

Tashi Choling
Sangha News
April 2021



Sangha Profile:
Sondra Bennett

Sondra Bennett grew up in Dallas, Texas during the 1950s. As a child, she loved to sing, and her parents often asked her to sing for visitors. When it was determined that her voice had a 4-½ octave range, her parents scheduled weekly lessons with a music professor at Southern Methodist University. Under his guidance, Sondra learned many operatic arias. Her professor/mentor booked her to sing famous arias in concert performances throughout the southwestern states when she was 12. “He called me, ‘Opera’s child prodigy’,” she mused.

Sondra had a dream that recurred several times when she was 9. In the dream, she found herself in the midst of space. The form of a corridor was just slightly indicated with imaginary lines. At the end of the corridor, a golden statue with six arms radiated brilliant light. Years later, she realized that it was a Tibetan statue of Avalokiteshvara. But as a child, she had no idea what it was. There was just the experience of vastness and brilliance.

Sondra was born into a Jewish family. As a youngster, she attended weekly Sabbath School classes. Her style of

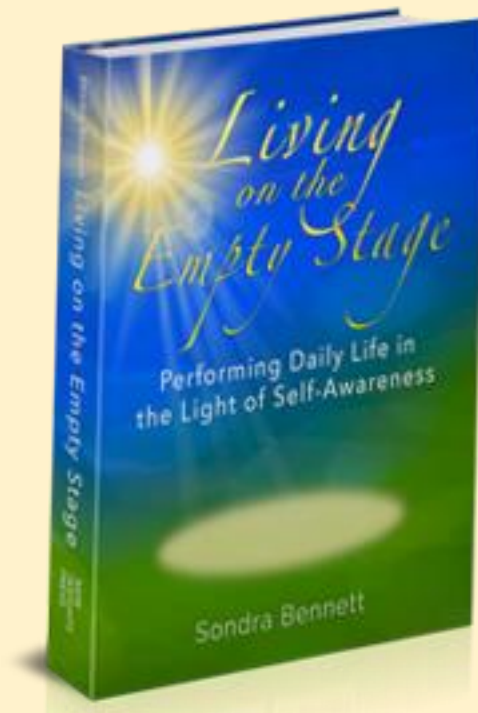
theological questioning got her into hot water with the rabbi. She wanted to know who God was—where he lived and what he looked like. She kept asking the rabbi about it but never got a satisfactory answer. Not content with being the solitary theological activist, she tried to get her classmates to join her in seeking answers. One day in class, she told the rabbi she would rather believe in a nearby ceramic lamp, which she could see, than God, who she could not see. The outraged rabbi got so angry that he broke the lamp into many pieces and had her expelled from Sabbath School. Unable to find any satisfying alignment in Judaism, Sondra decided that she was an atheist.

Later she attended Texas University, majoring in drama. Apparently, the thick Texas accent of her speech teacher made her want to move to New York City to study acting, which she did in 1964. During her New York era, she appeared in many musical productions including *Funny Girl*, *Once Upon a Mattress*, and *Three Penny Opera*. During the 1970s, Sondra lived in Ojai and spent time with the philosopher J. Krishnamurti and theoretical physicist David Bohm. She had already begun developing her life’s work, *Life Performance Practices*, a unique spiritually based process for the everyday actor in life.

Then in 1980, Sondra met Gyatrul Rinpoche in Santa Monica. At that time, Rinpoche was giving five evenings of teachings on *Taking Happiness and Suffering as the Path* at the home of Richard Rutowski. Richard called Sondra several times, urging her to come. She was skeptical, but she went, heading to the back of the room to sit on a couch so that she could observe the scene at a

distance. “I saw Rinpoche, this small Tibetan man, with Sangye Khandro, this beautiful young blonde Western woman translator, and Yeshe, this big American monk with tattoos, and I thought, ‘What a weird trio.’” After the first teaching, Sondra said she concluded, “What a nice man. Well, if I’m not doing anything tomorrow night, I’ll come back.” And so it went each night. After the teaching on the fourth night, Sondra reported that she got into her car and started crying. “What a wonderful man! I had never felt so content as in his presence. By the fifth night of teachings, he had me.” Thus began a long relationship with Rinpoche, which has included a fair amount of cooking and dharma event organization over the years. Rinpoche and Sangye often stayed with Sondra during the winter. Sondra is a very good cook. Rinpoche nicknamed her Grandma, saying that her cooking reminded him of his Grandma.

Sondra continued to develop Life Performance Practices. For 8 years, she worked with individual artists, managers, and executives at Walt Disney Imagineering as a Life Performance consultant. Her work helped Disney folks understand how the way they were acting and treating each other had an impact on the outcome of work relations and situations, including productivity and profitability. She taught classes at Cedar Sinai Cancer Center in LA, working with cancer patients and their oncologists. For 6 years, she taught a 10-week course at UCLA called *Acting for the Person in Business*. Sondra is the author of *Living on the Empty Stage: Performing Daily Life in the Light of Self Awareness*. The book is a guide to her vivid Life Performance work. You can learn more at www.lifeperformancepractices.com.



In 2001, Sondra bought a large house in Ojai, California, which she shared with her 91-year old aunt until her aunt passed away 4 years later. When Sondra invited Rinpoche to teach, her house became a Tibetan Buddhist center that Rinpoche named Osel Nyingpo. As time went on, other great lamas from the Nyingma lineage visited and taught. “It was a very special time for us all. Those few years provided us great blessings from not only Ven. Gyatrul Rinpoche, but from His Holiness Penor Rinpoche, Yangthang Tulku Rinpoche, Tulku Theglo Rinpoche, and His Holiness Getse Rinpoche,” Sondra said. In 2010, Sondra sold her house and moved to Ashland.

Soon afterwards, she headed for the Rinchen Terzod event, an important series of empowerments in the Nyingma tradition of Tibetan Buddhism which were being bestowed by Yangthang Tulku Rinpoche at Orgyen Dorje Den. When she arrived in Alameda, she was

physically tired and emotionally spent. As she was driving back to her hotel after the third day of empowerments, she suddenly started seeing double. Lights of oncoming cars seemed like a kaleidoscope of shapes. "Thinking I had just worked myself into a frazzle and needed sleep, I skipped dinner and jumped in bed when I got back to my room. The next morning, when I opened my eyes, I could hardly see. The room was spinning and again, I was seeing double!"



Two sangha friends took Sondra to see a local eye doctor. He told her that she had snapped a nerve in her neck that went directly to the eye socket, and it would take 3 to 4 months for her eyesight to be restored. He told her to wear an eye patch and sunglasses and to return for another appointment in two weeks. "About a week later, Sangye Khandro invited me to have dinner with her, Lama Chonam, and Rinpoche in their hotel room. I was sitting on the

couch across from Rinpoche and he asked me what had happened. I told him my story and he said to me, 'Don't touch your eyes, don't rub.' I said, 'Okay.' Not thinking much about it, I followed his instructions. By the fifth day, my vision was completely restored. When I went back to the eye doctor, he was astonished. He kept saying, 'What did you do? This is medically unheard of!!! Seriously, this is not possible! This takes months to heal.' I told him I did some acupuncture, which I did, but not for my eyes. I didn't think he would understand. How could I tell him that Rinpoche had worked his magic?" Sondra said.

Sondra was in Ashland from 2010 until 2016, when she moved back to Ojai to work with her LA editor on completing her book. She returned to Oregon in January 2020 and is enjoying living in a rural setting in Talent.

Welcome back, dharma sister. Hope you stay awhile in our locale.

About Sangha News

Sangha News appears bi-monthly. The next issue will appear in June. If you have any news, poetry, cartoons, etc., to share, please email Gaea Yudron at gaea.laughing@gmail.com by May 10th.

Thanks to Carolyn Myers, Linda Jo Enger, and Nancy McGee Wongmo for your suggestions and contributions to this issue.

Editor's Note: *Clark Hansen (aka Jampal Gyatso) has been coordinating Dorje Ling, Gyatrul Rinpoche's Portland center, for over 30 years. What an inspiring offering! Clark was diagnosed with ALS several years ago and is dealing with worsening symptoms. Please keep him in your prayers. I asked Clark's longtime friend, Carolyn Myers, to share something about her experience of Clark. Her article follows.*

A Tribute to My Friend Clark Hansen/Jampal Gyatso

by Carolyn Myers

It was the summer of 1973, and I was working in the garden patch behind "Das Institut." Das, as we all called it, was a political and theater collective in Isla Vista, the beachfront student ghetto next to the University of California, Santa Barbara. A very long, mint green station wagon pulled up, and a long, tall wanderer unfolded from the driver's seat. His blond hair fell to his waist. He wore cut-off jeans, long fisherman knit socks, hiking sandals—can this be the true picture? Or is it just my crazy mind in roly-poly hindsight, making stuff up? I know I had a sensation of past life "deja-vu"—a feeling I have never experienced with anyone else. Before even learning his name, I already knew him as "Brother" from what felt like lifetimes spent as brother and sister.

He came to Isla Vista seeking Emerson. She was also one of *my* best friends. Of course, she lived right here. Of course, he should stay to dinner at Das—always around twenty people eating together. Of course, he should meet the whole collective and regale us that very night with his tales of world travel.

The most vivid of these stories involved getting kidnapped by some white toughs in South Africa, forced to curl up naked (so he could not escape) behind the front seat of their car for several days—and included the car being accidentally driven off a cliff, with no one seriously injured. Then there came a daring escape involving a helpful child, some not very helpful missionaries, and finding himself in the middle of the Zulu convention in Durham. I hope you get to hear Clark's stories from afar sometime yourself—they are timeless tales.

That first day introduced everything about Clark—well, everything but the dharma. For one thing, his particular style of sartorial splendor was already on display. I have known him as a hippie vagabond, as a Saks Fifth Avenue salesman of fine goods, as a farmer, as a visitor's assistant for performers at Los Angeles' Music Center, as a US National Park Service ranger, as an oral historian for the Oregon Historical Society, and finally as a Tibetan Buddhist monk. In each role, he has completely looked the part. When I asked him about actually wearing robes, before he took the robes, Clark joked that he had a few tailoring ideas. But it turns out that both the details and the depth of wearing robes overtook him. Jampal Gyatso grew into the robes. He did not refine their style to heighten his presentation of self in the world.

Meeting Gyatrul Rinpoche was, as it is for many of Rinpoche's students, a pivotal moment in Jampal's life. Our center was on 2nd Street at that time. Clark had arrived in Ashland to visit Matthew and me, and I was thrilled, as always, to see him. But perhaps I was especially thrilled



this time, because he agreed to sit outside with my toddler daughter Uma while I got to go in and listen to the teachings, childless for the first time since I had met Rinpoche. At the break, he asked us, “Who is giving that teaching, and what exactly is the talk about?” At the end of the teaching, he met Rinpoche, and I have never heard him express one iota of doubt since then.

Clark had already been on a spiritual quest for many years. His interest in Eastern religions began with a stint in the Peace Corps in Kathmandu in 1970. But it was his connection with Gyatrul Rinpoche that hooked him completely. Clark/Jampal is a dedicated practitioner. After several years of daily sittings focused on ngöndro, he told Matthew he had finally counted up his accumulations—and he had completed the Dudjom Tersar ngöndro three times over! On his very first visit to Tashi Choling, he immediately shared that he planned to become a teacher and a

monk. He even asked Rinpoche how to become ordained. Rinpoche said to ask him later. Twenty years later, in 2000, right after he had lost both his job and his partner, and was in complete doubt as to what to do next, there was a knock on his door. There were Sangye and Rinpoche. Rinpoche said, “Remember when you asked if you could become a monk? Well, maybe now is the right time.” “And that,” Jampal says, “changed everything.”

Clark’s natural gifts for travel and for telling travel tales have evolved over the last 40 years into Buddhist pilgrimages—recounts of a “pilgrim’s progress,” as he puts it. These stories include a stay at Namdroling in India in 2006, where His Holiness Penor Rinpoche gave him full ordination instead of the usual novice ordination. Clark was worried that something had gone wrong, lost in translation perhaps. He couldn’t get back in to see Penor Rinpoche, so he asked everyone he could for clarification. Gyatrul Rinpoche shouted at him, “Well, what do you want? Do you want it? It’s up to you now, do you want it?” And, Clark did, he realized, want it. Finally, when the Khenpo Brothers came to visit, he asked them if there could have been a mistake. They grew very still. Then Khenpo Palden Sherab Rinpoche said, flatly, “Penor Rinpoche does not make mistakes.” And that was that.

In 2013, Jampal travelled, robed, throughout Southeast Asia, sometimes alone and sometimes in the company of groups of local monks. There he found himself a tourist spectacle, as the first Westerner in robes many people had ever seen. Most recently, in 2019, he hiked Bhutan at the invitation of and accompanied by a Bhutanese monk. He undertook this trip after his diagnosis of

ALS. Included in the journey was the arduous climb to Tiger's Nest, the wildly photogenic Buddhist retreat in the cleft of a steep cliff.

Clark has been able to bring to us lucky listeners, with his dedication to fully embracing the lifestyle of the monastics he stays with, insights and glimpses into varieties of Buddhist experience we could never have known otherwise. Like all great storytellers, Clark's warm, expansive nature draws the listener in, makes you feel one of a group, creates a circle of tribe, of home.



Speaking of home, I have stayed in several of Clark's homes, and many of you have, too. He has always been a generous host. And now he lives on Skyline Drive, that astonishing wild mountain ridge right inside the city of

Portland, from which you can see Mt. St. Helens, our own Northwest reminder that even a mountain is impermanent. He has donated his home as a dharma center, Dorje Ling. There he serves as gelong/bhikkhu, resident monk. Dorje Ling is part of Yeshe Nyingpo, blessed many times over by visiting lamas, many of whom have slept in the "lama room." Getse Rinpoche, on first his visit to the United States, recognized Dorje Ling as a particularly loved, spiritually evolving dharma place, and stayed there again on his second trip. It is home to an exceptionally congenial sangha, who study, practice, and work together well. Currently, sangha members center their practice, as does Jampal himself, around his medical situation.

I want to add a final personal note. Jampal and Emerson, our mutual friend, came to my daughter Uma's wedding in 2008. Her groom, Tim, was from a small town in the Midwest. The campground wedding and extended celebration was a lot to take in for his relatives. Later, when visiting Tim's family, Uma and Tim found that his family had told their friends—in complete sincerity—that the Dalai Lama had been at the wedding! It's an anecdote of mistaken identity that makes one laugh. But I understand the feeling. It matches my immediate recognition of Clark as "Brother," someone whose presence transcends this particular lifetime—and a representative, on the relative plane, of the trustworthy center that a dear friend can provide.



Rinpoche in Kona, Hawaii in 2000

Two photos from Nancy McGee Wongmo, who was the coordinator for Gyatrul Rinpoche's Portland center from 1980-84. Above, Gyatrul Rinpoche in Kona, Hawaii in 2000. The photo below shows Chagdud Rinpoche and Gyatrul Rinpoche at a Losar celebration in Cottage Grove, Oregon in the late 70s.



Losar in Cottage Grove, Oregon

Thank you, Nancy. Please keep sharing these photos from the early days with us.

Contemplative Cartoons

