POSTCARD 22 FROM ROBINA: SUNSHINE COAST, THURSDAY, APRIL 26, 2012

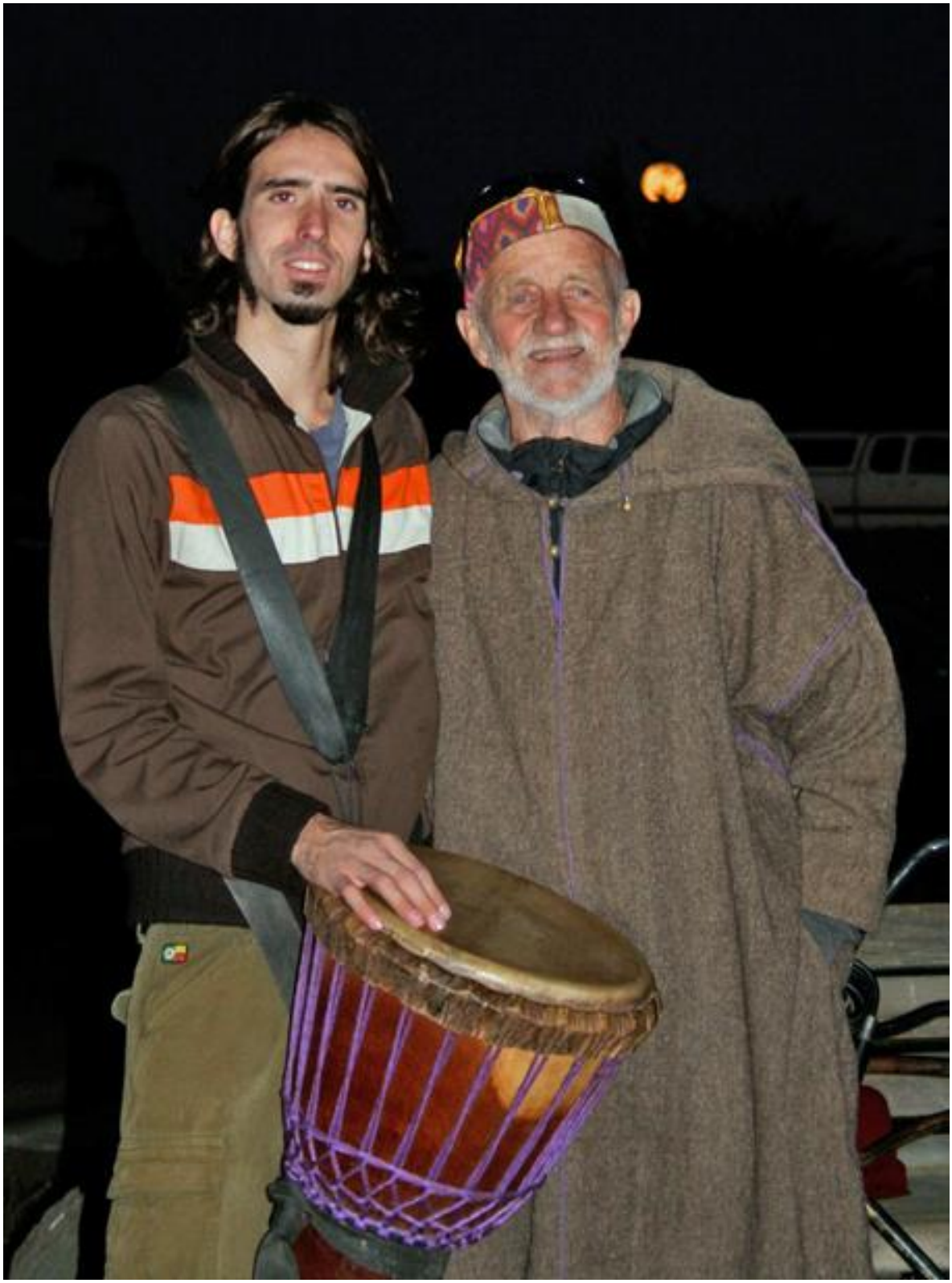
I've finished in Brisbane and have driven up the coast to Chenrezig Institute, 100km north, on the Sunshine Coast. I always like coming back here, the place of my introduction to the world of Buddhism, my world now, and of my lamas. It was a bit like winning the lottery to fall into my spiritual home and meet my lamas at my very first course. I must have been ripe and ready for it! Also, I spent a year or so here, back in the late 1980s, as the spiritual program coordinator. The highlight of that tenure was the visit of His Holiness Sakya Trizin. I was the chant-leader as well and I remember that I went down to Brisbane to get some training from Khejok Rinpoche: I wanted to do the job perfectly. Whether I did or not, I'm not sure, but His Holiness seemed to thoroughly enjoy the chanting.

His Holiness Sakya Trizin arriving at Vajrapani Institute, Lama Zopa Rinpoche's center in the Santa Cruz Mountains, August 2011. Photo Chris Wesselman.

Chenrezig is like a small town now: the 160 acres of hilly land (Australians talk about hectares these days, so that's about 75) packed with nuns and a few monks, and plenty of laypeople, and their resident teacher Geshe Jamyang. He's a student of the former resident teacher, Geshe Tashi, who's now the abbot at Gyume, one of the two main tantric monastic universities that traditionally the Gelug graduates from the Three Greats (Sera, Drepung, and Ganden) can go on to (although many monks do all their education there).

Geshe Tashi Tsering (left), resident lama at Chenrezig Institute from 1990 to 2009, and Geshe Lobsang Jamyang (right), the center's current teacher. Photo Tina P.

Chenrezig is one of the handful of FPMT centers that has a program of more advanced philosophical studies; the majority of Chenrezig's nuns' community participate. The more I have to do my job of talking about the Dharma at Lama Zopa Rinpoche's centers, the more it's clear that without some serious study of Lord Buddha's views on reality, it's a joke to call ourselves "Buddhist" - and the more I regret my lack of study. We're so vague when it comes to spiritual things. Merely believing in Buddhism is just not enough. An old friend of Lama Yeshe's, Age Delbanco, a Daoist, who's still around now in Santa Cruz, told me that when he answered Lama's request to tell him about Daoism with something like, "Oh, it's beyond words," Lama told him that he was just being lazy; that if he couldn't explain it, how could he help others? Age said he spent the next 20 years thinking it all through until he was able to write a book about it.



Lama's old friend Age Delbanco with Osel Hita Torres in Santa Cruz, California, October 2009. Photo Pam Cayton.

When we learn that 1 + 1 = 2, we don't simply believe it. Our teachers demand that we go home and think it through until we have experienced it for ourself and, crucially, validated it as true. This is exactly what Buddha demands of us. Because Buddha is either right or wrong, and it's up to us to find out. Everything is knowable, Buddha says, and it's our job to know it. This is the wisdom that he says we all have the potential to achieve - and the bonus is bliss. Getting wisdom is Buddha's method for getting happiness. And then, of course, we can explain it to others: that's the compassion wing and the point of it all. Buddha's best gift is his words: the power of speech.

So, all power to the nuns at Chenrezig!

Chenrezig's nuns and other students of the center's advanced study program. Photo chenrezig.com.au.

This time I was there for a week or so and on one of the evenings we went to a place called Sunshine Beach, a resort now, full of buildings and people. After my first course in 1976 the place was just an isolated stretch of beautiful beach. After two intense months of teachings and meditation, I figured I needed a break so some of us retired here for a week of naked swimming and sun-bathing - and, I remember, some smoking. I knew I was heading towards nunhood but I wasn't ready to give up everything yet!

Lama and Rinpoche blessing the flagpole at the institute in 1976, during my first course; and Rinpoche teaching during that course. Photo Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archives.