Naropa University was founded by Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, a lineage holder of both the Kagyü and Nyingma Buddhist traditions. In 1959, he escaped Tibet through the Himalayas to northern India. In 1970, Trungpa began presenting Buddhist teachings in the United States. During the next seventeen years, he taught extensively and founded meditation centers throughout North America and Europe.

A scholar and artist as well as a meditation master, he became widely recognized as one of the foremost teachers of Buddhism in the West. This distinction put him in the unique position of possessing and understanding the wisdom of both cultures, with the ability to join them in a compassionate, innovative and fruitful way. With the founding of the Naropa Institute in 1974 (later to become Naropa University), Trungpa realized his vision of creating a university that would combine contemplative studies with traditional Western scholastic and artistic disciplines.

On the face of it, there is a striking contrast between the Naropa University of 2007 and its beginnings as the Naropa Institute in the summer of 1974. This is not surprising, for Naropa’s founder, Chogyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, himself described Naropa as “a one-hundred year project,” and we would expect the labors of countless faculty, staff and students over the intervening years to have borne fruit, as they have. Still, it will be helpful to pause here and to marvel a bit at what has happened, and then to ask, in light of Naropa’s Buddhist roots and its corresponding appreciation of impermanence, whether it
is possible to affirm continuity between the Naropa of 1974 and Naropa today. I believe the answer is yes, but in subtle and profound ways.

First, let us note the contrast.

One of Rinpoche's early students, Sherab Chodzin notes that, ever since the Vidyadhara came to the west in 1963, "he definitely seemed to have some idea of a college, or institution of higher learning... But whatever it would be, it was to be discovered in the midst of the mud. It was not like he had a blueprint."1 Marvin Casper, another of Rinpoche's early students, puts it this way: "We didn't have any great master plans in terms of how Naropa could evolve over time... The basic idea was an institute that would create an interface, a dialogue between Buddhism and the highest intellectual culture of the West, as well as with other spiritual traditions. That was the pearl of the idea. I remember at some point Rinpoche talked about creating sparks, by juxtaposing different traditions. The idea was that if you looked at things from different perspectives, you can get the essence of it. If people from different traditions challenged and compared their approaches, they could go beyond conceptual mind to new perspectives, and express what they've learned in fresh ways because they're in dialogue with something different."2 The "midst of the mud" that Sherab Chodzin refers to took the form of a gathering for poets, artists and intellectuals in Boulder, Colorado, in the summer of 1974, planned for several hundred—

1 Quoted in The Spark of Wisdom: 25 Years at the Naropa University, unpublished manuscript, 4.
2 Spark of Wisdom, 6-7.

to which several thousand came. The East-West Journal described the scene this way: "Almost overnight Boulder has become a magnet of learning and excitement and promise... The student body is made up of an astonishing assortment of college students, dropouts, scholars, scientists, artists, therapists, dancers, heads of departments, musicians, housewives, and on and on. The whole first week seems filled with a sort of joyous incredulity that Naropa is really happening."3 The program that summer consisted of two five-week sessions taught by such luminaries as Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Bateson, Gary Snyder, Anne Waldman, Ram Dass, John Cage, Herbert Guenther, Barbara Dilley, Joan Halifax and Stanislav Grof.4 An ongoing and lovingly competitive public conversation in the evenings between Rinpoche and Ram Dass constituted the central energy of the times.

Fast forward now to 2007. Naropa Institute has become Naropa University, the name change being occasioned by its growth from being chiefly a graduate school to also providing a four-year bachelor's program. It has been accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Universities for over twenty years. It occupies three campuses comprising over twelve acres in downtown Boulder. It has an undergraduate enrollment of 452, who are enrolled in 11 BA and BFA programs, and a graduate enrollment of 635, enrolled in 15 MA, MFA, and MDiv programs, including three low-residency (online) programs. Students come to Naropa from 49 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and 21 foreign countries.5 Naropa is only a third of the way through Rinpoche's one-hundred-year project, but already the contrast with its simple origins is striking.

There is, of course, some linear continuity between Naropa today and the early days of Naropa, the most obvious example being the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics, founded that first summer by Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman, which continues to bring a broad range of artistic luminaries and students to campus each summer. But if we want to understand the continuity between Naropa then and now, we have to dig deeper. We have to take note, first, of the Vidyadhara's language in the convocation that launched Naropa in June 1974, and, second, we have to understand the profound impact that the visit of the 16th Karmapa to the United States in the fall of 1974 had on Rinpoche, his students and Naropa.

In his "Welcoming Remarks" at that first convocation, Rinpoche used the powerful image of a pilot light to describe the role that Naropa can play in reigniting the incandescent potential that lies in all religious and cultural traditions. He goes on to tell the now well-known story of Naropa, abbot of Nalanda University in classical India, and his encounter with the old woman, who embarrasses him into recognizing that he knows only the external meaning of the texts he was studying.

3 Spark of Wisdom, 19-20.
5 See the Naropa University website—www.naropa.edu—for further details on the university today.
President Nixon is about to resign in the wake of the Watergate scandal. Hippy culture is woven into the fabric of American youth culture, and is particularly in evidence in Naropa's convocation hall. The boisterous, effervescent "joyous incredulity" noted by the East-West Journal is in the air. And Rinpoche says: "We could work, study, think, intellectualize, and experience everything that goes on in our state of being. We could explore and open various fields of understanding, whatever is venerable, whatever has possibilities. But at the same time we also have to bend ourselves into a discipline—into a particular discipline. Such discipline is enormously important."¹

What did Chogyam Trungpa mean by "discipline"? Surely he meant, in part, the discipline that is part of contemplative practice, formal meditation. But over the course of the ensuing months, another related meaning became apparent when Rangjung Rikpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa, who years earlier had played the decisive role in recognizing the Vidhyadhara as the 11th Trungpa and in his subsequent enthronement, made his first trip to the United States. Fabrice Midal observes that "this was a historic opportunity for Chogyam Trungpa to expose his students to the greatness of the Kagyu lineage and to introduce them to the Tibetan formalities that made up the tradition. But what mattered was not so much to maintain the Tibetan character of the formalities as to demonstrate the way that formality can create an environment that transforms everyone's state of mind."² In preparation for the Karmapa's visit, Rinpoche organized groups of his students in every city the Karmapa would be visiting and personally oversaw the correctness of each environment's details. To his astonished students, the Vidyadhara explained: "We are not purely devotees who will kneel in the dirt and receive blessings, but we are elegant people, worthy of receiving the teachings," with our own, natural dignity.³ During


³ Chogyam Trungpa, "His Holiness Karmapa's Funeral," Boulder, December 1981, unpublished,
their time together, the Karmapa and Vidyadhara not only rekindled their earlier relationship, but came to a deeper, mutual appreciation, culminating in the Karmapa’s proclamation on September 29, 1974:

Chokyi Gyamtso Trungpa Rinpoche, supreme incarnate being, has magnificently carried out the vajra holder’s discipline in the land of America, bringing about the liberation of students and ripening them in dharma. This wonderful truth is clearly manifest.

Accordingly, I empower Chogyam Trungpa Vajra Holder and Possessor of the Victory Banner of the Practice Lineage of the Karma Kagyu. Let this be recognized by all people of both elevated and ordinary station. 4

From this time forward, “a sense of ceremony and formality...became an integral part of community life.... Chogyam Trungpa’s students began to address him with more formality [and dressed more mindfully themselves].... The world was no longer seen as unconnected with the spiritual path and undeserving of attention. On the contrary, it was the place where an authentic spirituality could take place.”5 An emphasis on discipline, combined with celebration of effervescence, even chaotic energy, has been part of the Vidyadhara’s legacy at Naropa and elsewhere ever since.6

In conclusion, let me note how Naropa’s newly revised mission statement, which affirms the university to be “simultaneously Buddhist-inspired, ecumenical and non-sectarian,” is actually placing the university’s work squarely in line with Rinpoche’s mission of helping the dharma take root in America. Fabrice Midal puts the matter this way:

Chogyam Trungpa might have appeared, at first sight, to be very modern and up-to-date in his approach to the teachings.... But nothing could be further from the truth. For Chogyam Trungpa was arguably the most traditional of all Tibetan masters. The word tradition here must be understood in the precise sense of being associated with the source of the teachings. It thus has nothing to do with the desire to maintain the past for the past’s sake.... Thus, an authentic relationship with Tradition is a matter of purity of heart and not of being a conservative. It is inseparable from the freedom to return, beyond all conventions, to the source.

This distinction between two meanings of the word tradition is of fundamental importance; it allows us to understand the entirety of Chogyam Trungpa’s work as an effort to liberate the first utterance of the teachings from the swamp of habits, customs, and commentaries and from all that is familiar. Chogyam Trungpa reinvented the dharma while remaining absolutely faithful to the Tradition.

Such a paradox is nevertheless possible because the source does not belong to the past but resides in the living present. The Buddha is nowhere if not here, on this patch of earth, now, at this very moment.”7

It is in precisely this spirit that the last line of Naropa’s new mission statement, quoting the Vidyadhara himself (here in italics) affirms that “a Naropa education—reflecting the interplay of discipline and delight—prepares its graduates both to meet the world as it is and to change it for the better.” It is this same spirit that constitutes the challenge and the reward of our daily life today at Naropa University.

7 Midal, Chogyam Trungpa, 83-4.

THOMAS B. COBURN
Dr. Thomas B. Coburn became president of Naropa University on July 1, 2003. Prior to assuming this post, Dr. Coburn served from 1996 to 2002 as vice president of the university and dean of academic affairs at St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York, where he was also the Charles A. Dana Professor of Religious Studies. Dr. Coburn holds a BA in religious studies from Princeton University and a MTS and PhD in comparative religion from Harvard University. He is a well-known scholar of the great goddess tradition in Hinduism. He has lectured broadly in the United States and India, and is a widely published author specializing in comparative and Asian religion.