

Tashi Choling Sangha News April 2019

Sangha Spotlight Marti Ambrose



Marti Ambrose in Rasuwa, Nepal

Marti Ambrose grew up in Vermont with three sisters and one brother. All the kids went to Catholic school through high school. Her siblings continued their studies at Catholic colleges, but Marti took another road, choosing to leave the Catholic Church. She was searching for a meaningful spiritual practice of some kind, and Catholicism did not seem to be her path. "I've always been on a spiritual quest. It has defined my life," she said. "Why are we here? What is the purpose and meaning beyond ordinary life?" These questions

started very young in her life. Moving from Vermont, Marti enrolled in New York State University College at Oswego, New York, where she received her BA degree in Elementary Education, followed by one year as director of a preschool in Syracuse, NY. At that time, Ram Dass' book, *Be Here Now*, and books by Hermann Hesse provided some light along the way, but even they were not enough.

At 26, Marti thought that California was probably the best place to search for her spiritual path. Traveling across the country, she was headed to Los Angeles but wound up in Big Sur, California where she met Gerry Westerkamp, who introduced her to Tibetan Buddhism. "His car was full of Tibetan Buddhist books," Marti said. "Mostly books by Tarthang Tulku and Herbert V. Gunther, and, of course, *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa*, but I read them all." Gerry and Marti traveled around together, mostly camping out in the mountains, reading and discussing these books. Finally, they moved to Oregon so that Gerry could be closer to his aging parents, who lived in Ashland. They found a cabin in the country and settled down there. To make money, they both cut and sold firewood and made jewelry.

In Ashland one day, they saw a flyer for a teaching that Gyatrul Rinpoche was giving at a house on East Main Street. "I really wanted to go. All my learning about Tibetan Buddhism was from books and discussions with

Gerry, but now it was time to meet a Tibetan teacher. I was curious and ready to meet an actual Tibetan teacher who had a strong basis in these teachings. That seemed like an exciting next step for me.” Marti and Gerry began to attend Rinpoche’s teachings and in no time took refuge with Gyatrul Rinpoche and helped in the construction of the Vajrasattva statue.



Marti visited Gyatrul Rinpoche

Marti was present when His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche blessed the Tashi Choling land in June 1980. In fact, in some of the photos from that time, Marti can be seen standing behind His Holiness. For awhile, when the center was located on Second Street in Ashland, she lived in one of the rooms rented to students, located behind the shrine room.

Marti taught at Lincoln School in Ashland. Then she moved to Reedsport, a town on the coast, continuing her teaching career. In 1996, she decided to take a year’s leave of absence in order to travel. She headed to Nepal, trekked for two weeks in Helumbu, then toured India for three months before settling down in Boudha, Kathmandu. In February 1997, she went to Tibet for a week, the first of four trips to Tibet. The tour group traveled to Lhasa, visiting the Potala, Jokang, Sera, Drepung, and

other major monasteries in the area. “What made the biggest impression on me was seeing all those big monasteries, once so thriving, with thousands of monks, now just shells, with maybe a few hundred monks. Yet they were still places of power. The Jokang was very powerful. And seeing the devotion of the Tibetan people for their religion and their leaders had a strong impression on me.” At one point, on their way over the Himalayas and into the Tibetan Plateau, their tour bus got a flat tire. Over the objections of the tour guide, Marti walked out by herself into the white snowy solitude for about a mile, telling her guide just to pick her up along the way. “Nobody was there, no people, no houses, no cars. It was nice to be alone in the vastness of that snowy landscape and it was understandable how this solitude was an important prequel to being a good practitioner.” The experience made her realize how the vast qualities of the landscape naturally supported the practice of many great masters.

Back in Kathmandu, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche was the only lama that taught Westerners at that time. He gave teachings each Saturday. In addition, as Marti was preparing to return to Oregon in late spring 1997, she read a flyer passed out at one of the public teachings about a shedra that Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche wanted to begin in December 1997 in one room of his monastery in Boudanath. During the teaching that day, Marti decided to leave her teaching job in Reedsport in order to attend the shedra for two years. She was one of 33 students who gathered as two khenpos taught two texts:

Shantideva's *Bodhisattvacaryavatara* and the Tipitaka text by Mipham Rinpoche, *The Gateway to Knowledge*. It wasn't long before Marti needed to find work to be able to remain in Nepal, so she took a job as principal of Rupy's International School in Kathmandu, attended by the children of wealthy Indians and Nepalese. Then, for the next seven years she taught at the American International School, known as Lincoln School. Marti has always been an advocate for children, and nothing changed for her in her years in Nepal. "It all began with me sponsoring the daughter of the woman who worked for me cooking and cleaning, and then slowly I found sponsors who would support the education of other children. I never added up how many children received school sponsorship from the people I organized to help them, but I would guess at least 100 children." Today, she manages the school sponsorship for ten children. "It's not through any organization. I find sponsors through connecting with people. In fact, I still need a sponsor for a smart twelve-year-old boy who comes from a very poor family."

By 2006, Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche's shedra had grown and became more sophisticated under the auspices of Rangjung Yeshe Institute. Marti returned for more studies at RYI in 2006-2008 and took a summer intensive Tibetan language course in 2007. "That was the hardest thing I have ever done." Today there are many accomplished teachers and the program offers BA, MA, and PhD degrees. "Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche has always been very loving to me. I

had a close relationship with him, and he invited me to be part of his activities," Marti said. From 2004-2013, she was part of Rangjung Yeshe Shenpen, a nonprofit that Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche founded to help the poor and disadvantaged in Nepal (<http://www.shenpennepal.org/>). Shenpen provides health camps, meals for the elderly, clothing and food for street children, sponsors for children's education; organizes skills training for women; and supports care for animals.



Dhungse Asanga

In 2006, when Marti retired from teaching, the parents of the young Dhungse Asanga Vajra Sakya were searching for a tutor in math and English for their son, who lived at Tharlam Gompa in Boudha. Students of Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche who were close to these parents recommended Marti. Marti taught Dhungse Asanga Vajra Sakya from 2006-2014. "We first met when he was age 6, and I began teaching him when he had just turned 7. It was quite endearing to be with him. His parents lived in Seattle but visited their son for one month each year. The other months I was probably the only female presence in his life, so in many ways I was like a mother to him. I had no children, so it was so easy to fall in love with him. When I look back, in many ways I can say he was the 'love of my life'."

Once flying on a small plane from New Delhi to Dharamsala, India to visit Asanga Rinpoche at the Dzongsar Institute in Chauntra, India where he was receiving the Lamdre teachings from His Holiness Sakya Trizen, Marti realized that the Dalai Lama was one of the passengers on the flight. Of course, she could not resist the opportunity to offer him a khata and receive his blessings.

As Asanga Rinpoche grew older, Marti told herself, "When he leaves Boudha to continue his higher studies, that is when I will be ready to leave Nepal." He left in 2014, but it took the big 2015 earthquake to motivate Marti to move on in her life. Marti was working at a health camp for monks at Chokyi Nyima's monastery when the earthquake occurred. "It shook things up for me," she said, and she began to think more seriously about moving back to the US. In September 2018, she returned to Ashland, settling into a beautiful apartment filled with art. During her years in Nepal, she regularly came to the US to visit with Gyatrul Rinpoche, with whom she has had a long and loving connection. These days, she enjoys reconnecting with sangha members and working as a substitute teacher. "Our practice is nothing static. It's about developing a loving, compassionate heart. Working with kids is where I get to practice and receive teachings. Young children are sheer lovingkindness. They want to be heard and loved. I try to teach in that way. I try to live in that way."

Welcome back, Marti.



"Get out of the construction business! Stop building bridges across the raging waters of samsaric existence, attempting to reach the "far shore," nirvana. Better to simply relax, at ease and carefree, in total naturalness, and just go with the primordial flow, however it occurs and happens. And remember this: whether or not you go with the flow, it always goes with you."

~ Nyoshul Khen Rinpoche

Stories of Meeting Gyatrul Rinpoche

From time to time, we will be sharing stories of how various students met Gyatrul Rinpoche. A version of the following story appeared in the 2006 Mirror of Wisdom newsletter.



Gyatrul Rinpoche in the Seventies

In 1974, the Dharma Centre of Canada (then located in Toronto) took part in the first visit to the West of a Tibetan spiritual leader, His Holiness the 16th Karmapa.

Les Collins, who earlier had taken refuge with the Karmapa at Rumtek, His Holiness' seat in Sikkim, attended the event. He noticed a small Tibetan man standing by himself. "I knew he was with the Karmapa, but nobody was paying much attention to him,"

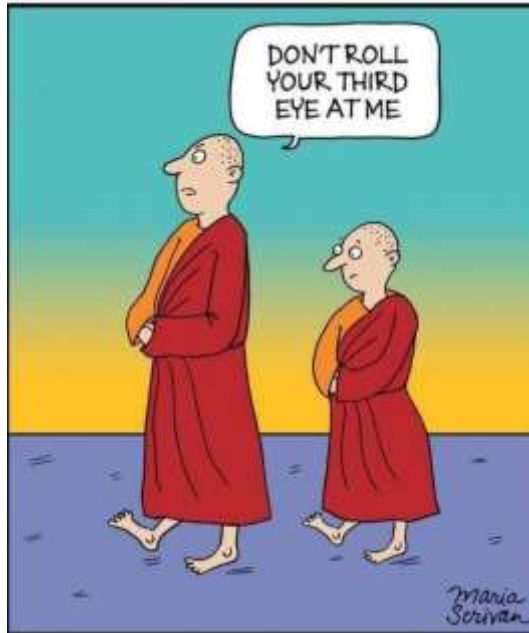
Les recalled. "He was very skinny and pale. I thought to myself, 'He looks like someone who needs some attention.' He looked ill and I wanted to help him. The other thing was," Les continued, "he was like a magnet. I was drawn to him. I had to go and talk with him. There was no way around it. So I went up to him and I asked him, 'Do you need some help? Do you have a problem?' I was looking right into his eyes, and it was like looking into a nebula. There was a vastness there I had never seen before."

Not missing a beat, the Tibetan man responded, "I'm not the one who has a problem."

Recounting the story, Lama Les laughed. He never learned who that Tibetan man was until years had passed. Moving from Canada to California, Les completed a 3-year retreat. In 1982, a friend called to say that a lama named Gyatrul Rinpoche was going to do a fish release in Santa Monica and suggested that Les attend.

So Les headed to Santa Monica. Who should he see at the fish release but the skinny lama he had met years before in Toronto. Gyatrul Rinpoche looked at Les, and with his characteristic humor asked him, "Did you ever work out that problem you were having?"

Cartoon Corner



Teachings of the Masters Film Series

Join us on Sunday, April 7th, 5-7pm at Ashland Library's Gresham Room where we will be showing "Blessings: the Tsoknyi Nangchen Nuns of Tibet." The event is free, and there is popcorn, too.

This film series is a program of TLC Transitional Life Care, a Vajrayana Buddhist non-profit offering training and support for the end of life transition.

TLC is offering a new program for the first time in April. DEEP CHAT will provide an opportunity to have an open dialogue about impermanence, loss, and what we can gain from

learning to work with them. There will be time to mingle and refreshments will be provided. The event is offered at no charge.

Deep Chat

Sunday, April 28, 3-6pm

467 Beach Street, Ashland

Seating is limited, so please pre-register at tlcareashland@gmail.com

About Sangha News

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