



Ani Rih Heigh

Photo by Ani Yeshe

### Sangha Spotlight: Ani Rih Heigh

People get their names in various ways. Some are named for movie stars, singers, or presidents. Ani Rih got her name through numerology, which some of her relatives loved. When they gave her the name Rih, they knew it stood for “exactness and thoroughness, intelligent interpretation, true ideas, alertness, awareness, and watchfulness.” Heigh stood for “enquiry, study, analysis and grandeur, vast expanse.”

Rih learned how to read by the time she was 4. Unfortunately, her family life was quite harsh and she tried to run away from home that same year. The adversity of those early years propelled her into a long spiritual search. “What I was seeing and hearing from others didn’t match up with what I experienced as true. I knew there must be something else,

but I didn’t know what it was,” she said.

She learned to rely on herself from an early age. She got good grades, received recognition for her artistic talent, and bought her first car at 14. She dreamed of becoming an architect. To Ani Rih, architecture seemed a wonderful opportunity to bring all the elements together in a harmonious and organic way.

At 16, she became involved in a relationship. “I became a teen mother and reared my daughter Roberly on my own,” she said. “She became my total focus. I was not prepared to be a mother, so I made a few mistakes along the way. I’ve always believed that my daughter came into my life as a bodhisattva to help me learn about love.”

Now a single parent, Rih went to college and got an undergraduate degree in art and psychology. When her daughter was 9, she decided that she wanted the freedom to make more money and entered the field of real estate. At the height of her career in Los Angeles, she had 4 phone lines and was in charge of 32 people.

When Roberly left for college, Ani Rih said, “I didn’t know what my life was about anymore.” This existential quandary led to 5 years of travel. First she sailed from California to Tahiti in a small boat. “I went all over the place--the Marquesas, Tuomoto Islands, Polynesia, Tahiti, Bora Bora, Hawaii, then Canada, England, Spain, Portugal, Greece, Yugoslavia, Italy, Germany, Majorca, Morocco,

Bali, Ibiza, Belgium—many, many places,” she said, remembering that time, when she was searching for something, not realizing all the while it was within. Sometimes she would send her daughter a ticket to join her.

In 1982, some meaningful dreams led Ani Rih to travel north. In the strange and wonderful way that coincidence works, she drove right down into the Coletin Valley, spending the night in her VW van. The following morning a car stopped. A blonde haired woman got out and a man in the passenger seat asked, “Who are you? Why are you here?” Later she learned that the people who had stopped were Rinpoche and Sangye. On her second visit, Ani Rih drove further down the road, saw Rinpoche at the Vajrasattva statue, and realized he was her teacher. “I didn’t know that he was a Rinpoche or even what Buddhism was for that matter, but I knew in my heart that he was my teacher. I also knew that I had to unencumber my life so that I could place him and the teachings as the focus of my life.”

Returning to her Sausalito home, she sold or gave away most of her possessions and returned to Tashi Choling. At the statue garden she asked Seiji, one of Rinpoche’s students at the time, to tell Rinpoche that she was back. The message she received was, “So what? Tell her to go into town and get a job.” “But I dug my heels into the dirt. I wasn’t going anywhere,” Ani Rih said. She put up a yurt, took ngondro instruction from Lama Yeshe Nyima, and completed her first retreat that

winter, despite temperatures that plummeted to two degrees above zero. In 1988, Rih heard that His Holiness Penor Rinpoche would confer ordination vows. “In that instant I knew that I’d offer myself to the sangha as a nun. Putting the robes on was like being wrapped in solace, clarity, and peace. It felt like coming home.”



Ten years ago, Roberly, Ani Rih’s dear daughter, passed away. “I think the most impressive thing is that she never ever said ‘Why me?’ and she would always say when she noticed my sad face, ‘Mom, look at me. I am happy’ even when she was so very, very ill. Oh my, what she went through was unbelievable. When she was at Stanford, her room was just below the room that Rinpoche was in when he was there. He said that not only did she benefit her nurses and doctors, but the whole wing. She managed to go to her school where she taught special ed. Teachers and students loved her, and she would give inspiring, uplifting, empowering talks to the teen kids. She would say to them, ‘You can do it. Look at you

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wonderful young people.' A lot of these kids were the emotionally and even physically abused ones. I am sure she changed/helped so many people. She was always kind to everyone. She taught me so much about dying. When it got closer, she would invite each friend over, go through her jewelry box or possessions, and offer each one a specially chosen jewel with her love. What a treasure she was," Ani Rioh said.



photo by Ani Yeshe

After 25 years in her retreat cabin near Tashi Choling, these days Ani Rioh lives in Ashland with a bevy of small rescue dogs that she loves dearly. Over the years at Tashi Choling, she has created brochures, sewed pecha covers, painted frescos, statues, and temple ornaments, transcribed teachings, gone on pilgrimage with Rinpoche, traveled to Nepal, Bhutan, and India, and much more.

### About Sangha News

Sangha News is published bi-monthly. If you are interested in contributing news, photos, articles, poetry, cartoons, etc. please contact me at [gaea.laughing@gmail.com](mailto:gaea.laughing@gmail.com). Next deadline is May 15<sup>th</sup> for the June issue.

--Gaea Yudron, editor

Here is a reflection on the sangha that she shared recently: "I understand the Buddha a little bit, and I've heard lots of dharma and so have an inkling of it. But I never understood the sangha because, looking around, I could only see my own kleshas manifest in others. But now I understand that every sangha member has pure motivation to purify and be happy. So I fell in love with their motivation."

--Gaea Yudron

*Note: Some material in this article came from earlier interviews done by Clark Hansen (Jampal Gyatso) and Ani Nyima (Rebecca Wood).*



Dad eventually pulled over at a frozen lake, which represented the sublime beauty of impermanence, but he was pretty annoyed about it.