



The Fortunate Life of Ani Migme

Ani Migme was born Thelma Eskin in Ottawa, Ontario in 1924. Her father was a carpenter and her mother was a seamstress. They lived in LowerTown in a diverse neighbourhood of French and Irish families with an intermixture of a few Jewish families. Her parents, free-thinking Jews who had immigrated to



Venerable Migme Chödrön (2008)

Canada from Russia in the very early part of the 20th century, were seeking a better life in North America. As a child, Thelma was curious of other folk's beliefs but she grew up proud of being an atheist. At school where she excelled she read voraciously, encouraged by one of her "idols," a librarian who gave her books beyond her age to read. Natural history became her keen interest. The spiritual dimension of nature made itself felt even though she did not believe in God.

A scholarship to Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario and the new discipline of biochemistry rewarded her with a Bachelor's Degree and an animosity towards dissecting live animals. This was followed by a Master's Degree in chemistry. Thelma married Harry Habgood in 1946 and as graduate students in chemistry, they chose to enrol at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. Music, film clubs, good friendships and doctoral research did not mix too well and so the PhD took longer than expected to be completed. Thoughts of staying on in

the USA were discouraged by the post-World War II Red Scare and Senator McCarthy's chilling effect.

Back in Ottawa, Thelma and Harry secured positions at the National Research Council. Harry's position was a fellowship which came to an end in 1954 and he was offered another job at the Bureau of Mines. With that security in mind, they set off to travel in Europe. In Italy, Harry got word his job offer was rescinded for "security" reasons. In the end they deduced that this may have been the result of suspicion caused by the fact that an employee of the Russian Embassy was boarding with Thelma's parents. Harry then took up a position with the Albert Research Council in Edmonton and they both moved out West.

With a career in chemistry on hold and no job, having a family came to mind. Helen Habgood was born in 1956 and the loving task of raising a child softened her mother's mental outlook. Thelma stayed at home until Helen was ready for school. Then she took up an open-ended research position at the University of Alberta which lasted for 14 years. A deep interest in archaeology and, in particular, rock art such as in the caves of Lascaux, led to her taking up a research position in the Department of Anthropology and Archaeology and also heightened her interest in spirituality, something other than the ambient materialistic out-look. The Unitarian Church furthered the inquiry into Meaning. The minister provided an introduction to meditation. Work on archaeology digs brought her into contact with ancient Cree settlements. Classes in Hinduism and Buddhism followed and the common sense of Buddhism became clear.

She explored the Pure Land (Japanese) Church but this did not grow into any feeling of commitment. Then came "Meditation in Action" by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. This book made absolute sense to her and she felt that she had to meet this teacher. It clarified her nascent awareness of the ultimate dissatisfaction with worldly life in spite of ample success in family and work.

Regular teachings from the guru blossomed into forming a reading group and then a meditation group in her home which led to the establishment of a Dharmadhatu, as Shambhala Centres were known at the time.

Trungpa Rinpoche's move to Halifax

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brought Harry and Thelma to Halifax in 1984 where she was practice coordinator of Karma Dzong and host for travelers to and from Gampo Abbey. Eventually she and Harry moved to the Abbey. After much discreet self-reflection, she told Harry that she wanted to be a nun. This was not easy for Harry to take but he remained close to the Abbey as friend and neighbour, living with his companion. Harry died in September 2008.

Ani Migme became a fully ordained



Harry & Thelma's Wedding Day
Ann Arbor, Michigan - 1946

nun. She was in the first group of graduates of the 3-year retreat at Sopa Choling. She has been the Abbey librarian from its very earliest days, has translated a number of Buddhist texts from French into English, and continues to enjoy helping students as a mentor and meditation instructor.

An Interview w

Ani Migme, a resident of Gampo Abbey for 20 years, has contributed unstintingly to the life of the Abbey over this time. Now at 84, she is part of the Elders' Group providing a depth and breadth of reference difficult to match. Her keen interest in bodhicitta and monasticism benefits many practitioners.

Question: How long have you been practicing Buddhism?

Ani Migme: I became a student of Trungpa Rinpoche in 1973, so that's 33 years ago and maybe I've been meditating for a year before that, so maybe 34 years.



*Thelma Habgood - Nee Eskin
Age 12 - 1936*

Q: Somebody who reads this would ask you, after so many years, why are you still practicing? (Laughs)

AM: Because that's just life, life is practice. There's no difference for me (laughing.)

Q: You mean that the practice you are doing became your life?

AM: Yes, there's no separation. When I am on the cushion or in the shrine room, there's no difference from my sitting here in the chair talking to you.

Q: But it takes a while.

AM: Oh, it takes a long, long time. For myself... up to 30 years.

Q: Before... life...

AM: And practice integrated completely. There is no thought in my mind, that I should be practicing the dharma right now. Dharma is just living.

Q: What is the influence of this long practice of Buddhism in your life?

How does it manifest itself?

AM: I had always been a shy person, a person who didn't socialize very well, particularly a person who didn't express my inner feelings, my inner desires, and my inner thoughts to

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anyone. It was sort of my secret life. I suppose I had been looking for someone who would actually share



*Thelma Eskin (Habgood)
Queen's University Graduation - 1944*

that so-called inner life with me and I never found one. But what I did find is some fruition of the practice: I'm not holding anything back now; I don't have a secret life anymore.

Of course I don't blurt it out to everyone, but if I feel that the other person would understand or would

benefit in any way, it's just there. I still am not a very sociable person but I think I'm much more open. What I found in the last few years is that I can truthfully say that I love everyone; it's just an unconditional love, in that I'm



*Thelma with daughter Helen
Edmonton, Alberta - 1961*

not expecting anything back from anyone. I still find myself occasionally making judgments, but I find I'm not allowing those judgments to make a separation between myself and others.



with Ani Migme

by Dr. Mauro Peressini

So that's what practice has done for me. So I would say love and compassion.

Q: Which is what...?

AM: Well, it feels good (laughs).

Q: And during all these 30 years did

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you have some doubts in your path, in your practice?

AM: Doubts about the dharma...?

Q: About what you were doing.

AM: No, actually, I felt that this was the only thing there was to do, no doubts about that at all. The Buddha said it like it is, and somehow there was no doubt in that regard at all.

Q: I was asking this question because it is often said that when you practice, inevitably you will have doubts and you have to deal with these doubts and you are taught how to do it. But in your case, you were convinced from the beginning.

AM: I was convinced from the

beginning, I don't remember any outstanding doubt at all, but if there were any incipient doubt, then I must have been telling myself, let's just keep working with this and the dharma will actually take care of it.



Monastic Ordination Ceremony

Q: Let's say somebody doesn't know anything about Buddhism and what is life in a monastery. Can you describe one of your typical days?

AM: A typical day would be that I get up at 4:00 in the morning and I read the New York Times, the Globe and Mail and the BBC on the web. Then I usually do about an hour of translation before going into the shrine room for morning chants. We sit from 6:00 until 7:00, then it's breakfast time, so if I finish my breakfast at 7:15, I get another hour of translation done. I try to get little bits done wherever I can and then I go back into the shrine room. At this stage I like very simple practices. I've been through all the fancy practices and I like just the very simple basic one. I do sitting meditation for an hour until 9:30.

From 9:30 to 11:30 I usually translate again. Sometimes I have scheduled meditation interviews with people so it could be at that time, then lunch. In the

afternoon, meetings that I have to attend, if not, I do some work in the library, perhaps a little more translation. At 5:45 back in the shrine room, we actually do a little Buddha Sadhana, a simple little practice which everybody can do, a lovely practice. Then evening chants, supper and then, I usually relax with a book and I go to bed at 8:00.

Q: In order to wake up?

AM: Yeah.

Q: So when you practice now, what happens? Do you see one thought after another?

AM: No, there would be gaps between the thoughts where nothing happens particularly. You see the chair and you see the books, you see the person in front of you but you are not telling yourself a story about them, no story line. So you don't even label it chair...it's just the visual impression of chair, but not, "that is a chair".

Q: I guess arriving at that point takes a long...

AM: Yes, takes a long time (agreeing).

Q: I guess if we meditate, it is in order not only to experience this, but to live differently. How do we link this meditation practice that can arrive at that point where you are, where you can have a mind with long periods of time without any thoughts, how do you live this with your life outside the meditation room?

AM: That is the training. The more frequently you can sit and allow your

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Thelma Habgood / Ani Migme - Ottawa 1953

mind to settle then you begin to see what the nature of mind is, that it can be peaceful. When you get up from your meditation cushion, you can keep reminding yourself, when you are busy doing something, you can remind

even though they were practicing for 35 years, they still have problems, after all these years. Do you still face problems in your practice?

AM: I'd say the only problem that I face in my practice is occasionally a tendency to just fall asleep momentarily.

Q: (Laughs) That's not a problem.

AM: Well, it is, it is a problem because to me the falling asleep is an indication of ignorance and that's the main underlying problem. That's an indication I haven't cured all my ignorance yet, so...

Q: How come you link that to ignorance?

AM: First of all, I'll just say how it's taught in Buddhism.

Ignorance is not understanding the nature of reality and out of that misunderstanding, there arises either what's called passion, which is wanting to suck things into you or aggression which is wanting to push things away from you, and both of those arise out of the ignorance. So, ignorance is the source of all the difficult emotions, jealousy, pride, covetousness, greed and so on. The other way of looking at it is, ignorance is not understanding reality, not being aware of the true nature of mind. Our experience of everything

depends upon our mind. Some schools of Buddhism say there is nothing else but mind, and so if we understand what mind is, then we've done away with ignorance. So, it's fundamental....

Q: Isn't it a contradiction to become a monk while you're supposed to transport your practice, your realization, into the world? To become a monk, at least for Westerners, means retirement from the world. Isn't there a contradiction here?

AM: No, because basically a monastery is not a retirement from the world. The world is right here. If you go into a cave by yourself, you're retiring from the world, but if you are living a communal life, you're not separated from the world, you're right in the world. All the same relationships of love and hate and so on are still there. In fact, in a monastery they are even intensified because there's no distraction, so they're right in your face all the time.

Q: But still you work at a small scale.

AM: Yes, a small scale, but nevertheless the mechanics are still the same.

Q: Maybe this is the only scale where we can act actually efficiently.

AM: Efficiently, yes, because out in the world, we have so many distractions to lead us away from working on those, we rarely face up to things properly.



Ani Palmo (left), Gampo Acharya Penna Chödrön and Ani Migme

yourself, "No, I don't have to tell myself a story line about this. There it is, I can let go, I don't have to churn up all sorts of stuff". That's perhaps the difficult part. Generally, when we get up off the cushion, we jump right in, we dive right into something without just allowing a little bit of space. So if you can slow down, take deep breaths before you answer somebody and say something you wish you hadn't said (laughing.)

Q: This is an effect of the meditation.

AM: It's very practical.

Q: Some other people to whom I spoke,

Lion's Roar would like to thank very much Dr. Mauro Peressini of the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa for allowing us to use this excerpt from his project "Buddhism in Canada".