

Tashi Choling

Sangha News

August 2020

Sangha Spotlight

Keith LaCoste



Keith LaCoste, whom many of you know as the chant leader or umzed at Tashi Choling, was raised in the dharma. His mother, Lisbeth LaCoste, is one of Gyatral Rinpoche's senior students. Keith was born in Ashland, Oregon and lived with his family for the first 6 months of his life in a small house near Tashi Choling owned by Shandor Weiss and Gaea Yudron. The LaCoste family moved to Bellevue, Washington when his parents, Lisbeth and Mark, got jobs there. Mark plays guitar and sings beautifully, and with his encouragement, Keith began playing the piano at the age of 4. Soon after, he began taking piano lessons, which continued for many years.

When Super Nintendo video games appeared, they became a fascinating pastime for both Keith and his older brother, Joshua. Keith loved the games and was drawn to the music that accompanied them. He began to compose music when he was around 7,

elaborating on themes he had heard in the Nintendo games. As he grew older, he realized that his main musical inspiration was Nobuo Uematsu, who composed scores for many Nintendo games.

The family made trips to Tashi Choling while they were living in Bellevue, camping out and helping with building projects. Keith especially remembers one trip when he was 6 or 7. He had bad allergies and was quite miserable; but as soon as he entered the garden where the Vajrasattva statue stands, his symptoms disappeared completely. This made a strong and lasting impression on him. In 1998, after Keith completed 6th grade, his family moved back to Ashland to be closer to Rinpoche and Tashi Choling and so that Keith could attend the Waldorf School in Ashland. Rinpoche soon gave the 13-year old Keith the nickname Kiss My Face—a word play on the way Rinpoche pronounced “Keith” more like “Kees”. “That must have been embarrassing,” I ventured. Keith responded with a quiet “uh-huh.” Keith attended Waldorf School through 8th grade and finished his high school education two years later with some home schooling, obtaining a GED or General Education Diploma.

“What did you want to become when you grew up?” I asked Keith. He noted that he was not at all attracted to the kind of work either of his parents did (both worked in computing) and never thought of making a career in music either. “I never had any particular interest in becoming anything,” he said, adding that he had never had ambition or drive in that way. Soon after moving to Ashland, however, Keith received direct instructions from Rinpoche on what to do with his life on two different occasions. Both events

occurred at times when Keith was offering Rinpoche a khata after teachings. First, when he was 14 years old, Rinpoche urged Keith to “chip in.” At least, that is how Keith heard it. Later he discovered that Rinpoche was saying that he wanted Keith to learn chopening (being a ritual assistant during practices); so, Keith began to study with Brian Carstens, Trish DeMers, and others. On another occasion, when he was about 16 years old, Rinpoche gave Keith a glimpse of his future, saying, “First chopen, then umzed, then geku, then lama.”

In 2002, at Rinpoche’s request, an Educational Program was organized. Its main focus was to provide traditional Buddhist training for people selected by Rinpoche as future lamas and translators. Several students enrolled, including three that Rinpoche especially encouraged to study in the program: Keith LaCoste, Ila Reitz, and Shashi Reitz. Rinpoche has indicated on several occasions that he regards these three as important figures who will carry his dharma work forth into the future. The wider sangha was welcome to attend classes, and over the years that the Educational Program occurred, many sangha members took part. Many esteemed lamas and scholars provided training in Vajrayana philosophy and practice during these years. Keith was 16 when the Educational Program began in July of 2002.

In spring 2003, Gyatrul Rinpoche asked Keith to begin studying to become a chant leader or umzed at the monthly pujas. Keith has a grounded, calm presence, a beautiful voice, innate musical talent, and years of musical training, so it was not surprising that Rinpoche viewed him as a likely candidate for the role.



Photo by Susan Goldberg

To prepare, Keith studied with Matthew Small and Ani Baba, both of whom had been leading most of the pujas at Tashi Choling for years. He studied audio recordings and videotapes to learn the melodies in various pujas and trained with visiting umzed Pema Tenzin during annual retreats. Keith began serving as the main umzed for monthly pujas in 2003. Then at the Vajrakilaya retreat in the fall of 2006, Keith stepped into the role of main umzed for Tashi Choling’s annual retreats as well.

For the past 14 years, he has continued to serve as umzed for Tashi Chöling’s retreats and pujas, studying with several lamas, including Lama Sonam Rinpoche at Pema Osel Ling, to refine his knowledge and technique. He has also been training others in the local sangha and traveling to other centers to teach those who have an interest in learning this role. His dedication to leading the practices in a traditional and authentic way, along with his wonderful voice and musical ability, has been a beautiful gift to the sangha. Fortunately, Keith has never felt weighted or pushed down by his responsibilities at Tashi Choling and other centers. “It’s always just enough,” he commented. He hopes that someday others will take a sincere interest in

studying and learning the chants and techniques well enough to serve in this role. But for now, he is content to continue. "It's something that needs to be done," he noted in his understated way.

Keith is quiet, and unless you have had a chance to work with him on torma making or some other dharma project, you may not have gotten to know him. He has worked on a variety of projects. Besides the ongoing ritual support at Tashi Choling and other centers, Keith worked with Lee Furbeck and several others for many months in 2011-2012 to digitize and preserve 30 years' of Gyatrul Rinpoche's teachings. They had been recorded on about 3,000 cassette tapes which were beginning to degrade, endangering the preservation of Rinpoche's precious teachings. More recently, Keith and his mother have been working on digitizing all the sadhana practices that are used for Tashi Choling's monthly pujas and retreats as well as other typewritten prayers. Keith has also been working with Lama Chonam and Sangye Khandro on retranslating many of these materials.

Rinpoche provided some warm affirmation of Keith's qualities in comments he made after a puja in 2013. He noted: "Then there is Keith, who hasn't had a lot of study, contemplation, or meditation really, but seems to have learned his skill as an umzed naturally because of his wish and his diligence and his merit, and now he is doing really a very good job. He doesn't get in other people's business or talk a lot or gossip or anything like that. He is just quiet and simple and shows the qualities of someone who is really internalizing dharma and trying to benefit others... He doesn't have enemies; he doesn't have friends. He is just even. He is a good

example of someone who is really internalizing the dharma."

Now 34, Keith lives with his parents on their land in the southern part of the Colestin Valley, about two miles from Tashi Choling. His main "job" is serving the dharma through his activities at Tashi Choling and Vimala Treasures. But he also helps his parents with property upkeep, forest work, and other activities around the land. Oh, and he still really likes video games.



Gyatral Rinpoche and the Big Boulder

This story is an excerpt from Most Precious Friend, an upcoming book on Gyatrul Rinpoche's life and wisdom activities.

One summer day, Rinpoche's root guru, Tulku Natsok Rangdrol, suggested, 'Let's go out on a holiday and just have some fun.'

Reporting on their outing, Rinpoche said, "So we went out and came to a place where there was a large stone formation, with another very large stone on top of that. It was a huge stone, and if you looked at it you wouldn't imagine that someone could push it over at all.

"My guru said to me out of nowhere: 'Whoever can push that over is really a brave person. Whoever can push the one on top of it over is even braver.' He said, 'You would have to be strong like me.' And he showed his arm and his muscles, as if he was baiting me. Then he went over and sat down just below it. I was still a child. So, I ran up there to the rocks and was playing around. Then I put my feet on the rock and decided that I would just push. But first I prayed to Guru Rinpoche.

"It was a bigger rock than the giant rock up higher. I pushed and then it started moving. I yelled out 'Hey, it is moving.' My guru was there so I said, 'You should move.' He got up and moved to the side, but he was laughing. He kept watching me and laughing.

"Then sure enough, that huge boulder just keeled right over. It went down with a huge bang. Rolling down, it knocked down a large tree and then continued, bringing down all the other rocks and trees, completely covering the path that people used to go through that area. It was kind of amazing. Who would ever think that I could do that? Then Tulku Natsok said 'Oh, that is really a miracle. You are a true hero. You are really a special reincarnation.' Then he stopped, flexing his own muscles. Before we left, he put a khata over the spot.

"Unfortunately, some local residents were displeased that their road was covered because of this game. Lots of yaks had to come back and forth and it was really a rather narrow area. So Tulku Natsok asked his students to open another road for them to use. I think that giant boulder is still there," Rinpoche added as he concluded his story about what happened that day, when Tulku

Natsok suggested that the two of them go out and have some fun.



Thangtong Gyalpo statue, in the midst of painting

Thangtong Gyalpo Statue is Being Painted

In 2004, Gyatrul Rinpoche authorized artist Sonam Tsering to build a large statue of the Tibetan saint and mahasiddha, Thangtong Gyalpo, who was famous for building 58 iron bridges in Tibet and Bhutan, and for stopping a terrible epidemic. The artist began developing the statue in the carport of the temple residence at Tashi Choling.

At the time, Lama Yeshe Nyima and Brad Boucher were envisioning a project they called Heaven and Earth, a community for practitioners and retreatants on Brad and Tara Boucher's land in the Coleson Valley. They spoke often with Gyatrul Rinpoche about their hopes and plans.

One day, Rinpoche offered them the Thangtong Gyalpo statue, so that it could be placed on Brad and Tara's land to bless that place and the whole area. Not long after, Tulku Sang-ngag Rinpoche visited and chose the location for the statue, which was set on a knoll and oriented to face toward Tashi Choling.

Many years have passed, and now the statue is being painted by Tulku Jamyang Rinpoche, who is visiting from Pema Osel Ling with his wife Chimed-la. Several local sangha members have helped with prep work, some of the painting, shopping, purchasing needed materials, making food offerings.

Tulku Jamyang Rinpoche is an accomplished artist in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Kyabje Chatral Rinpoche chose Tulku Jamyang Rinpoche to make the designs for Dudjom Rinpoche's Ku-Dung stupa in Boudhanath. Also, when Thinley Norbu Rinpoche needed an important thangka painted, he chose Tulku Jamyang Rinpoche as the artist. Tulku Jamyang Rinpoche created the artwork for the extraordinary Ku-Dung stupas for Kyabje Dudjom Rinpoche and Dungse Thinley Norbu Rinpoche at Pema Osel Ling.

The photo above shows the statue during the painting process. It will be very beautiful when finished, and this is such an auspicious time for it to be completed, in the midst of a global pandemic. May beings be safe and well!

About Sangha News

Sangha News is published bi-monthly. The next issue will appear in October. If you have any news or materials you would like to contribute, please email

editor Gaea Yudron by September 10th.
gaea.laughing@gmail.com

Contemplative Cartoon Corner

