

# Tim McNeill

From presidential campaign strategist to Buddhist publisher

By JUDITH ROSEN

On a bookshelf in Tim McNeill's office at Wisdom Publications stand two photos of former houseguests. Together they represent the two poles of his life: politics and religion. In one, McNeill stands next to Bill Clinton during his first presidential campaign; in the other is the Dalai Lama.

Religion and politics may make for strange bedfellows, but in McNeill's case they have given way to strong publishing instincts. Those instincts have enabled him to turn around a nonprofit publisher of Buddhist texts, which had been losing money by the time he took the helm in the late 1980s. Before accepting the challenge, McNeill served on Michael Dukakis's presidential campaign. His other publishing "qualifications" included a degree in public policy from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, fluency in Farsi after three years in the Peace Corps in Afghanistan and an international business background from his work with International Data Group and Arthur D. Little. And he was willing to work at Wisdom on a volunteer basis for five years.

One of the first changes McNeill made in taking over was to move Wisdom from London to Boston and



## CHANGE MAKERS

eventually to its own building in Somerville, Mass. After years of steady growth, Wisdom broke \$2 million in sales in 2006, and in 2007 it had its best year ever, with a double-digit increase in its net surplus. Although the 2008 figures are still being tallied, McNeill anticipates a small change in the surplus. In 2009, Wisdom's sales should get a boost from the publication of the Dalai Lama's *The Middle Way: Faith Grounded in Reason*, which will have a 12,000-copy first printing. Originally slated for August publication, the book's release was pushed up so that it will be available when His Holiness visits North America in late April. This is the 14th book that the Dalai Lama has published with Wisdom—more than with any other publisher.

McNeill has steered Wisdom away from distribution of Buddhist titles, which it emphasized instead of publishing in the company's early days. "I really focused on succeeding as a publisher,"

says McNeill, who says Wisdom's publishing program produces authentic resources. "We don't do crossovers. If it's Zen; it's Zen. We like to think it has the Good Housekeeping seal of approval." Because the press's books provide perennial wisdom, Wisdom doesn't put things out of print. In fact, says McNeill, backlist outsells frontlist by a 55% to 45% margin. Currently, e-tailers account for more than 20% of Wisdom's sales, and licensing accounts for another 10%, with some of the Dalai Lama's books available in 25 to 30 languages. Wisdom is also getting ready to embark on digital publishing through distributor PGW's Constellation program.

Wisdom doesn't shy away from serious subjects, and remains committed to publishing scholarly works at a time when even some university presses are cutting back. In 1999, Wisdom launched the series *Studies in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism* to make the works of scholars on the Indic Buddhist traditions available at affordable prices, most under \$30. More recently, Wisdom has made a commitment to publishing the entire 32-volume *Library of Tibetan Classics*, edited by Thupten Jinpa, which contains works of literature, philosophy and spirituality spanning 1,500 years. "I liken it to the Harvard Classics, five feet of books representing Western literary heritage," says McNeill. "But this is Tibetan wisdom."

For McNeill, publishing can be a balancing act between books like Jaimal Yogis's *Saltwater Buddha: A Surfer's Quest to Find Zen on the Sea* (May) and Bhante Gunaratana's *Mindfulness in Plain English*, which has sold over 150,000 copies. But he finds it "very fulfilling. It comes," says McNeill, "with being inspired by this phenomenal and multifaceted human resource called Buddhism." ■

## PROFILE

**Name:** Tim McNeill **Age:** 58 **Company:** Wisdom Publications **Title:** Publisher/CEO

**First job:** Peace Corps volunteer teaching English in Afghanistan **Publishing in the**

**future will be...** increasingly accessible to all through technology. Publishing houses in the future—

especially niche publishing houses—will help nurture communities of readers and authors, and be a source of a value-added quality, assuring readers of polished, thoughtful and carefully chosen works.