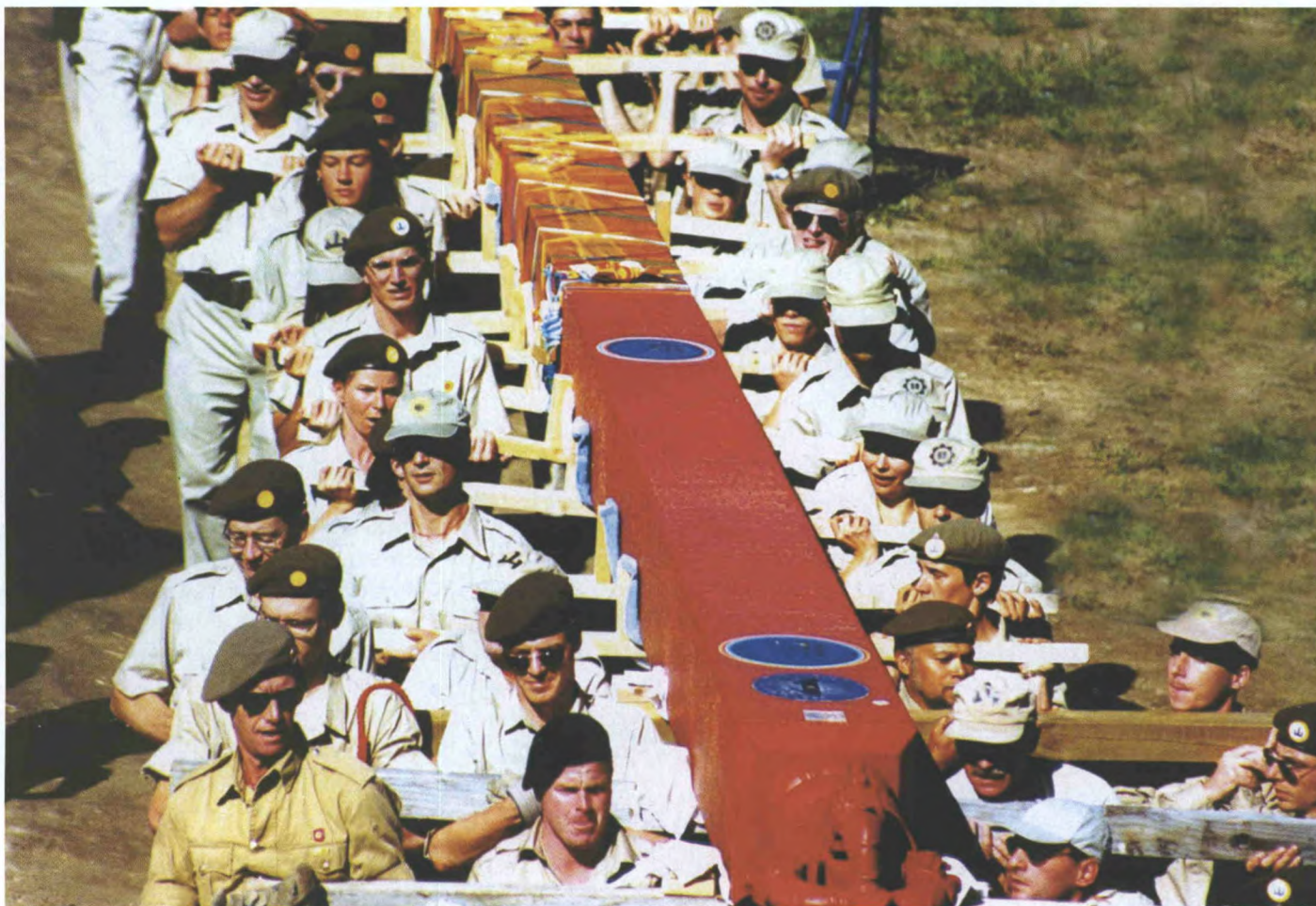
tive, which was not based on gentleness or basic goodness, didn’t work for me. When the Vietnam War heated up, my entire social and political views shifted and I became disillusioned with my society. I changed from seeing myself as wanting to be career military to someone who would never consider that in a million years! Looking back though, my youthful military experiences had however planted some useful seeds.

The program evolved into a yearly Kasung practice retreat with Rinpoche that continues to this day under his oldest son and Dharma heir, Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche. This is an encampment where we do our core practice, core meditation — and can completely live that 24 hours a day. We work with many facets of form, from how we arrange our entire camp, to how we arrange ourselves, our tents, our clothing, our duties, drill, everything, and we practice the forms diligently, yet always infused with a sense of humor. The rules and forms help us develop precision, and humor allows us to delight in that precision. Trungpa Rinpoche once said, “If you maintain a sense of humor and a distrust of the rules laid around you, there

will be success.” The encampment is a physical mandala that you surrender to, that’s self-contained. Everyone wears the same thing, rotates the same duties, eats the same food, and that simplifies things. The only options you have are whether you wear your clothing properly or not, walk from one place to another mindfully or not, decide you want to be 100% present or not — it doesn’t matter whether you are fat or thin, athletic or out of shape, timid or gregarious. It’s completely up to you whether you connect with why you are there. The forms are there to help experience that completely.

The purpose of Kasung practice is to bring together gentleness and fearlessness, masculine and feminine. It would not work otherwise. Hence many women are attracted to it. Young people too. There is something about the directness of the military approach mixed with gentleness and caring for others that seems particularly accessible to young people.

Dorje Kasung’s primary activity however is to provide security, hosting, and other protection activities throughout the year. At talks by Dharma teachers, we will help provide a dignified environment or container for them to present the teachings through establishing a non-chaotic atmosphere and maintaining an alert, non-aggressive presence in the room. Kasung acting as a wind that dispels



Kasung members carry, as their activity, the sokshing (life pole) of The Great Stupa of Dharmakaya Which Liberates Upon Seeing.

clouds, allowing the sun to shine through, was a metaphor Trungpa Rinpoche once used.

My “marching orders” are to be “on duty” 24 hours a day. That’s my aspiration. When our practice takes place in the “real world” and our view is of protecting unconditional mind, it’s a very potent mix. Sometimes it can seem like our meditation practice works everywhere but in our daily activities. Kasung practice really does use the “day job” aspect of mundane activity and mixes it thoroughly with the Dharma by keeping the view of unconditional mind and applying it to one’s activities. This is done by engaging obstacles rather than avoiding them. You don’t accept them or reject obstacles – you meet them without bias. This becomes your practice because what you find is that you have biases all over the place, and you are accepting and rejecting like crazy. So the practice is to just expose yourself to that situation in a simple way, even though it can be intimidating, and stay with that. You persist and train hard in doing that non-aggressively.

The first place I deal with aggression is with myself, recognizing my own aggression. I look at my tendency to assign blame outside of myself, and the Mahayana practice of driving all blames into one, keeping the basic reference point of no blame and expanding out from there. This helps relax the kleshā, the ‘getting caught’ in the solidity of ego, and opens up

other possibilities. Obstacles come up all the time and the critical thing is what to do with that. Take road rage – suddenly somebody cuts you off at an intersection, then there’s that first flash of raaaaaaa!– fear, anger. It happens very quickly. But when we look at that, it’s just energy. We can’t find any aspect of it that is fundamentally real. The fear and aggression are not fundamentally who we are either. Nothing about it is even inherently good or bad, but what happens after that first flash point... there’s an instant where we can see that it’s up to us if we get caught. We can cultivate that little gap. Then when we act, if our actions come from allowing that gap, we have possibilities of helping. When we surrender in that way, protection becomes a way of helping others, becoming part of something much more spacious and vast, much more precise and aware. ☸

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Photo Diana Church