



## THE *Arts* AND THE “IN-BETWEEN” SPACE

**ON THE FACE OF IT**, there is an easy explanation for why the arts have been woven into Naropa University’s identity over the past thirty-three years. Like meditation, the arts expand our mundane consciousness, opening our limited conventional perspectives to larger possibilities. They offer new ways of thinking, of feeling and of experiencing both the world and ourselves. It is no accident that Naropa’s founder, Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, was not just a prolific scholar and meditation teacher, but also an artist in a broad range of media. For these reasons, the arts will always be one of the principal carriers of the vision of Naropa University.

On the one hand, this means an ongoing commitment to the kind of vibrant programming in the arts that you will find described in the following pages. But there is also something deeper going on here. I was alerted to this early on in my time at Naropa by university professor and former president, Barbara Dilley, when she offered the pithy suggestion that the heart of Naropa lies “in the in-between spaces.”

I have found this suggestion enormously helpful, for it enables one to honor the many dualities that characterize our institutional life and to recognize that both poles of each polarity are essential to who we are. Teacher and student, for example. East and West, intellect and emotion, outer world and inner world, for others. And the list goes on: graduate programs and undergraduate, teaching and research, curricular courses and co-curricular activities, discipline and chaos, Buddhist inspiration and ecumenical aspiration, recluse and activist, in-breath and out-breath, wisdom traditions and the modern world. The heart of Naropa lies in the dynamic tension between these contrasts, not reducible to either pole of any polarity, just as the present moment hovers pregnantly between a past that is gone and a future that has not yet arrived.

The arts capture this elusive, essential quality of Naropa for many reasons, but as a historian I see it as a function of our bringing together—not synthesizing, but holding in creative tension—the artistic heritages of East and West. Far more than the study of textual material, it was a graduate school course on the art and architecture of Asia that alerted me to how religious and cultural traditions can be carried on with fidelity and with great creativity—and with virtually no attention to the identity of individual artists. Most of the arts of Asia are keenly respectful of traditional forms, of established patterns of proportion, style and communal values, and cloak the artist in personal anonymity. They have been produced with much less attention to those qualities that matter in the arts of the post-Renaissance West, with their emphasis on individual creativity, novelty and the self-conscious reworking or rejection of traditional forms. The arts at Naropa are suspended between these two complementary understandings of creativity, one steeping the artist in inherited forms, the other nurturing new horizons of imagination. This in-between space holds together two different understandings of origins: in one case, it points “backward,” to the source of all creativity; in the other, it points “forward,” to the novelty that becomes manifest in the originality of the artist’s expression.

The arts are thus a microcosm of a Naropa education as a whole. They are well calculated to help one resist easy dichotomies and to keep one in suspense.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Thomas B. Coburn". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Thomas B. Coburn, President