



Fred Ehmke's selfie

## **Sangha Spotlight: Fred Ehmke**

I was first brought to Tashi Choling by a friend in 1998. I knew nothing about Buddhism and I was really taken aback by the beauty and splendor of the temple, Vajrasattva garden, and the whole experience. We arrived at the land a little late and the temple was packed with people. Everyone was sitting quietly on cushions and mats. To me it looked as if there was no place for anybody to squeeze another two people in. A fellow in robes (Nick O'Connor) grabbed some mats and cushions from under the table where the food offerings were placed, and extended the front row by placing the mats and cushions right up in the very front; right below where the lama was going to sit. My friend did some prostrations and then sat on the cushion, and I just sat on the cushion and tried to settle in. All of my senses were at their peak.

After a few minutes, it was announced that Gyatrul Rinpoche was on his way and everyone stood up, put their hands together and bowed as Rinpoche entered the temple and proceeded to the throne

platform. As Gyatrul Rinpoche was entering the temple, he interacted with some people along the way. He came by me and looked, then proceeded to the lower of the two thrones.

As the practice started, I was really overwhelmed with the Tibetan language and playing of drums and bells and everyone chanting prayers in unison, with pauses to meditate. I did not understand one single thing that was going on, but I knew, at that very moment, it felt right that I was there. I tried to follow along, sharing a text with my friend, but soon gave that up and just sat and tried to absorb it all. It just felt good to be there.

Physically I was miserable! My body parts, particularly my back and hips, were really rebelling by the time the first short break occurred. I had been sitting and squirming almost the entire time. It took me awhile to get back to my feet and in an upright position. After the 15-20 minute break, it was back to being enthralled by the practice I did not understand, and yet being very uncomfortable physically.

In my next few visits to the temple, I still tried sitting on a cushion but someplace near the back where I gained support from the wall. (After a back operation and a change in seating, I now am able to sit on my preschool chair with a small cushion on it. It seems to work for me. Rinpoche has teased me about my preschool chair.)

In June of 1999, I was fortunate to take refuge in the Three Jewels from Rinpoche. I continued to attend a variety of practices, usually coming with my friend and staying for just one session. I was fortunate enough to attend practices when Rinpoche would bring great lamas to Tashi Choling for us to learn from and receive wonderful empowerments from. Rinpoche continues to this day to bring great teachers for us to learn from as they bless our temple.

After I had shown up to practices a few times, Rinpoche, when entering the temple, would sometimes come by me, tug on my beard, and ask me, "Who are you? Where are you from?" and "What are you doing here?" He also used to call me "bad boy," and I was not really sure why.

Many times over the years, Rinpoche found his way to my beard to give it a tug. Sometimes he would call me "bad boy," and sometimes he called me "Little Phillip," but he always asked these three questions: Who are you? Where are you from? What are you doing here? I know he knew. I think he was trying to see if I knew. I'm still working on figuring it out.

Over the years I've been fortunate to receive many empowerments and teachings from the myriad of great lamas Rinpoche brings to us. I've been to many of the retreats at one time or another, albeit usually not for the entire retreat. It's safe to say I am **not** a good practitioner. In 2001, I went to my first Bardo retreat at Tashi Choling. The retreat was led by Lama Les, and that year it was

held in the temple. Phillip let my friend and me camp on his land. I was able to attend the entire retreat, and there was a bonus! Rinpoche came down almost every evening when it cooled down some and we were able to do khorwa with him and receive spontaneous teachings from him as he sat on the bench in the Vajrasattva garden. His ever-present wit and humor was always on display. After having done the Bardo retreat a couple of times, I had an opportunity to do khorwa with Rinpoche and I asked him, "Now that I am doing the Bardo, which practice should I do?" He said, "Do your ngöndro." I'm guessing we have all heard that numerous times.

I have had some good karma over the years; my schedule has allowed me to attend the Bardo retreat since that first time in 2001. After that first year, the venue changed. We moved across the creek to the Guru Rinpoche/Vimalamitra area, which was an empty field at the time. There was a tent put up to accommodate the retreat.

From 1999-2007, I was living about 5 hours south of the temple. In 2007, I retired and moved 1½ hours away from the temple. For 5 years, I was able to come to the temple once a week and take care of the lawn in the Vajrasattva garden. This was a very powerful experience for me. It was like a three-hour weekly meditation. There was usually no one around the mornings I was there. I approached the mowing as my mandala offering to Vajrasattva. After I finished sweeping up the garden, I would always head up to

the stupa above Amitabha and sit for a time before heading back into my own brand of samsara. My situation changed in 2012 when my friend and I parted ways, and I once again found myself living in my cabin, which was a five-hour round trip from the temple. I sadly had to give up my weekly mowing chores.

Rinpoche has been stressing continually that we should do our practice, contribute in any way we can to the upkeep of the temple, and be kind to our sangha sisters and brothers by not fighting with each other but instead working together in harmony. He also warns against the boys and girls chasing each other around. It seems like a pretty simple request. I think the sangha is making progress. We are fortunate that our lama, Gyatrul Rinpoche, can be both peaceful and wrathful. He is very skillful at both and knows exactly when to employ each.

Our wonderful teacher, even though he is not as mobile as he once was physically, his mind is as clear and lucid as it has always been. He continues to bless us with frequent, spontaneous, profound teachings via the internet while he is staying in Half Moon Bay. He breaks these teachings down into a message that is simple for us to understand. All we have to do is follow them.

I have had very good fortune to be with Rinpoche for about 20 years now. I am **not** what anyone would consider a “good” practitioner. I fall way short. But I have gained a great deal of inner strength and wisdom and a little better control of my mind

and actions. I got a late start in this life with the Three Jewels. The preschool chair I sit on kind of tells the story. I am hoping that my practice in the Bardo and my good karma to connect with Rinpoche will at least get me a human rebirth. I’ll try to do better next life.

***Thank you Fred, for sharing this essay with us.***





## Exchanging “My Way” for the Bodhisattva Way of Life

*Here are a few excerpts from the many teachings that Gyatrul Rinpoche has given on this topic.*

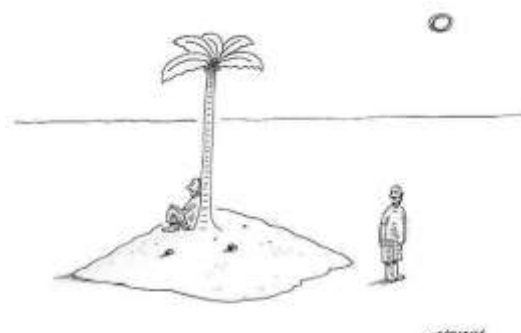
In America there are many habits preventing you from making that true choice (for dharma) because of the MY WAY habit. Thinking that you just have to use your ego to make decisions basically undermines the spiritual path and destroys yourself along the way...

If we are always under the sway of our three poisons and focus only where our three poisons direct us, looking only at the eight worldly concerns and paying attention to those, we will always only be caught up in MY WAY. If we wish to give up our suffering, we have to see how our suffering is really coming from

MY WAY. As long as you have done MY WAY, you have just created your own suffering. If you can begin to loosen your grip on MY WAY and give it up little by little, then slowly your mind will become a little bit soft...

When you reduce your own afflictions, then the blessing comes...All of that MY WAY, all of that smart aleck, will slowly decrease. Why is that? It is because you are following refuge. If we follow MY WAY, then we aren't really taking refuge at all. When we take refuge we say we are going to follow after the Buddha. That means giving up MY WAY. Give up your own way and follow the Buddha's way...

As long as you continue to choose MY WAY with ordinary phenomena, growing larger horns on your head, then the opportunity for developing enlightened qualities becomes more and more bleak. Therefore, I would encourage all to give up MY WAY, your attachments, aversions, negative opinions, and all the passions and poisons, and look at the opportunity that is there for you to be supported in your spiritual development.



“Hey! Guess what?”

## Passages



Antal Toth

Our dear dharma brother, Antal Toth, passed away on Wednesday, July 25th at the age of 73. Antal became interested in Buddhism while living in New York City. Through research, he learned about the Yeshe Nyingpo center there and arranged to meet its secretary. After this meeting, Antal and his longtime partner, Ullie Howard, received permission to visit the Yeshe Nyingpo center in Greenville, New York, where they stayed for several days. Continuing their exploration of dharma centers, the couple made a trip to Tashi Choling in 1997 and stayed at the Mouse House. They met Rinpoche, Jigme, and Mimi during this trip. In December 1999, they moved to Ashland to be close to Tashi Choling and Rinpoche.

Ullie described Antal as a “very devout and serious practitioner” and noted that before he died, he told her “Never give up the dharma.”

Several local sangha members supported Antal in his last days, visiting and practicing with him up until the day he died. Sangye

Khandro and Lama Chonam came frequently and provided dharma teachings and advice to Antal. They also helped with the preparation of his body after death.

On the full moon day of Friday, July 27<sup>th</sup>, the sangha gathered at Tashi Choling to perform the Dorsem Lama Chodpa practice in Antal’s honor. At this time, Sangye and Lama Chonam both spoke about Antal’s passing. Sangye noted that Antal’s body had remained warm for nearly two days after his death.



Lama Chonam, Sangye Khandro, and Ullie Howard at Antal’s cremation

On Sunday, July 29<sup>th</sup>, at the invitation of Antal’s partner, Ullie Howard, 30 sangha members gathered at Litwiller-Simonson Funeral Home in Ashland to practice during Antal’s cremation. Keith LaCoste served as umzed. This was a moving occasion for many sangha members, bringing everyone into a keen awareness of impermanence and the importance of dharma.

As Sangye Khandro noted, “We probably will be doing a lot more of this.” Certainly, with so many aging sangha members, we will.

Click [HERE](#) to download and read Venerable Gyatrul Rinpoche's message to the sangha regarding Antal's death.

## **The Recent Visit of HH Dudjom Sangye Pema Zhepa Rinpoche**

In 1980, His Holiness Dudjom Jigdral Yeshe Dorje Rinpoche arrived in a helicopter to bless the Tashi Choling land.



HH Dudjom Rinpoche, Shenpen Dawa Rinpoche, Gyatrul Rinpoche, Sangyum Rigzin Wangmo

How fortunate we are that his reincarnation, HH Dudjom Sangye Pema Zhepa Rinpoche, returned to visit and teach 38 years later.

The Klamathon wildfire was raging nearby, and many sangha members who live in the Coleston Valley and in Hornbrook had been evacuated from their homes. The Tashi Choling temple was also evacuated. In spite of this difficulty, and the last minute changes that had to be made because of the fire, the event transpired very well.

Over 400 people attended His Holiness' teachings at the Ashland Hills Hotel on July 7<sup>th</sup>. May he return again soon to be with us.



His Holiness visited the Padmasambhava Pavilion located in a small meadow below the temple, where Penor Rinpoche gave the Nam Chö Wangs in 1985



At the Vimalamitra Pavilion



At the Tashi Chöling temple



Lama Chonam, Sangye Khandro, and chopen Samantha Cheney receiving empowerment substances



His Holiness taught the Ashland Hills Hotel



Over 400 people attended the event. Here Tony Reitz and his daughter Ila Reitz enjoy a moment together.



The ordained sangha

If you use Facebook, His Holiness has a page there titled **Dudjom New Treasure.**



Some who had been present 38 years ago lined up to present offerings

## About Sangha News

Sangha News is published every other month. October is the next issue. If you would like to contribute an essay, cartoon, poem, illustration or photo, email editor Gaea Yudron at [gaea.laughing@gmail.com](mailto:gaea.laughing@gmail.com) by September 10<sup>th</sup>.



Lamas and the ordained sangha passed out empowerment substances



Chris and Michael Abbey talk with Dominique Shelton

