

Tashi Choling

Sangha News October 2018

Sangha Profile: **Lisbeth Duncan LaCoste**



Gyatrul Rinpoche arrived in Berkeley in late 1976 to guide His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche's new center, Orgyen Chö Dzing. At that time, Lisbeth was majoring in Western philosophy at Cal State Hayward University and had no interest in Eastern philosophy. She had a housecleaning job at the home of Sandra Scales, who was a dharma student. One day in late 1976, Sandra said, "Lisbeth, you need to come and meet this lama in Oakland." Lisbeth's reaction was not wildly enthusiastic. "I said, 'lama?' And she said, 'Yep, you need to come and meet him. Just

trust me.' I sighed. I remember thinking, okay, I am going to do it for Sandra because I trust her, but I don't know what to think about this."

At the appointed time, Lisbeth made her way to the center on Hillegass Avenue in Oakland. "And here is this little, thin, funky looking guy up on this tall throne," she recalled. "I mean he looked so misplaced there, a little thin guy on this big tall throne at the end of a room. The oddest thing happened to me, however, the moment I laid eyes on Gyatrul Rinpoche. Everybody was doing prostrations. I didn't know what a prostration was, but I just felt compelled to follow suit and it was like my head made its own way down to the floor in front of this lama, as if that was the most natural thing in the world to do. There was something about him that was magnetizing for me. I felt like I knew him somehow even though I had never met him. There was no translator at that time. He was trying to speak English, but I could not understand what he was saying. But I was drawn to him nevertheless. So, I just started coming to the center regularly. He was teaching *Words of My Perfect Teacher* as well as giving bardo teachings on a weekly basis. But I could only understand a little of it because his English wasn't very good. I just kept coming anyway because I felt like I *had* to be there. I didn't know why. I just adored him. Everybody just adored him. I took refuge with him shortly afterwards in March of 1977. I was brought up to his

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room. I made the request, he agreed and had me repeat some Tibetan lines about taking refuge in the buddha, dharma, and sangha. Then his attendant handed me a slip of paper with my dharma name on it. Then Rinpoche showed me how to do a prostration, how to make a mandala offering, and how to practice ngondro.”

That same spring, Sangye Khandro returned from a trip to Dharamsala, India where she had been studying Tibetan and doing practice. She was able to speak Tibetan but her ability to translate Buddhist texts was still somewhat basic. Rinpoche worked with her for hours at a time, helping her understand the meaning of the texts he was teaching. Lisbeth sat in on these study sessions with them and took notes in shorthand and then went home and typed them up on her typewriter. Sometimes, the three of them drove up into the Berkeley/Oakland hills with a picnic lunch to work. It often required several typewritten drafts to complete the translation for one session. As class began, Sangye handed out the notes, which made it much easier for people to understand the teachings.

In the fall of 1977, Sangye Khandro suggested that Lisbeth accompany her and Rinpoche on a trip to Nepal. There, H.H. Dudjom Rinpoche was scheduled to give the complete Dudjom Tersar lineage empowerments in Boudhanath, just outside of Kathmandu. Lisbeth, who was 22 at the time, recognized the trip

as a once in a lifetime opportunity. She held a garage sale in her Oakland apartment and sold all of her belongings in order to raise enough money to go. After selling everything, she had just enough for a plane ticket and a few months’ living expenses. It was indeed an eye-opening trip, spiritually and culturally. After returning from Nepal in January 1978, Lisbeth moved into a room in the dharma center, where her housemates were Charles Frahm (later known as Lama Yeshe), Neal King, and Tien Shou Hao. Bruce Newman lived nearby. In the next few years, Lisbeth was fortunate to attend retreats by lamas that Gyatrul Rinpoche invited to teach, including



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Lama Ganga and Gonpo Tseden Rinpoche.

Reflecting on that early period, she said, “I had no idea how ngondro, bardo, tsalung, and dzogchen all fit together: I found it challenging because I was coming from a Western philosophical academic tradition where I was used to teachings being laid out in clear, logical order. Of course, in Tibetan Buddhism, the teachings are also built one upon the other, stage by stage, in logical order. But Gyatrul Rinpoche’s style at that time was to throw us Westerners into the deep end of the dharma pool and force us to learn how to swim. He introduced us to the entire path in just 3 short years! When I look back, I am completely amazed how many teachings he gave us and how many amazing lamas he introduced us to during that initial short period of time.”

After earning a Bachelor’s degree and most of a Master’s degree in computer science at the University of Oregon in Eugene in the early 80s, Lisbeth moved in 1986 to Bellevue, Washington with her husband, Mark LaCoste, and their two young children, Keith and Joshua. There she began a job with the Boeing Company. Along the way, she earned a Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of Washington.

About mid-way through her Boeing career, she and her family moved back to Ashland in 1998 to be closer to Gyatrul Rinpoche and Tashi

Chöling. That move back to Ashland, which had been her aspiration for the entire time she lived in Bellevue, seemed miraculous at the time. It was made possible when two remarkable things happened: Mark was offered a job in Medford during a time when jobs were very hard to come by in the Rogue Valley, and Boeing allowed Lisbeth to try telecommuting, something they were not doing at the time. She telecommuted for years, traveling as needed for her job. Then, in early 2014, after nearly 30 years of working for Boeing, and although she was not at the typical retirement age for corporate workers, Lisbeth decided it was time to retire so that she could devote herself more fully to practice and support of Rinpoche’s many activities.



Over the 40+ years she has known Rinpoche, Lisbeth’s keen interest in supporting Rinpoche’s many projects has continued without a break. Lisbeth became one of the founding

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members of Orgyen Dorje Den in 1978 when Gyatrul Rinpoche requested her to serve as one of the brand new center's officers. She continued to serve in that role until she moved to Eugene, Oregon in 1981 after her first son, Joshua Pema, was born. She was also part of the crew who built the Vajrasattva statue garden on the new Tashi Chöling retreat land in the early 80s. Even after she moved to Bellevue for work, Rinpoche would call her up regularly and request her to come down to Ashland to work on this or that project or to attend this or that event with a visiting high lama. Now and again he also insisted that Mark come with her. In this way, Rinpoche seemed to personally ensure that she never got too far away. Lisbeth says now, "I think it's because he wanted to make sure my two sons stayed connected with his dharma centers. I think he knew the roles they would eventually play."

Lisbeth now serves on the board of Vimala, Rinpoche's archives and publishing company (formerly known as Mirror of Wisdom, and before that as Yeshe Melong). She is also a member of the Tashi Chöling board of directors. Of these responsibilities, she says, "I feel like I finally have the job that matches my heart, serving my guru doing things he has asked me to do. I feel so fortunate to have these opportunities to serve him and the centers he created in this way. I can think of nothing better to do with my life than serve my root guru with what's left of my life."

Shashi Reitz recently sent this photo of Rinpoche, who apparently was practicing his hobo persona in the kitchen.



CARTOON CORNER



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IT'S A SIGN!

Does anyone else find this funny?

ABOUT SANGHA NEWS

SANGHA NEWS appears bi-monthly and is sent out with the regular Tashi Choling monthly email. The next issue will appear in December. If you have any photos, cartoons, or stories you would like to share, please send them to Gaea Yudron at gaea.laughing@gmail.com by November 15th.

It was nice to receive positive comments recently from readers in Montreal, Portland, and New Mexico. Thanks for the feedback. Glad that you find Sangha News a good way to keep in touch and learn more about Tashi Choling sangha members too.

