



# word power: a journo's story

By Adele Hulse

Back in 1976 Lama Yeshe called me up to his house at Chenrezig Institute in Australia and said: "You. You writer. You good understand my language. I want you write por me. You take Chenrezig teaching notes here and make book." Lama Yeshe couldn't say his 'f's'. I spent the next year in a caravan in the mountains rearranging Lama's 'language' into what later became a Wisdom Publications' booklet. I loved living alone in the mountains but realized there was more I had to do for Lama, so I moved to Melbourne and began importing books from the Tibetan Library – there were very few Dharma books available in English. This went on for some years and I wondered again about 'writing por Lama'. How?

I made friends with a journalist who threw me a story no one else wanted to write. A Melbourne daily, *The Age*, gave it a full page, which led to a few more stories and a year later an invitation to write a weekly column. Suddenly I could feel Lama at my back again: "You write por me!" Because the media is a hotbed of egotism, I knew my poor ego would not do well seeing my own name pasted up every week so I started out with a pseudonym, a real plain working class-type pseudonym. 'Sharon Gray' has different resonances in different countries, but in Australia it is very, very ordinary. Nothing to get attached to. Also, a weekly column tends to plunder the lives of one's friends and families and I never felt I owed my or their privacy to the constantly changing owners of a large media conglomerate. Besides, I was writing 'por Lama'.

A daily newspaper is not a gentle environment, so I couldn't come on as some New Age religious nut. You absolutely cannot preach in a daily. Lama had talked about 'Universal Education' for years, saying that everything in Buddhism could be explained without using any foreign words, that the Dharma was open to simple modern language. So I began writing about raising chickens, seeing their personalities, their precious individuality, showing they are living creatures desiring happiness not suffering. I also wrote about raising my son alone, about getting over flirting with men, seeing them as sex-objects, about getting older, getting fatter. I wrote a lot about death because a lot of my friends and family died. I tried to balance a 'heavy' column with a light frothy one, a 'teaching' column

with an indulgent one, hoping to trick the newspaper into keeping me on. Because you never know when they are going to sack you and they never, ever tell you that you are doing a good job. Heavens – you might ask for more money!

I got scared every week – what was I going to write about? How was I going to make the space useful? I constantly expected the sack and still do, though the column has been running now for 18 years, which is something of a record in this country. But I still get scared and the paper still never ever comments on what I write. I have come to find their hard professional attitude very useful because the readers write in and say wonderful things and if the paper did too, well, you could get seriously 'up yourself' as we say in Australia. And that is an unforgivable affliction. I never write about movies and TV. They don't interest me.

Some weeks I'm really scared. Then I sit down and meditate and say: "Lama, please, please, please give me a column!" A couple of hours later I'm tapping away at the computer and something comes out. Over the last few years I've also been writing about organizations which help people in trouble, and at the bottom of the column asking for donations for them. That has been very satisfying. In Australia we have an increasing number of asylum seekers from Asia and the Middle East who are horribly dealt with by our government. I went to an asylum seeker's house for men. Adult males are at the bottom of the 'kids and kittens' charity pile. They keep the blinds pulled down 24 hours a day and spend a lot of time in bed and crying because there is absolutely nothing for them to do. The readers sent them gym equipment, a pool table, CD players, CDs and lots of money.

There is not one issue that affects me alone. Everything we think and feel is thought and felt by countless others and this is the base I write from. I try to include all those others. In a couple of months I will be moving from Melbourne's wealthiest suburb to one of its poorest, where there are 157 nationalities. I'm really looking forward to writing about that because columnists are so invariably middle-class. People often ask if I have a few columns 'in storage'. But it doesn't work for me, they smell like old fish. It has to be fresh. It has to be for Lama. ●