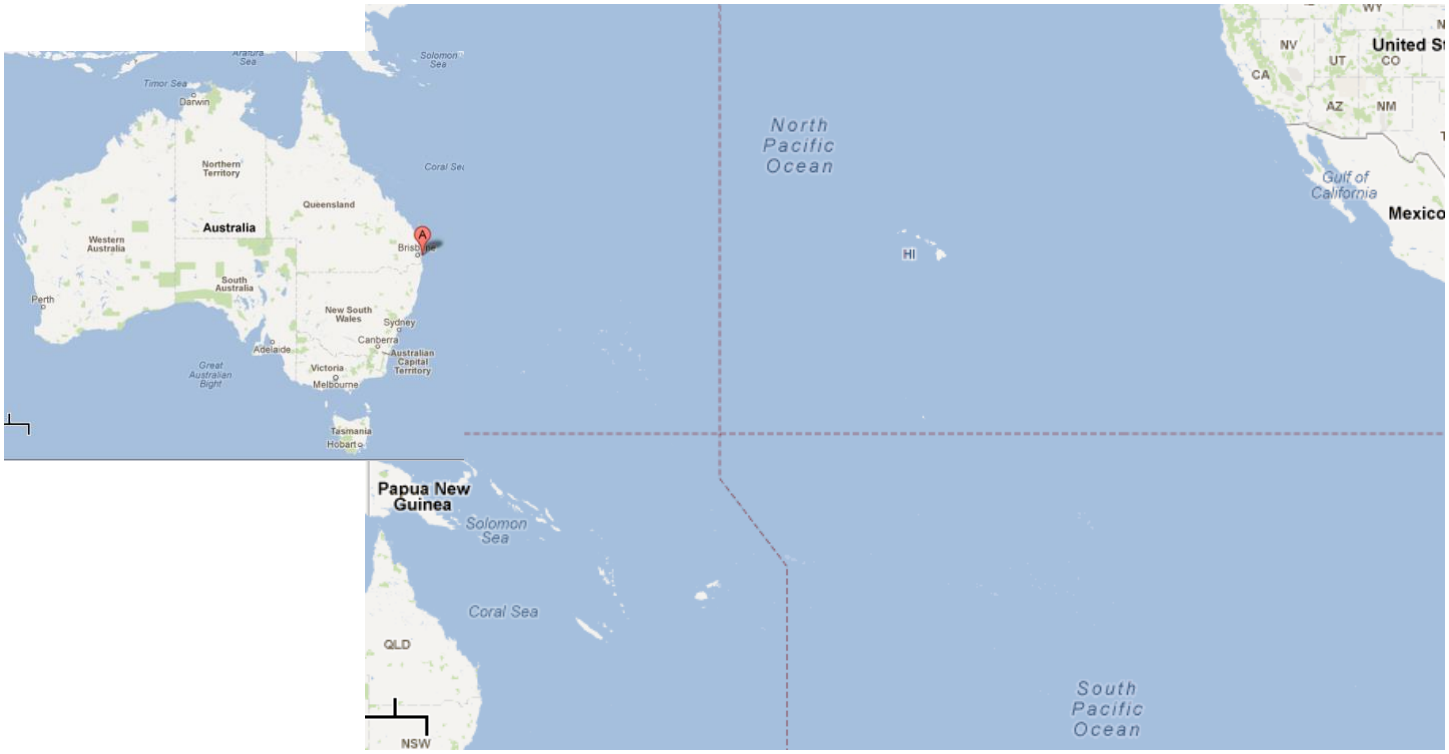
POSTCARD 20 FROM ROBINA: STRADBROKE ISLAND, TUESDAY, MARCH 6, 2012

A month has passed since I was at Maitripa in Portland. It's Tuesday March 6 and I'm in tropical Queensland, settling in for a month's editing retreat. Kathleen Surawski has kindly offered me her house: a raised wooden structure with a deck, on a cliff overlooking the ocean at Point Lookout, on the tip of Stradbroke Island, just off the main coast, 20 miles east of Brisbane.



The sea is called the Coral Sea here, and it turns into the South Pacific Ocean as you go east. If you keep going east, you'll hit Chile, 7,000+ miles away; go northeast and you get to California.

It's nearing the end of Australia's summer now. There's been lots of rain lately, so the air is still moist. But there are cool breezes coming in through the big doors, which open onto the deck, a few feet in front of me. Beyond that are the gum trees, then the ocean.

The sounds of the waves and the wind in the trees are pleasing, I must say. Although it doesn't take much imagination to re-label the sounds of the traffic on a distant freeway as "pleasing": the whooshing is quite similar (no freeways here, though).

A view from Stradbroke Island's Point Lookout, similar to what I can see from my open doors. Photo Luke Casey.

I've set myself up on the couch in the lounge room. I sleep here at night, then sit up and do my prayers in the morning and my editing the rest of the day, my computer on a little table in front of me. I like the convenience of all-in-one.

Actually, I haven't started the editing yet – tomorrow. I've got two books I want to finish first drafts of during this month. One is Lama Zopa Rinpoche's teachings on death, given in France in 2003; and the other is teachings by Lama Yeshe on mahamudra, given at Atisha Centre in Australia in 1981, both of which I've been doing some work on during the past few months.

I got to Australia last Friday, flying to Sydney from Los Angeles, a 15-hour journey across that Pacific Ocean. My friend Dana met me – the same Dana who got me through the traffic on the Indian visa escapade four months ago. This time she drove me to the Blue Mountains, two hours to the west, so I could pick up my car.

Yes, even though I'm homeless these days, I have a car. I have it only a few months of the year, of course; other people use it the rest of the time – including Lama Zopa Rinpoche, just once, last April. I bought it over the Internet during my stay at Tushita in Dharamsala in 2010, and my brother Tony picked it up for me, in Melbourne.

Tushita closes for the winter, December through February, and that, of course, is Australia's summer, and I spent those months in Australia. Someone had kindly offered me a donation for some mediation that I did for them, so I figured I'd get myself a car. I enjoy driving: I can sit behind the wheel for hours at a time, relaxed and focused. I use the time to listen to my prayers on my iPod Shuffle, and to do some thinking. It's a Mercedes and it cost no more than any other car of its age. It's a 1995 C220, with a racing green body in very shiny condition, a sunroof, and dark windows (good for the tropics), and it has low kilometers on the clock. This time I'm here for three months and will use it to drive around Brisbane next month when I teach again, then up to Chenrezig Institute, and north to Hervey Bay. Then I'll drive the 1,000 kilometers south to Sydney (I drove up over the past weekend) where I'll be in May.

I like to drive fast. I do my best to stick to the legal limits, but I fail sometimes. In Australia, you can't escape getting fined: everywhere they use cameras now; you rarely see a live policeman. When I went to the States in 1994, I bought a car then, too: a 1976 Dodge Dart, a classic. I got so many speeding tickets that if I'd gotten one more I would have lost my license. I slowed down just in time.

Before I flew to Sydney at midnight on February 29, I spent the day in LA with my dear friend Tiffany Murray, a student of Geshe Lama Konchog and a kind benefactor of Liberation Prison Project in the past. At four o'clock she drove me to Antioch University in Culver City, where I gave a talk, invited by Matt Silverstein, who's on the faculty there, involved with spiritual and depth psychology. Also there were some people from the faculty and students involved with LGBT clinical psychology, a specialization at Antioch. We had a very lively discussion about identity, stemming from a question from Douglas.

From the Buddhist perspective, we might well be gay or female or black – or a gymnast, for that matter – but they're relative realities and finally do not define us. I remember giving a talk at a prison in Virginia 10 years ago. We talked a lot about karma and reincarnation, and a young man, who happened to be black, said, "You mean I could be born a white man?" (Actually, I didn't tell him he could be born a white woman!) It's clear we all take a certain aspect of ourselves and then define ourselves in those terms – and race and gender seem pretty fundamental to our being. It's inevitable that a person who has suffered in terms of being a black man, for example, would, as this young man in prison was doing, learn to heal his self-identity in those terms. It's necessary to do this, in fact.

Tiffany took me to American Apparel in Santa Monica to buy some $9 thongs in readiness for Australia's summer.

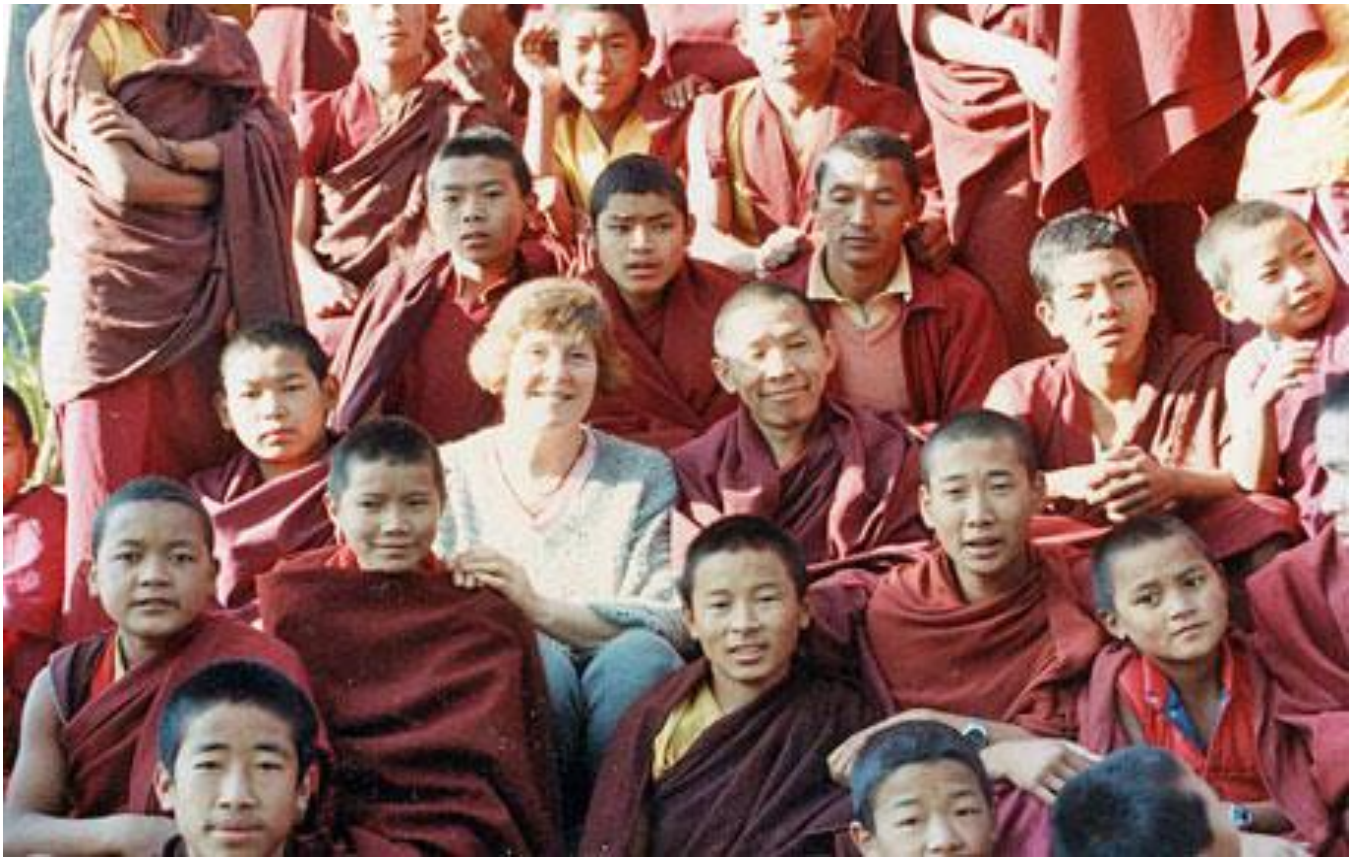
Because I'd been involved (40 years ago) in radical feminist politics and for a while had identified myself as a lesbian and thus was billed for this talk in LA as an "LGBT activist," which in fact I'm not, someone else asked me if I defined myself still in this way. I said no. Clearly I am the sum total of the various identities I've had over the years – Catholic, communist, feminist, lesbian, Buddhist – but I don't take any one of them as who I am at the core. This gets to the very essence of Lord Buddha's teachings, of course: who we think we are. We need to happily be our dependent arising self without clinging to anything intrinsic. I'm doing my best to be Robina without over-identifying with her! Not easy.

Before LA I'd been two weeks in snowy Missoula, at Rinpoche's center in Montana. Old friends; I've been going there for years. We had about eight classes, each one taking a verse of Langri Tangpa's classic mind training text. In the end of course, we covered everything: the mind, delusions, karma, purification, and, of course, bodhichitta. I stayed at Fran's house while she went off to Portland on a job: she's a welder.

Snowy Missoula. Photo Scott Sharick; with Fran.

During the week before that, which would be the second week of February, I drove three hours from San Francisco (this time courtesy of Avis) to Chico State University, off Highway 5 in the desert. A nice little town, based around the university.

Then the three hours back to town, to San Anselmo in Marin County and the home and Jack of Judith Hunt, who've run a little group there for years and years, sort of a satellite of Tse Chen Ling in SF. Judith spent a while at Kopan Monastery in the 1980s, where she became the beloved Ama-la of many of the monks.



Judith with Kopan's beloved abbot for 40 years, from 1972 until his death in September 2011. Photo courtesy Judith Hunt.

And before Montana I spent a weekend at Vajrapani Institute, where I did my first job for Rinpoche in the USA, in 1994: spiritual program coordinator. It lasted only a few months; I moved over to Soquel, 45 minutes away, to take on the job of editor of *Mandala*. We had a very nice weekend together, talking about how to deconstruct our emotions and then reconstruct them in sync with wisdom and compassion: the real job of being a Buddhist.

Then it was back up to San Francisco again for an evening with the Gay Buddhist Sangha at the Zen center on Hartford Street. Old friends there, too.

Prostrating to Lama Yeshe's cremation stupa, on the ridge at Vajrapani, the site where, on March 7, 1984, Lama's holy body was cremated. Photo Fabienne Pradelle.

Teaching at San Francisco's Gay Buddhist Sangha Photo Alison Harr.