POSTCARD 19 FROM ROBINA: PORTLAND, TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 7, 2012

The Land of Medicine Buddha course ended at lunchtime on January 22. No time to waste. I'd just heard that there was to be a long-life puja for Geshe Dakpa, the resident lama at Tse Chen Ling in San Francisco, where I'd lived between 2001 and 2008. No way could I miss that! I'd rented a car from Avis at San Francisco Airport upon my arrival from New York – I like to be able to drive myself here and there – so I drove the hour and a half to the city, making it on time.

Requesting and making offerings for Geshe Dakpa's long life. Photo Alison Harr.

Sitting in the passenger seat was a gorgeous Tara statue I'd bought at a Kagyu center in Boston and had blessed at LMB. She was for Geshe Dakpa, whom I went straight upstairs to see the moment I arrived at Tse Chen Ling. All my old dear friends were there, whom I'd worked with for years. A very moving event.

On Monday I drove to Livermore to spend the night with Paul Thompson, an Englishman I've known since the 1990s. He first invited me there to teach when he was part of a Christian group – he still is, although now as a practicing Buddhist. He's been a strong supporter of Tse Chen Ling and the prison project; a dear friend. And I love his group of sincere Christians: they're like a group of monastics! Except this time there were a few dedicated materialists, scientists who've worked in Livermore for years at the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory.

As always in discussions about the nature of mind, whether it's the brain, whether such a thing as something non-physical can even exist – the way Buddha describes the mind, in other words – I emphasize the need to take Buddha's view as a hypothesis, something any decent scientist would do. But it seems that's not so easy!

There's such a strong conviction in the minds of some people that the contemporary, materialist view of the world is fact, not merely a viewpoint, that they do not want to even consider the possibility that Buddha's view might be feasible.

As much as any scientist, Buddha is dealing with what is real, not just presenting some belief system, which is the typical view of anything spiritual. If we consider the implications of Buddha's being not a creator, it's quite sobering. He's either a crazy guy who has simply invented all this stuff about continuity of consciousness, its being non-physical, there being no creator, karma being the natural law that runs the world, etc. etc.; or all of this is his findings from his own direct experience. If he's the first, who could possibly take any of it seriously! That'd be insane. If he's the latter, then he's worth looking into.

The fact is, Buddha is either right or he's wrong. It's up to us to find out. As His Holiness says, "If we can prove from our direct experience that what Buddha says isn't true, then we must reject it." I'm happy to use Buddha's views of reality as my working hypothesis. And all I can say is: so far, so good!

I dropped off my car at SFO on Thursday January 26 and flew to Albuquerque, an hour's drive from Santa Fe. This part of the U.S. reminds me of the Australian desert around Alice Springs: red, dry earth. Except that Santa Fe gets pretty chilly in the winter, whereas Alice does not.

I was based in New Mexico for a year or so, back in 2000, when Lama Zopa Rinpoche moved International Office to Taos, another hour and a half above Santa Fe. Soon after we moved, I stopped being the editor of *Mandala* and moved the prison project into its own place. But I realized we needed to be in a busy city so decided to move us to San Francisco and to connect with Tse Chen Ling. Because all the work we did was not local – it was all over the U.S. and in other countries as well – it didn't matter where we were based, but I felt strongly that we needed the energy of a big city and access to more people.

Personally, I was much happier in SF, not only because it's a big city, but because the center was 20 minutes from the airport, where because of my travels to Rinpoche's centers six months of the year meant I spent a lot of time going to and coming from. Albuquerque is a good three hours from Taos.

Anyway, this time round I was delighted to be back in Santa Fe, where earlier I'd spend time traveling from Taos to teach at Thubten Norbu Ling, which had only just started. Now it's a flourishing place with its own resident teacher, my dear friend Don Handrick, one of the top graduates from the first group of Master's Program students at Istituto Lama Tzong Khapa in Italy. We met first in the '90s in San Francisco, where he was a student at Tse Chen Ling. He was an accountant at Levi's, the jeans company. He gave up his job and moved to Italy. He's an excellent teacher; they're lucky to have him.

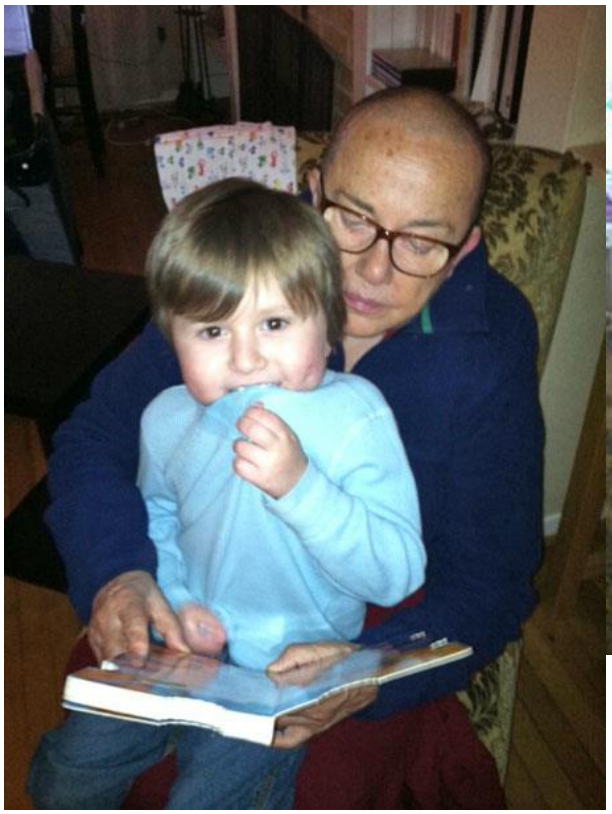
We did a Tara retreat at a nearby Carmelite convent. A lovely, tranquil place. And, of course, it reminded me of one of my childhood heroes, St. Thérèse of Lisieux. She became a nun when she was 14, and oh how I yearned to be like her! When I was 12 or 13, I was in our kitchen, I remember, on my knees and with hands folded, begging my mother to give me permission to become a nun like St. Thérèse. I cried and cried when she said no. Twenty years later it was she who cried when I told her that I was to become a Buddhist nun! "I wish I'd let you become a nun when you wanted to!" she said. "Oh, Mum, it's all the same," I answered. "Well, if it's all the same, why did you change?" A sharp question, which I left there.

Then I flew to Portland and stayed a few nights with Carina Rumrill, who after being the operations person at the prison project moved here to take on the job of editing *Mandala*.

With Laura, center, and Carina: three Mandala editors, past and present, after the teachings at Maitripa.

She's working part-time now because she's had a couple more kids. She has two already, born when she was a young teenager herself; they are now 16 and 18. Her latest sons are Dechen, 4, and Milam, 6 months.

Dechen's a powerhouse! Very much his own boss. As bright as a button, showing multiple talents. Children like him are often considered by contemporary psychologists as tending towards Asperger's Syndrome. For me, that's dangerous. Because there is no factoring in of past karma, a bright, fierce, super-intelligent, super-focused, stubborn child who is also quite mature emotionally – that is, doesn't show signs of much neediness or jealousy, and is quite independent – can easily be misdiagnosed as having "psychological problems." After all, "stubbornness," when it's used for the practice of morality, etc., is called "enthusiastic perseverance": we all need that! As Lama Yeshe puts it, "if there's no energy, there's nothing to transform!" Give me a wild, stubborn, brilliant person any day!



With Dechen, left; and singing mantras to Milam (that's Carina in the background); with Yangsi Rinpoche of Portland's Maitripa College.

I was very pleased to be invited to teach at Maitripa College in Portland, run by Yangsi Rinpoche (see above), the reincarnation of one of Lama Yeshe's main teachers from his youth at Sera Je Monastic University in Lhasa. Maitripa is the only center in the FPMT that is now an accredited college. Throughout the world we have these amazingly highly educated scholars teaching intensive Buddhist philosophy, but because they teach at "Dharma centers" and not "colleges" their classes are not given the credibility they deserve. It would be marvelous if other centers could follow Maitripa's lead.