POSTCARD 23 FROM ROBINA: SYDNEY, MAY 3, 2012

Sydney again, and seven months since my dramatic departure last year after accomplishing the normally impossible task of getting a visa to India in three hours. I talked about it in my postcard 16 from Dharamsala.

Sydney Harbor. Photo by Pat Travels the World.

I drove the 1,000 kilometers, 600 miles or so, from Chenrezig Institute, stopping off in Port Macquarie. Some weeks earlier I'd received an email from someone called Krissa who invited me to give a talk there. She said she'd hosted some Tibetan monks to do sand mandalas. I liked the sound of her, so I said yes; I could come on my way down to Sydney on April 30.

As I've said before, I like driving. I like moving. Perhaps it's something to do with all the Sagittarius in my chart: Sun, ascendant, and Mars. It seems we have an appetite for travel. All I know is, if I'm moving, I'm happy. It's not rational, of course. I was driving my green Merc – which drives like a dream but a bit like a truck sometimes, although you can give it a bit of oomph by going down to third gear, and even second, which, because it's an automatic and there's no clutch, is very nice, very direct and snappy. I decided to leave in the evening, soon after the Chenrezig course finished on Sunday, figuring it was better than joining the early Monday morning freeway traffic into Brisbane and that I'd find a hotel on the Gold Coast, south of Brisbane.

First, though, it was dinner at 8 with my old mates Garrey and Krissie Foulkes, who live not far from Chenrezig. We met at my first course with the lamas, at Chenrezig in 1976. Garrey these days built and runs the Garden of Enlightenment at Chenrezig, which His Holiness the Dalai Lama blessed last year (see postcard 15). Krissie had the honor of cooking for Lama Zopa Rinpoche in Bendigo, before and during the time Rinpoche had his stroke in April last year. Of course, she had to be a food policeman in order to take care of Rinpoche's health, but Rinpoche had other ideas: one day, Rinpoche sent a desperate message from the hospital, scrawled with his left hand on a paper napkin, BEGGING for some of his fatty, tasty, totally bad-for-his-health Nepalese food!

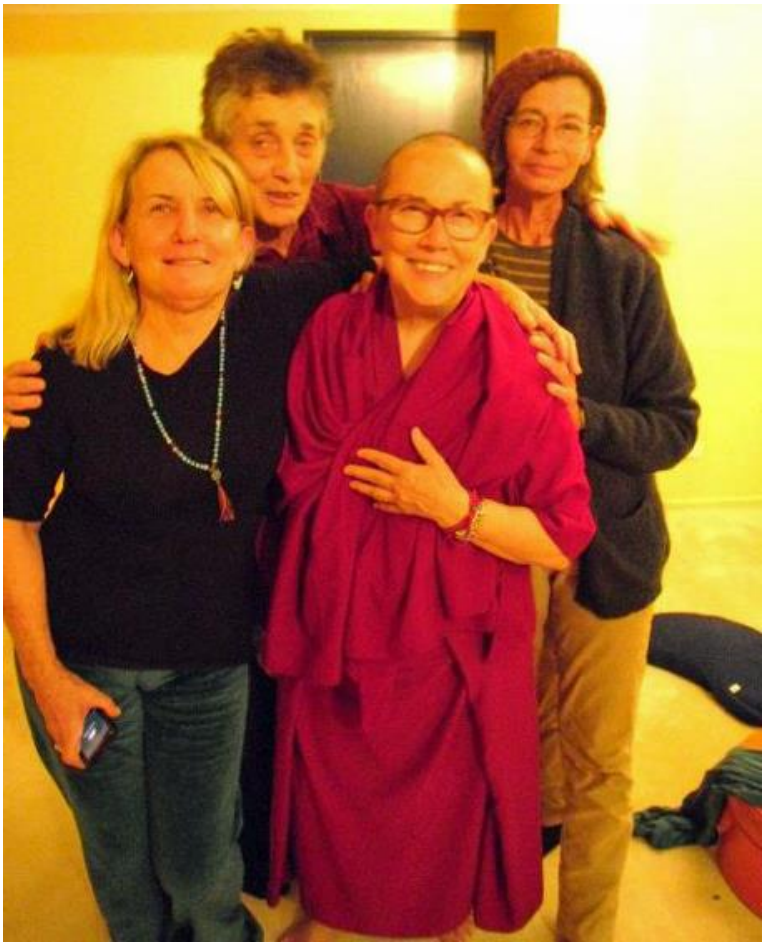
Chenrezig's Institute's Garden of Enlightenment, which includes a main 10-meter stupa commemorating Ven. Geshe Thinley, Lama Yeshe's older brother who was resident teacher at the center for many years, and seven smaller stupas. The eight stupas, on the roof of a shrine building surrounded by landscaped gardens, depict the Eight Great Deeds of the Buddha's life: birth; enlightenment; turning of the wheel; miracles; descent from Tushita; reconciliation; complete victory; and parinirvana. Photos Chenrezig Institute.

I left after 10. Using my trusty Google maps on my iPad, with the little blue dot that tracks your journey – I love it! – I made it to Coolangatta around midnight. I remember it as a quiet little beach town, but it's now this shiny resort. Nevertheless, not a single motel was open. I figured it was because it was winter. Anyway, I ended up driving till 4 in the morning, then sleeping on the side of the road for a couple of hours, with the monster trucks whooshing by, until hotels opened up at 7. I sank into a very comfortable bed at Coffs Harbour, a pretty town two+ hours north of Port Macquarie and six hours from the Sunshine Coast.

Coffs Harbour. Photos: Globe Images (above); Tourism NSW (below).

After a good sleep and a nice meal, I made it to Krissa's in the afternoon. As I pulled into her driveway, there she was, this very familiar person. "When did we see each other last?" I asked, not remembering her and thinking it must have been at some recent event. "In 1972, in Fitzroy," she said. Wow! I couldn't believe it! Like it was yesterday. A blast from the past. They were my radical lesbian feminist days. I'd arrived back in Australia after five intensive years of political activity in London, as I mentioned in postcard 7, and lived with other radical women in Fitzroy – then a rundown part of inner-city Melbourne but now the trendiest place you'll find. One of the women had bought some land near Port Macquarie, which became known as Amazon Acres. I visited once, I think; I preferred cities even back then. It's still there now, it seems.

Radical lesbians in Melbourne in 1973. Chris Sitka, one of our friends in Fitroy, is on the right. Photo Australian Gay and Lesbian Archives. Below, with, from left, Krissa, Zoe, and Trish, in Port Macquarie; photo courtesy Krissa Wilkinson. And my 150cc Italian motor scooter that I whizzed around the streets of San Francisco on in 2008; photo Rashel Adragna.



I made it to Sydney on Tuesday afternoon, May 1. I'd arranged to have a cup of tea with my dear friend Judy Sperling, who lives in Neutral Bay, on the North Shore, just before you get to the Sydney Harbor Bridge. We've known each other since my first days in Sydney in the late 1980s, when Vajrayana Institute was just up the road from Judy, in Cremorne. She's an old acquaintance of His Holiness Sakya Trizin and his family, and of Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche. When Rinpoche first came to Australia, she and her husband Hal had him living with them for six months.

Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche (left), photo Marvin Moore, and His Holiness Sakya Trizin, photo Melbourne Sakya.

Earlier this year the NSW Attorney General Greg Smith appointed Hal, a retired supreme court judge, to conduct a review of bail laws in the state, which has the largest number of remand prisoners in Australia. His draft report is now being studied by the attorney general who, it seems, is committed to reforming the bail laws and which, it is reported, will likely be opposed by the police.

In 2010 Judy was in a coma and was put in the intensive care unit at Mona Vale Hospital, further up the coast. I asked Hal if I could go in to see Judy in the evenings; he rang the hospital and said that I was a Buddhist nun and was Judy's "religious advisor." When I arrived, the nurses nervously asked me to not ring any bells while I was there, as it might disturb the other patients! Every night for a week or more, around 11, I'd drive the hour from Ashfield, where Vajrayana Institute is and where I was living. The traffic was okay at that time of night. I would stand at her bed and whisper words into her ears, and sing and recite prayers. They said they were worried that she'd never recover. Hal rang me one day and said she was out of her coma. I visited her in another hospital, and there she was, as perky as usual. She said the only thing she remembered was this husky voice saying to her "Judy, Sakya Trizin is praying for you! Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche is praying for you!" – which is exactly

what I did say, every night. She said she didn't know it was me – in fact, she thought it was some blue lady who came through the window!

Anyway, Judy and I had a nice chat in her lounge room, which is full of marvelous Tibetan art and artifacts and which overlooks Sydney Harbor.

A view from Neutral Bay in North Sydney. Photo planbooktravelaustralia.com.

Then I had two days with my sister Jan, who lives in Surry Hills, Sydney's equivalent of Fitzroy, before flying to Hobart on Thursday May 3 for a week to see Lyndy Mailhot and her group for a retreat at a Catholic convent near the beach.