

Choden Rinpoche touches hearts of prisoners, officers and staff in Australia



In January Choden Rinpoche, one of Lama Zopa Rinpoche's gurus, visited two Australian prisons: Long Bay Correctional Centre in Sydney on January 7 and Karnet Prison Farm just outside Perth in Western Australia on January 30.

On a whim, the nurse at Karnet had phoned Rinpoche and asked if he would visit the prison, said Liberation Prison Project (LPP) teacher in Western Australia, Ven. Drolma, who visits Karnet once a month.

"I didn't think it would work because he was booked to the hilt in Perth," she said. "So I was shocked when he said he would come."

At Karnet Rinpoche was accompanied by LPP Australia's chaplain coordinator Ven. Aileen Barry, administrative assistant Margaret White, and Ven. Drolma. In Sydney, the resident teacher of the FPMT center Vajrayana Institute, Geshe Samten, and translator Ven. Yeshe joined Ven. Aileen and Margaret at the prison.

"As soon as he came in the whole wing just stopped and went dead quiet," said Les Akers at Long Bay. "The aura he gave out was so strong but humble at the same time."

Rinpoche spent ninety minutes at Long Bay: offering Buddhist refuge to Glenn Mabbot in the chapel; visiting various units; receiving khatas (traditional offering scarves) from prisoners, guards and staff; and blessing everyone.

In Perth he spoke for forty minutes in the chapel and then "had dinner with the prisoners out in the bush under the gum trees," said Ven. Drolma.

"All the venerable monks enjoyed the taste of some jail food," wrote Warren Gillespie and Tony Wilson in a report to LPP.

The 75-year-old lama has spent the last fifteen years teaching Buddhism around the world, mainly at FPMT centers, since his departure from Tibet.

"In 1959 when the Chinese invaded Lhasa, he chose not to escape and spent nearly twenty years in isolated retreat, staying in a small dark room in Lhasa, meditating and acting as if he were an invalid," said LPP's Director Ven. Robina

Courtin. "He had no texts; everything was in his mind."

In Perth Tony prepared the altar and built a beautiful throne for Rinpoche in just three days, said Ven. Drolma.

A drawing of the Buddha by LPP US student Raven Jones was the altar centerpiece at Long Bay. "Rinpoche expressed delight on seeing our preparations," said Ven. Aileen. Rinpoche blessed copies of the image, which were given to the eighteen prisoners and twelve staff and officers who attended the refuge ceremony.

Before the ceremony Rinpoche chanted The Heart Sutra, and afterwards gave a brief teaching.

"Seeing people as friend, enemy and stranger: these are merely labeled by the mind," Rinpoche said. "Meditate on developing the good heart with those you live with; it is very important that you live in harmony together."

At both prisons Rinpoche spoke about the benefits of being in prison: having access to the Dharma, not being caught up in accumulating wealth and possessions and observing the laws of the country. He said it is also important to abide by the laws of the prison.

"It's so important to keep a relaxed mind," he told the prisoners, officers and staff gathered at Karnet. "Because otherwise you worry and then you create more suffering for yourself."

At Long Bay one inmate, who had never done a prostration, said that when he saw Rinpoche, he felt compelled to put his hands together at his heart and bow down.

Les Akers at Long Bay said three feral cats that "fly down a hole in the floor as soon as they see you coming" sat within three feet of Rinpoche, watching him.

A sense of harmony, peace and joy prevailed during Rinpoche's visits, said Ven. Aileen.

"One long-term Long Bay staff member confessed to having become hard-hearted in her work and said that the blessing of Rinpoche's words and his touch as he placed his hands upon her head softened her heart again."

"I know that compassion is possible now," the woman said. ☸

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