

Tashi Choling

Sangha News

December 2021

Sangha Spotlight:

Billy Wisdom



Billy Wisdom was born and raised in southern Oregon, and so were his parents. In 1913, Sam Jennings, Billy's maternal grandfather, arrived alone in Medford at the age of 13 and began to earn his living by ferrying people from the railroad depot to local hotels. He later founded a company under his name, which provided tires and brakes in Medford for many years. Billy's father's family arrived from Oklahoma during the bitter Dust Bowl years. Medford, where

they developed orchards, was "like the promised land to them," Billy said.

Billy and his family lived on a farm in Central Point; their nearest neighbor was a mile away. "My brother and I got to enjoy an idyllic agrarian childhood," he noted. Of course, there were some elements and events that were not idyllic. When Billy was in 3rd grade, he and his brother were playing with guns and Billy accidentally shot himself in the leg. He did not want anyone, especially his fierce step-father, to find out, so he cleaned the wound and bandaged it himself, carefully removing traces of the accident from his clothing. "My parents didn't find out about it until 30 years later," he recalled. As he tended to his wound, he contemplated the danger of guns, asking himself a hard question: "What if I had shot my brother?"

When he was 13, Billy's mother encouraged him to begin studying martial arts. "My brother had gotten involved in wrestling. I think she saw martial arts as a way for me to have more structure and athletic activity." As it happened, martial arts became a key feature of his life for decades after. He began with judo and karate and practiced for two hours every day. "I learned that practice really works—and if you hurt yourself, it's a sign you have to do something different. I learned respect for the teacher because you want to learn from them."

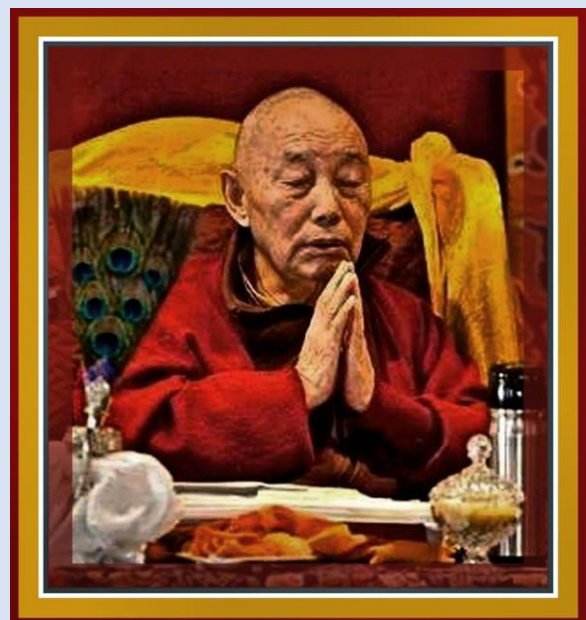
Billy got his undergraduate degree at Southern Oregon College (later University), focusing on history and anthropology. In the early 80s, he met Gyatrul Rinpoche and Sangye Khandro, who were living in an upstairs apartment in a building on Beach Street. Billy was sharing a downstairs apartment in the same building with some friends. "I

remember Rinpoche coming down the stairs one day, smiling. I put my hands together in the gesture of prayer. I saw him as a jewel of a human being, polished and precise.” But it wasn’t yet time for their connection to deepen. Billy was attending nightly teachings by Prem Rewat, then known as Guru Maharaji. “In those gatherings, I gained an appreciation for sangha and for the value of devotion,” he said.

He completed a Master’s degree in public history at the University of San Diego and began working for the US Forest Service doing cultural resource surveys. “It was basically anthropology,” he noted. A year later, with staff cuts, the job disappeared and Billy was at a crossroads. “It was either Prague or Japan,” he said. He knew he could get a job teaching English in either locale. He tossed a coin, and headed to Tokyo. Billy spent a decade in Japan during the 90s, teaching English and studying and practicing aikido. At first, he lived in Nagoya and a smaller area called Tsu, both south of Tokyo. Then he lived in Nagasaki for 8 years. His sensei’s mother was a hibakusha, or survivor of the 1945 atomic bombing of the city. The dojo he practiced in was set in the middle of a rice field. Billy sees some similarities between the martial arts and dharma: “You are listening to the teacher, doing what the teacher tells you to do, not having a goal, and not being competitive. In both martial arts and dharma, there’s a constant reminder of impermanence and death.”

In Japan, Billy met Michiko Fukuzawa. They married, moved to Ashland and settled into a home near the library. Soon they had a son, Thomas. Billy often took Tommy to the library for story times. He must have had a real affinity for the place

and its positive qualities, because one day the librarian suggested that he apply for a job opening there, which he did. Billy spent the next 14 years on staff as a library assistant. During his library career, he appeared with a variety of inventive hair styles, including a rather dramatic Mohawk. He often wore a kilt, too. It seems he enjoyed shaking up the status quo a bit. “My best practice at the library was to imagine that everyone who came in was Gyatrul Rinpoche,” he said.



Billy enjoys using an application called Pixart to add textures and layers to photos, as he did with this photo of Gyatrul Rinpoche and the Vajrasattva statue photo that follows.

To retreat a few steps, Billy had reconnected with Gyatrul Rinpoche. A friend asked Billy to find out what was happening at Tashi Choling. Billy read about an upcoming Chimed Sog Tik empowerment and decided to attend. “It was profoundly moving to be there,” he said. “In my heart, I had an instant reconnection with Rinpoche. There was a piece of Rinpoche in me and it was resonating.” That day, Billy took refuge.

Billy shared a few of his dharma memories. How, seeing Rinpoche passing in a car on Main Street, he and Tommy prostrated. How surprising and delightful it was to connect with Karma Kuchen one Halloween as he gave out candy at Sonam and Thubrig's store, Tibet Treasures. Having the opportunity to receive teachings from His Holiness Getse Rinpoche and the opportunity to see the Dudjom Yangsi.



When his beloved brother died, in his grief Billy decided that the only thing to do was walk from town to Tashi Choling. He set out and stayed on the mountain overnight. There he saw bright lights shining in the midst of nowhere. The next day he walked down to the Mandala Garden. Rinpoche appeared and Billy had a chance to talk with him. He asked Rinpoche about the bright lights he had

seen. In response, Rinpoche said, "Your prayers will help your brother."

"I am lucky to know even the name of Gyatrul Rinpoche," Billy said. "My few personal interactions with him are flowers in my life."

Portland, Oregon: News from Dorje Ling

By Jude Foster and Carolyn Myers

The pandemic story of Dorje Ling in Portland, Oregon is inextricably and intimately tied in with Jampal Gyatso's end of life. Who was Jampal, our beloved monk? He took refuge with the 16th Karmapa when he came to Portland in 1980. In 1989, he took responsibility for the Portland Yeshe Nyingpo Center, (later named Dorje Ling by Gyatrul Rinpoche). With Gyatrul Rinpoche's support, he took monk's vows with Penor Rinpoche in India in 2006 and moved the shrine room into his house. Jampal nurtured Dorje Ling through 32 years, bringing many great lamas and cultivating a devoted sangha.

BEFORE the pandemic began, Dorje Ling offered our regular Sunday practices, ngondro alternating with Guru Rinpoche and Dakini day tsoks. We had a long-time Tuesday evening book study and a Wednesday evening meditation group. We had a small but strong sangha. But Jampal already had his ALS diagnosis for more than a year, and his symptoms were progressing. He stopped driving the previous November, and we had started a Lotsa Helping Hands effort

to organize our support. Dorje Ling was also Jampal's home, and sangha members were in and out all the time – for personal meetings to discuss dharma, board and sangha meetings, various people helped to take care of the grounds, his wide network of friends came and went, and many of us supported him with meals and driving and whatever else came up.

DURING the first year of the pandemic, with the center closed to in-person practice since March 2020, the book study group moved online in May, and our Sunday ngondro practice resumed via Zoom in August, both thanks to dedicated sangha members. Jampal also encouraged us to join Tashi Choling's Zoom practices.

But during that first Covid year, slowly and then not so slowly, Jampal's condition worsened. Only a few were able to help him, only a few were able to visit. He kept on with his phone calls and emails as long as he could, never losing sight of his dharma commitments. He hoped he had more time. When he died on May 12, 2021, we were in that temporary lighter moment of pandemic hope. By the time his 49 days had passed, the Delta variation of the virus had set in.

SINCE Jampal's passing, the Zoom book study and ngondro have continued, but without him, it has not been easy to re-connect our sangha.

A big change happened in September when Matthew Small and his wife Carolyn Myers moved into the downstairs apartment. This was Jampal's oft-voiced hope in his last months. Friends since the 1970s, it was Matthew and Carolyn who

introduced Jampal to Gyatrul Rinpoche in 1980.



Matthew Small

Matthew and Jampal became very close over the years through their deep commitment to dharma practice, and Matthew was one of Jampal's devoted caregivers during the last months of his life. They were practicing together when Jampal died.

Matthew has accepted his position as Program Director at Dorje Ling with gratitude and a sincere desire to help further the dharma. The board has begun to meet again, with much work to be done. Lunar pujas are practiced in the temple now, joining Tashi Choling by Zoom, with a few sangha members attending in person, and a Chod practice group has been formed. Our Zoom practices continue. Slowly, slowly Dorje Ling is opening up again.



More Sangha News



In January 1986, on a full moon day, Gilda Taylor became the first person in Gyatrul Rinpoche's American sangha to be ordained. She was also the first Westerner to be ordained by Penor Rinpoche at Namdroling Monastery in southern India.

Now 86, Ani Gilda recently moved into an assisted living center. Because of the pandemic, she cannot receive visitors, but you can send a letter or card to her at Sellwood Senior Living, 8517 S.E. 17th Ave., Portland, OR 972002 or communicate via email at loopski@gmail.com.

Ani Tsultrim recently moved from Hornbrook, California to an apartment on Clay Street in Ashland.

Diane Taudvin and Regen Armstrong have sold their home in the Rogue Valley and are moving up to the Portland area this month.

The Zoom sangha social that Susan Bosworth and I hosted at the end of October was quite wonderful, with surprise visits from Linda Godden in Australia, Barbara and Renato Caselli in North Carolina, Sangye and Lama Chonam in Palm Desert, Ila Reitz in Half

Moon Bay, as well as Lama Bruce and a bouquet of local sangha members.



Cartoon Corner



**Wishing all a happy Season
with warm end of year
celebrations.**

About Sangha News

The next issue of Sangha News will appear in February. Please send news, cartoons, or poetry to gaea.laughing@gmail.com by January 10th, 2022