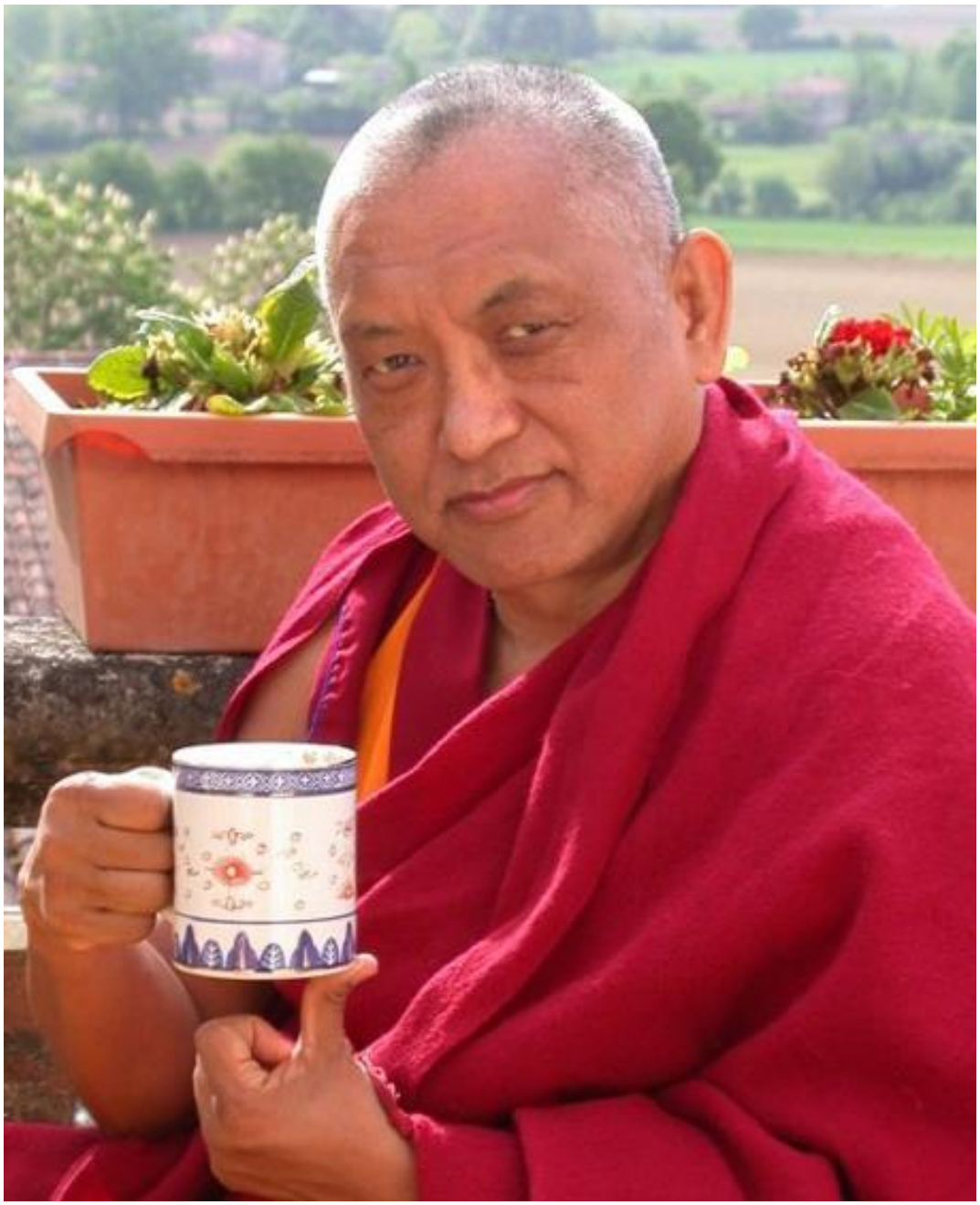
POSTCARD 21 FROM ROBINA: BRISBANE, SUNDAY, APRIL 22, 2012

I'm in Brisbane now, after my five-week editing retreat on Stradbroke Island, 25 kilometers east of here. I finished the first draft of the book I was working on, of Lama Zopa Rinpoche's, about how to help people at the time of death. It's mainly from teachings that Rinpoche gave at Institut Vajra Yogini in France in 2003. At the time Rinpoche said that he was energized to give these teachings after one of his students told him that when her father had died she didn't know what to do to help. "This is important education to have," Rinpoche said.



Lama Zopa Rinpoche at Institut Vajra Yogini, the FPMT center in the French countryside in the south, not far from Toulouse, in 2003. Photo fpmt.org.

"Helping at the time of death is the most important service we can offer to benefit others. Why? Because death is the most crucial time of life. It's at death that the next life is determined. By providing the right environment, the right support, for the person's mind, you can help them die with virtuous thoughts and – depending on karma also, of course – thus have a good rebirth."

The biggest obstacle at the time of death is attachment, "the main push behind samsara, the main cause." Rinpoche points out that attachment motivates our negative actions, which brings suffering results; it even motivates our wish for a good future rebirth. And at the time of death, very intense levels of attachment called craving and grasping arise, which nourish the karmic seed that will ripen as our future life. Attachment is pervasive. "It is what ties us to samsara, has been tying us to samsara continuously, and will continue to tie us to samsara. Body after body keep coming, like the production line in a factory."

The book is full of details about what to do to help during the weeks and days before death, at the time of death, after the breath stops, and after the body has been taken out. It's all such helpful advice. Wisdom Publications will publish it, probably next year.

During my editing retreat, I'd sleep on this sofa at night then sit up in the morning and do my prayers. The rest of the day I'd spend editing. Very comfortable. Photo Gail Bell.

Straddie, as the locals call it - Australians shorten EVERY word just about! - is called Minjerribah for the local people, who themselves are of the Noonuccal and Goenpul tribes. There is archaeological evidence that people have lived there for 20,000-plus

years. These days, perhaps 2,000 people, mostly white Australian, live in three small clusters: Dunwhich, which is the port, where the daily boats and car barges land after making the 40-minute journey from the mainland; Amity Point; and Point Lookout. Lots of tourists come throughout the year. Most of the land, which is very beautiful and is empty of people, has been offered back to the local people.

The trusty Merc takes me shopping for food. Photo Gail Bell.

During my five-week sojourn, I took the ferry on a couple of Thursdays to the mainland and taught at a place called The Relaxation Centre, which has been going in Brisbane for more than 30 years, run by an ex-accountant called Lionel Fifield. He and his team do an amazing job! They attract really sincere, wonderful people to give courses and classes and workshops there on a every imaginable topic to do with transforming our minds and lives. I wish our Buddhist centers would follow in their example! First of all, they have several events on every day of the week, morning, afternoon, and evening, whereas the vast majority of our centers only have things on in the evenings and during the weekends. And the titles of their talks etc. are so tasty. Every month there are something like 80 titles, such as A Guide to Procrastination, Addictions, Are you Stuck with Pain?, Deep Relaxation, Chinese Brush Painting, Dreams, Eating Well Being Well, Integral Yoga, Mindfulness Meditation for Kids, Resilience, Transforming Problems into Happiness . . on and on through the alphabet. So inspiring. Because they're not coming from any lineage they're not restricted, as we often are, by our titles of courses such as Introduction to Buddhism, Seven-point Mind Training, etc. etc. It's not obvious how they'll help me in my life, whereas The Inner Challenges of Becoming Conscious or Resolving Conflict tell me immediately. We could be much more creative, I think.

A view from North Straddie, similar to the view from when I'd look up from my computer. Photo R. Passis.

I also flew down to Melbourne on Friday March 16. I had lunch with my sister Julie, who lives in Carlton, just out of the city. She drove me to the main train station, Southern Cross, where I took a train to Bendigo for a class that night and a course at Atisha Centre near Eaglehawk, in the bush. The father of the first director, Ian Green, offered 50 acres of land to Lama Yeshe in the early 1980s, which became the center. Next to it is The Great Stupa of Universal Compassion, an amazing project that is building the largest stupa in the Western world: a replica of the Great Stupa of Gyantse in Tibet, which is 50 meters (164 feet) wide and nearly 50 meters high. There's also a monastery for monks nearby, Thubten Shedrup Ling, a lovely place, cared for by Australian monks Lhundrup and Gyatso. Ian's father for years ran a place on these acres called Sandhurst Town, which was a replica of an old Victoria gold-mining town. Lama's tasty teachings on Mahamudra, which I'm also editing, were given at Atisha in 1981; Lama talks about the kindness and generosity of Ian's father.

The group from the Karma & Emptiness retreat at Atisha. Photo Atisha Centre.

An aerial view of the land being prepared for The Great Stupa in 2000. Photo stupa.org.

The Great Stupa of Gyantse in Tibet, which the Great Stupa in Australia is based on. Photo Project Himalaya.

Then, after a couple of nights in Melbourne and more hanging out with Julie and some of my other sisters, Marie, Polly and Judy, it was back to Straddie on Tuesday. Marie's oldest daughter Sarah was there too. She is married to Mark Neeld, who is the newly-appointed coach of the Melbourne Football Club in the Australian Football League (AFL), a big deal in sport in this country, especially in Victoria. People are fanatic "footy (that abbreviating again) barrackers" here! When we were kids all my family would disappear to the footy on a Saturday to cheer on the Swans. I didn't like it so stayed home with my mother, who taught me classical singing (she was a professional pianist and singer). She had great hopes for me, which I didn't fulfill. The only singing I do now is some prayers in Tibetan - but I haven't forgotten the skill she taught me of holding the breath at the diaphragm, which causes the voice to be very clear and enables the singer to go for a while without having to take many breaths.

After Straddie, I drove the two-plus hours north to Hervey Bay where my old friend Choeying, who helped coordinate the prison project in Australia in 2002, now runs her own center called Oddiyana Dharma Sanctuary. She and her little group have an old Queenslander, as the wooden houses on stilts that are typical of Queensland architecture are called and the more beautiful versions of which are in big demand. It's on the Esplanade, opposite the beach, which is hidden from view behind trees.

The center entrance. Photos Oddiyana Dharma Sanctuary.

But before I headed north off the Straddie ferry at 7 in the morning April 10, the end of the Easter holiday, which is big in Australia, I headed south 80 kilometers to Robina, a city on the Gold Coast. It was established about 20 years ago and is famous mainly for Bond University, said to be one of the best in Australia and the only private university. Robina Town Centre, a huge modern shopping mall, also has an Apple store, which is why I went: my computer had some problems.

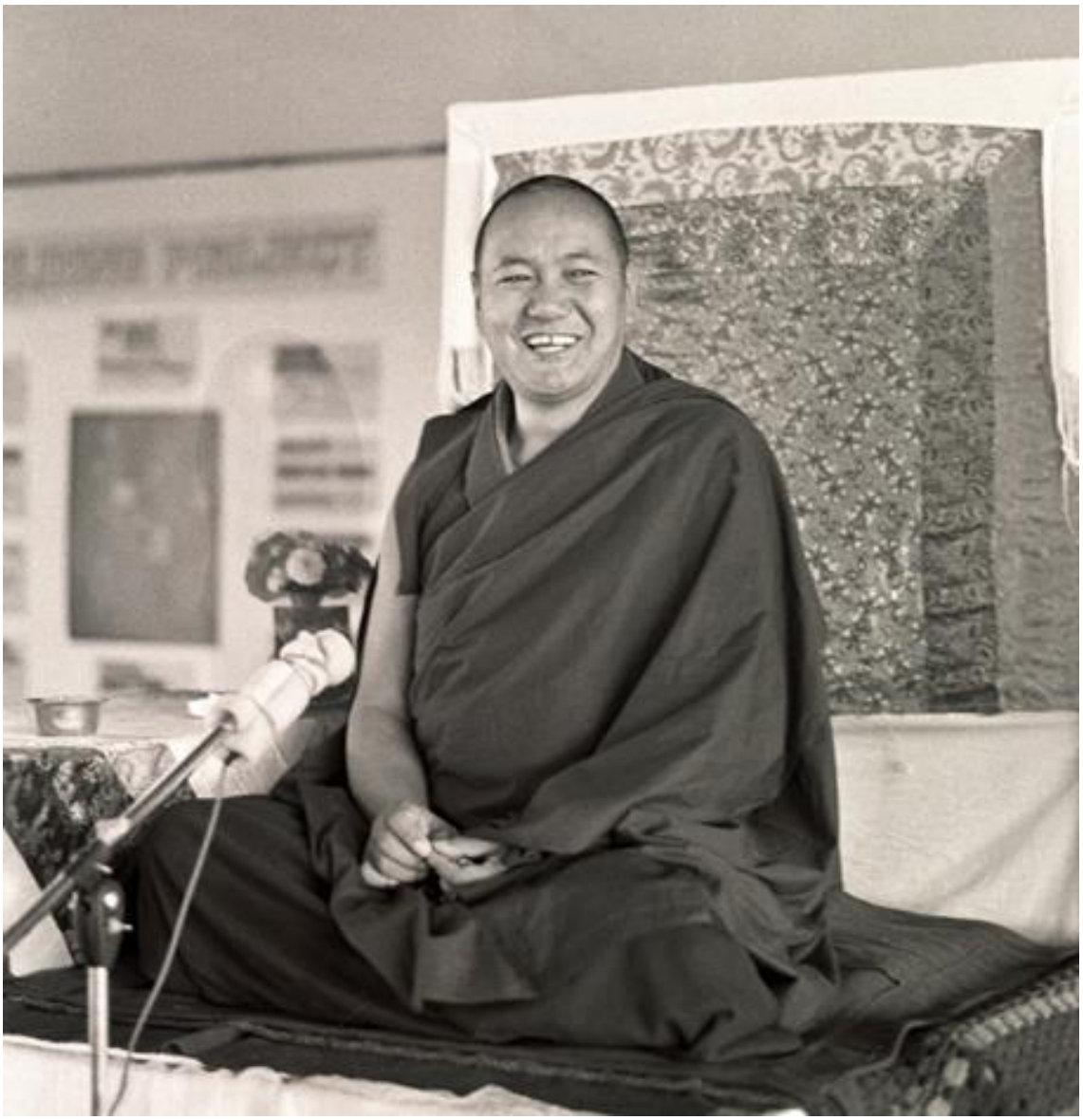
Then on to Brisbane and my old mates Miffi and Eddie at Langri Tangpa Centre. I talked about them in my postcard of September last year. Miffi and six others did two nyungnay fasting retreats over Easter. On their altar she included a picture of Jesus Christ on the cross. "Being Easter, I got quite close to Jesus during the retreat," Miffi said. "He had such a strong practice of giving love to others and taking upon himself their suffering, and despite all the corruption of his teachings, he's still relieving people of their suffering 2,000 years later."

Our weekend course was called The Psychology of Tantra. In the monasteries you wouldn't hear about this until you've had a solid grounding in all the general teachings and practices of the Buddha, which is appropriate, as tantra is the most advanced, most sophisticated, level of Buddhist teachings. But Lama Yeshe, in his compassionate and inimitable way, would introduce the principles to us Westerners early. He said we understood the concept of transformation - which, more than anything, is the principle underlying tantra: that all the qualities within us, all the good and bad, can be used to help us cultivate our marvelous potential for perfection. Of course, the only person qualified to actually experience realizations of this are those who have successfully subdued.

Miffi's nyung-nay altar, with a painting of Jesus on the Cross in the center. Photo Miffi Maxmillion.

Nevertheless, Lama could see that teaching us the psychology of tantra, the basic ideas, was so good for us, who lived in so much self-pity, with no sense of any potential. As Lama used to say that we know how to be miserable, and we don't know how to be happy! "Tantra is about pleasure, not pain!" He also used to say that when you visualize yourself as a deity, a buddha, you are identifying with your natural potential for love and wisdom and contentment and imagining it fully developed right now - far better than identifying with our usual feelings of low self-esteem, anger, depression and the rest.

Of course, we can't understand this unless we have a firm grip on karma: that every thought, word, and action necessarily leaves a seed on our mind that will ripen in experiences similar to the character of those thoughts, words, and actions in the future; that we are basically programming ourselves from moment to moment. When we get this, who would want to keep holding onto the miserable views of ourselves that seem so real to us right now, so true!



Lama teaching at Chenrezig Institute in Queensland in 1976; Photo Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archive.