

FOCUS

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Who is Rinpoche?

Spiritual king to some—others have their doubts

By Janet Wiscombe

Staff writer

The compact man in the tailored suit laughs easily from a gilded Victorian chair in his stately Boulder home. He expounds on philosophy, art, business, horses, politics, sushi bars—the gamut of conversational residue from an Oxford education.

The setting is elegant, majestic, a mixture of ornate Japanese and formal English. Yet, even in this diverse setting, the atmosphere is disquieting. Silent attendants are ever present. One suddenly appears with a crystal highball glass of sake; another delivers a capsule of medication in a jeweled pillbox nestled on a silver serving tray draped in linen.

When the gentleman at center stage has difficulty opening the ornate cigarette box placed on a side table, another attendant—a man in his 30s who is also wearing a tailored suit—is instantly on hand. As the conversation continues, the silver tray ritual is flawlessly repeated. More sake arrives. Another pill. A gold Japanese fan is presented.

The beneficiary of this impeccable service and attention is the Venerable Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche (Beloved One), Master Supreme abbot incarnate—a Buddhist monk from Tibet known to his 1,000 Boulder-based disciples as Vajracarya—The Invincible Master.

He is no ordinary householder on University Hill; rather, he presides over Kalapa Court. The attendants on duty are but a few of 300 court servers, Boulder residents who are true believers eager to give their time in service to their spiritual leader. There also are bodyguards—150 of them—who rotate on a round-the-clock vigil to keep their master safe and comfortable.

Many have come to Boulder expressly to study at the feet of the man who represents a link to a 2,500-year-old spiritual tradition. For them, his is at once the embodiment of generosity, kindness, love, sanity, humor, grace, scholarship, artistry, brilliance, creativity and compassion.

Like hundreds of other devotees from California to Nova Scotia to South Africa, they perceive him as a kind of spiritual king. They attend to his every need—cook his meals, wait his table, care for his children, even tie his shoelaces.

But to disgruntled former students and some readers of national publications, which have heralded ribald accounts about one of the nation's best-known gurus, Trungpa is also known as a person who has few limits when it come to booze and women...

(For complete story, please contact Janet Wiscombe.)