POSTCARD 24 FROM ROBINA: SYDNEY, MAY 16, 2012

I got to Hobart Thursday May 3 and spent a week. It's a lovely place, the main city in the island of Tasmania, 150 kilometers south of the rest of Australia in the eastern corner on the other side of Bass Strait. There doesn't seem to be anything between Tasmania and Antarctica at the bottom end of the Southern Ocean, 5,500+ kilometers south.

Non-Australians often don't realize it's one of the country's seven states (Tasmania, that is; not Antarctica). Half of Tasmania's half million residents live in Hobart. It's famous for its trees: more than a third of the island is parks, reserves and world heritage sites. Apparently it separated from the mainland around 10,000 years ago and there's evidence that Aboriginal people lived there for more than 35,000 years; with the coming of the British, they were all gone by the late 19th century.

Lyndy Mailhot has been running **Chagtong Chentong**, the FPMT center there, since it started in 1998. This year she organized a retreat at a Catholic convent at Blackmans Bay, just out of the city. At a public talk the day before, at the center in town, I experienced another blast from the past. A man came to see me at the end and asked if I remembered him from London back in the 1970s; I didn't – until he reminded me that he'd been one of my suppliers of a pleasant smoking substance. Damian! He'd lived in Notting Hill, where I'd go to conduct our business, and he worked as a television producer for the BBC. Back in Australia for years, where he's now retired from producing television shows for the ABC, I had breakfast with him and his wife the morning I flew out of Hobart.

At the Hobart retreat at the Catholic center near the beach.

Back to Sydney, into my car, and off to the Blue Mountains, two hours west of the city. If you like trees and cold weather – especially now that it's winter – you'd like the Blue Mountains. In the summer it's okay; for years it's been a place to get away to for Sydney people to escape the sticky heat. **Kunsang Yeshe** is run by Tencho, who spent years at **Chenrezig Institute** studying the philosophy program there. We had a retreat here, too, and I stayed at the center. Normally I stay with my friend Margaret White, whom my sister Jan first met in Brisbane in the 1980s. She became a student of the

lamas after her husband died and now lives in Katoomba, not far away. She very kindly offered her house for a while to **Liberation Prison Project** when I ran it.

A view from Katoomba of the Blue Mountains and the Three Sisters, a rock formation that according to Aboriginal dream-time legend is three Katoomba Tribe sisters turned into stone. Below, Margaret in front of the amazing Thousand-armed Chenrezig wall in Katoomba painted by a group of local artists.

With Tencho, who runs Lama Zopa Rinpoche's center in the Blue Mountains. Photo Khrystene Dalecki

Again, back to Sydney. On May 15 I drove from Surry Hills, across the bridge, and up the Pacific Highway to Gordon to see the dentist, my dear friend Ross Mackay who with his wife Brita, who runs the office for him, are students of Sogyal Rinpoche. I first met Brita in Italy when she worked for Lama Yeshe in the early 1980s. She still loves Lama and has a picture of him on her desk.

Ross and Brita (center) with their staff at ***Natural Dentistry,*** *in Gordon, northwest of Sydney.*

I had to get to **Newington College's Centre for Ethics**, a philosophy and religion department of a boys' school in Stanmore, to give a talk to the students – and I struck a bit of drama on the way. Well, to be precise, I struck a truck on the way. I stopped too late at the red lights and ran into the back of an old Toyota ute – as in "Utility Vehicle," Australian for pickup truck. My shiny green Mercedes crumbled in front of me, and so did my attachment to it – what choice? The driver seemed more concerned about me than his truck. But I was fine. We drove around the corner and exchanged information and then I made a few phone calls and found a panel beater – Australian for auto body mechanic – in nearby Marrickville. Because the truck was higher than my car and had bits sticking out, those bits went straight into my engine, messing with the radiator and the fan. There were no leaks but I figured I couldn't drive too far without overheating the engine. I got it to Newington College and then afterwards to the panel beater. Initially they thought it'd be a write-off, but they quoted it at around $4,500-worth of damage; with the car being valued at $6,000, my comprehensive insurance paid for it all except the first $800.

Lama in 1983 at his center in Pomaia, Istituto Lama Tsong Khapa, where FPMT's International Office was based in the early eighties when Brita worked for Lama. Photo Lama Yeshe Wisdom Archives, offered by Merry Colony.

Meanwhile I gave my talk to the boys. Very interesting. They had two teachers on the staff, teaching philosophy and world religions. I'm impressed with what happens at schools these days.

I had a busy week at **Vajrayana Institute**. My kind friend Dana drove me around in her saffron yellow car.

I got to go to Long Bay Prison again. I've visited many times over the years. These days Anna Carmody goes in on behalf of Liberation Prison Project, to teach and lead meditation. She picked me up at 10 in the morning and we spent half a day there.

The prison is on the Malabar peninsular, a few miles south of the center of Sydney, and it's called after the bay there, Long Bay. It's been there for nearly 100 years. Like most prisons, especially the old ones, it's a bit of a dump: good design is not a priority. Like San Quentin, which is near San Francisco, Long Bay occupies prime real estate.

The once shiny Merc. Below, Anna and I had lunch on the peninsular, not far from Long Bay; Andrew House at Long Bay.

I was delighted to be greeted by Andrew House, whom I've known from my LPP days and who is still the Alcohol and Other Drug Counsellor at the Ngara Nura unit. We also visited the Metropolitan Special Program.

The weekend at Vajrayana we did a Vajrasattva retreat, combined with teachings about karma, emptiness, purification, etc. A nice combination. Often we don't like to think about karma but when you include purification into the mix – that there is no karma that is permanent, that can't be changed – then there's some encouragement, some optimism. It relieves the heavy burden of guilt that most people seem to carry around, this exaggerated sense of our innate badness. As Lama Yeshe would say, "We create negativity with our mind, so we can purify it by creating positivity with our mind." This is why it is so powerful to think about karma in terms of its being an excellent example of dependent arising, which, in turn, is "the king of logics," as Lama puts it, "to prove emptiness." Hearing about karma, then – that we create ourselves, our lives, our reality – is the perfect way to loosen the grip of ego-grasping. Negativity is empty, too. So, so tasty.

Vajrayana's director, Tony Steel, whose own private business organizes conferences worldwide, continues to run conferences to support the center: **Mind & Its Potential** and **Happiness & Its Causes**. They're not attracting the same big numbers as when they started a few years ago, but they're still going strong. He has a full-time staff at the center running them.

Our *Vajrasattva Retreat at Rinpoche's center in Sydney. Photos Khrystene Dalecki.*

The Monday morning after the retreat, Chokyi, Vajrayana's program coordinator and the prison project's director, drove me up the road to the local train station where I took the train to Albury, six hours south, where Julie Klose picked me up and took me to Wodonga, just across the NSW/Victoria border, to give a talk that night for the group she runs, **Shen Phen Ling**.