

## **Longtime Montana rancher ordained as Buddhist priest**

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by David Cooper

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Bill Milton and his wife, Dana, have worked for years on their cattle ranch northwest of Roundup. In their years building the ranch, they celebrated the births of their three children, who have now grown up, some having children of their own. They have enjoyed a good life of hard work. Bill has equally enjoyed the hard life of his spiritual practice.

No spiritual practice is easily defined. The Buddha way is no exception. The path to ordination for Milton has been an ongoing realization-practice of the radical impermanence of our everyday lives, intersecting seamlessly with the inescapable interdependence with all things. Not one, not two. Recognizing “we all belong here,” how can we harmonize our essential difference and equality? Bill’s answer to this question has been his participation with a local community foundation, his facilitation support for ranch families, and his participation with large-landscape, community groups. His answer is also “just sitting,” facing the wall. All are opportunities.

Bill’s longtime dedication to the study and practice of the Buddha way was always under the gentle guidance and warm advice of his many teachers (inanimate as well as animate), especially Layla Smith (Gyokujun Teishin), a Montana girl and Zen priest since 1973; additionally she has received “Dharma Transmission” (a big deal) in the Soto Zen Way of Shunryu Suzuki-roshi, founder of the San Francisco Zen Center and Tassajara Monastery (the first Buddhist monastery in America). Layla is a profound teacher. But Layla lives in California; Bill in Montana.

There aren’t that many people who practice Zen in Musselshell County. Indeed the closest Zen meditation community with whom he could find support and spiritual intimacy was 200 miles away — in Helena — the Open Circle Sangha (*sangha* is a Sanskrit word meaning “spiritual community.”) Their primary teacher for years was also Layla Smith. So for years Bill complemented his isolated practice by driving 200 miles to immerse himself with the community practice of the Open Circle, on occasion with their weekly gatherings, and usually with their annual, multi-day meditation “intensives.” And then his years of practice became Saturday, April 26.

Led by Layla, the Open Circle organized an intensive meditation practice that began Sunday, April 20 and continued daily through Saturday, April 27. These periods were devoted to sitting and walking meditation, but included “talks” by the teacher and informal discussions with tea as well. These periods were also the foundation for the ordination.

On Saturday, after a morning of practice, the room was readied for the ordination — food was set out on the reception table, chairs were arranged for Bill’s family and friends, the special requirements for this ancient and formal ceremony were all prepared. And Bill’s head had been freshly shaved.

Including Open Circle and Bill’s guests, maybe 50 people attended. At 2 p.m. the guests and sangha could hear, coming up the hall outside the ordination room, two bells of different tones ringing softly, in complement to each other — “ding” (and one second

later) “dong.” Then the procession came into the room, and Bill became ordained. The ceremony itself was complicated, very formal and very ancient. Its highlights included a lot of head-on-the-floor bowing, Bill receiving his priest’s robes from Layla, Bill’s affirmation and intention to accept the weight of the robe, his Buddha name, Gyo Ji I Den (Continuous Practice, Dharma Field), and his public embrace of the Buddha’s “precepts,” the paths of awareness and action which create well being rather than harm to self and others. Then, in reverse, the procession left the room, their bells fading away.

And for the first time in Montana’s history, a Montana cowboy became a Soto Zen Buddhist priest.