

Tashi Choling Sangha News December 2019

Sangha Spotlight: Ani Baba

by Gaea Yudron



Ani Baba Photo by Ani Yeshe

Did you know that Ani Baba grew up on a farm in Ohio? E-I-E-I-O! (She wanted to make sure that was included.) She had four sisters and one brother. There were lots of dairy cows and a succession of farm dogs,

each named Brownie. Everyone in the family played music. Ani's father played 40s songs on the piano when he finished with his farm work for the day. Ani played both piano and drums during her childhood.

Do you remember from your childhood the population of the closest town? Well, Ani does. It was the nearby town of Carey and it had 3,722 people, as well as lots of churches, bowling alleys, and bars. In Carey, Our Lady of Consolation is a national cathedral with a statue of the Virgin Mary said to perform miracles.

Ani went to school on a bus, drove a tractor at the age of nine, and was valedictorian of her high school class, which had 92 students. She loved music. When she got her drivers' license, she liked to drive around and listen to rock and roll on CKLW out of Detroit. On a clear night, you could even get WLS out of Chicago. Ani got a grant to attend college and thought about going to Ohio State University to become a vet. But she decided against that and instead filled her course load with a myriad of subjects, including astronomy, poetry, and other fascinating subjects in the sciences and arts. She didn't finish her degree in Ohio. Instead, she dropped out and worked in a Westinghouse factory and a factory that made bumpers for Corvettes. "That didn't last long," she reported—which is something that could be said for many activities in the younger years.

Still in her Barbara Brown stage, she fell in love with a guy who lived in California. She bought a VW bug from

a relative and drove cross country in the middle of winter to be with him. The romance was short-lived, but while dwelling in a communal house in Saratoga, she met dancer Bruce Marrs, who became a good friend. That friendship led her to Ashland, Oregon where she started playing cello, studying dance, and doing yoga: "all the things you never get in Ohio," as she noted. She finished her degree at Southern Oregon University. Summarizing her life thus far, she asserted, "I gave samsara my best shot."

One day Ani, or Barbara Brown, was sitting reading a newspaper at the Dahlia Restaurant on the Plaza in downtown Ashland. Her table was right by the front window. When she saw Gyatrul Rinpoche, Sangye, Yeshe, Shandor Weiss, and Gaea Yudron walk past, she raised her newspaper up to block the sight of them out. "I didn't want anything to do with those guys!" she said. It was a visceral NO! She was on a search though. In ways, life did not make any sense. There was a feeling of hollowness in the heart.

Ani was working at Gepetto's and served lunch there to Rinpoche, Sangye, Shandor, and Gaea one day, yet there was still no connection. But the karma for connection was there. In the summer of 1985, Penor Rinpoche was about to give the Nam Chö empowerments at the Tashi Choling land. Ani's friend Laura Glasscock told her about them and suggested she attend. Even then, it was not easy sailing. On her way out to the Colestin Valley, she felt so uncomfortable that she nearly turned

around and went back home. Thanks to some reassurance from Patrick Hansen, she arrived at the land in time for the first empowerments. Then she was hooked and attended each day after that.

"Penor Rinpoche was on the throne, but I couldn't keep my eyes off this little guy that was sitting on the cushion below him, to the side," she said. "It was Gyatrul Rinpoche. I couldn't keep my eyes off him. The first time I got within three feet of him in the receiving line, everything in my being said, *finally...*" It was the same little guy that she had seen when she was reading a newspaper at the Dahlia Restaurant, and waiting on a table at Gepetto's, but everything had shifted. "Until you're ready, it's not going to happen," Ani noted. And at the Nam Chö empowerments in 1985, she was ready.



In this recent photo, Ani Baba appears to be levitating! Photo by David Gelfand

Having just connected with Rinpoche, Ani was heartbroken when he and Sangye left on their winter travels. Her sorrow spurred her to go to Tashi Choling every day to help Steve Merrill, known to all as Bucko. "It was important to me that the temple was here," she explained. From

November through March, the two worked together. Ani helped Bucko with everything from spackling nail holes in the ceiling to installing the kitchen cabinets.



Ani Baba with Philip Thomas and Richard Schwindt

When Penor Rinpoche returned to Tashi Choling in 1988, Ani was one of the three sangha members he ordained. Several years after she was ordained, Gyatrul Rinpoche requested that she perform the daily temple practices at Tashi Chöling, including opening the altar, a morning Vajrasattva practice, and afternoon protector practices. Ani Baba has continued performing these practices faithfully ever since—for over 30 years.

About her service to Tashi Chöling, Rinpoche said in the 2004 Mirror of

Wisdom newsletter, “Since the time of first building the temple, Ani went on to take nun's vows and continuously to this day maintains the temple and prayer ceremonies, as well as numerous other tasks, without taking a break and for no salary.”

Ani Baba served as one of Rinpoche's attendants from 1988-1992. One of her responsibilities was cooking meals, which presented a bit of a problem because she didn't know how to cook. She remembered crying over the state of a bowl of oatmeal one day. In other words, there was a big learning curve going on.

“Sangye taught me two different dishes, one with curry and another a stir-fry, and I served one or the other of them for lunch every day. I also learned to make tukpa (Tibetan noodle soup) for the dinner meal. Eating those same two dishes for lunch must have gotten old, but Rinpoche was very gracious,” she said. She was the main cook for a few weeks, then other sangha members arrived to help cook meals.

Ani remembers this four-year period as Rinpoche's attendant as both precious and challenging. “In some ways, the rug was always being pulled out from under me, and I had to learn how to get comfortable with that. It was an opportunity to be near Rinpoche and to serve him. Things he said then in little tiny moments are still very important to me,” she said.



Photo by Tom Glassman

Over the years, Ani Baba has been a constant and reliable presence at Tashi Choling, whether doing daily practices, rolling mantras, filling statues, painting, up on a ladder cleaning the temple, shoveling snow—you name it.

I've had many kinds of encounters with Ani Baba over the years. One especially has remained with me. At the time, I was grieving. She looked at me and asked, "How are you?" When I broke down sobbing, she gathered me into her arms and held me. Finally the sobbing subsided and I said quietly to her, "Most people are uncomfortable with this," meaning the intensity I was exhibiting. Still hugging me, she said, "Well, they just don't know how to have a good time, do they?"

There it is, the essence of Ani Baba. She has a big heart. She can be jolly, she can be funny, and she can be cranky. Hallelujah. We love it all, and we love her. She says she is "trying to learn what he's teaching, trying to take care of what he has brought us." E ma ho! Ani Baba!

News from the Tashi Choling Board of Directors

by Mimi Hohenberg

The Tashi Choling Board of Directors has created a new committee called the Dharma Advisory Council (DAC). The DAC is intended to guide Tashi Choling's dharma programs now and in the future while the board mainly focuses on legal and financially related matters.

Gyatrul Rinpoche has entrusted his students to lead Tashi Choling and over many years has reduced his involvement as the acting Spiritual Director. Rinpoche has made it clear that he is not designating an heir to fill his position as Spiritual Director and has given the specific instruction that his students work together to lead and care for the center in this capacity.

The DAC and TC board of directors are working together to collectively embody the role of Spiritual Director through a balanced group of experienced students and leaders.

The DAC meets together and then makes recommendations and offers advice to the board of directors in all matters concerning the Center's dharma activities such as lama invitations, teachings, retreats, and use of our sacred practice and shrine spaces.

The DAC's current members are: Lama Chonam, Diedre Goldberg, Susan Goldberg, Mimi Hohenberg, Sangye Khandro, Lisbeth Lacoste, Ila Reitz, and Matthew Small.

Represented in the structure of the council is a broad scope of student experience and qualifications which includes senior teachers, founding sangha members, junior teachers, long time board members, members of the geku committee, and active event coordinators. All members are volunteers.

Especially of note are Lama Chonam and Sangye Khandro participating in their respective capacities as highly qualified teachers to provide leadership and guidance in Dharma related matters. All members of the council are committed to working together to serve and care for the center and fulfill Rinpoche's vision and specific instructions.



Photo by Tom Glassman

The group was officially formed by the board in May 2019 and has had three meetings so far this year. All council members are excited to serve on a committee with such a meaningful purpose imbued with Rinpoche's blessings and are committed to working together with an inclusive sense of cooperation and active engagement.

The members are honored to have this opportunity to serve Tashi Choling and to grow together into

confident leadership by learning from one another's experience and perspectives, especially those of Lama Chonam and Sangye. The council aims at promoting harmony among leaders and the center as a whole and is committed to a consensus building process fulfilling its duties in accordance with Buddhadharma and Rinpoche's wishes.



Photo by Tom Glassman

It seems auspicious that as soon as the council was up and running, its first action was to recommend that the board extend an invitation to His Holiness Dudjom Yangsi to come and teach at Gyatrul Rinpoche's centers on His Holiness' upcoming US visit next summer. The TC Board had no hesitation to move ahead with this wonderful opportunity and requested Lama Chonam to make the official invitation on behalf of Gyatrul Rinpoche's centers. It was determined that Orgyen Dorje Den (ODD), Gyatrul Rinpoche's center in Alameda, CA, and TC will host the visit jointly at ODD in July. This was decided due to His Holiness' schedule limitations and southern Oregon fire season. (Stay tuned for more details.)



Other items the DAC has already acted on since its recent inception are: following Sangye's recommendation to make each of the puja announcements more informative by including relevant information about the history and meaning of the practice; setting aside time at the beginning of regular tsok gatherings when Sangye and Lama Chonam (or other senior teachers) might offer a few words of inspiration and guidance regarding the tsok practice and allow time for students to ask dharma related questions while partaking of tsok; requesting the Ven. Khenpo Tsewang Dongyal Rinpoche to return to Tashi Choling in the future to lead either our Vajrasattva or Vajrakilaya retreats, as his schedule allows; working on TC's schedule of programs for 2020 (still in process as of this writing); making an initial comprehensive list of qualified teachers that could be invited to TC in the future; gathering advice and protocol recommendations for inviting and hosting lamas such as H.H. Dudjom Yangsi.

The Dharma Advisory Council looks forward to continuing its important work of discussing dharma related matters and making

recommendations to the board regarding Tashi Choling's future needs and goals.



About Sangha News

The next issue will appear in February. If you have any news items, poetry, cartoons, photos, or articles, please contact Gaea at gaea.laughing@gmail.com.

Cartoon Corner

