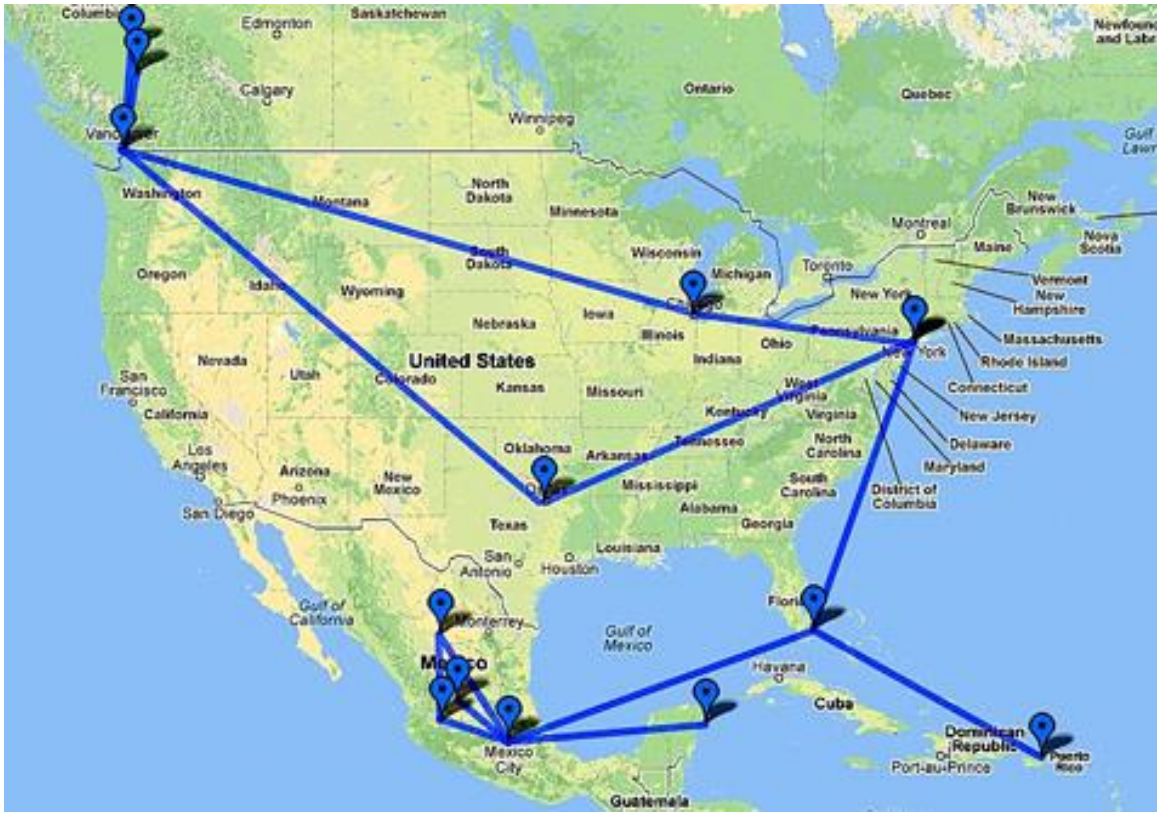
POSTCARD 31 FROM ROBINA: CANADA-MEXICO-PUERTO RICO, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2012

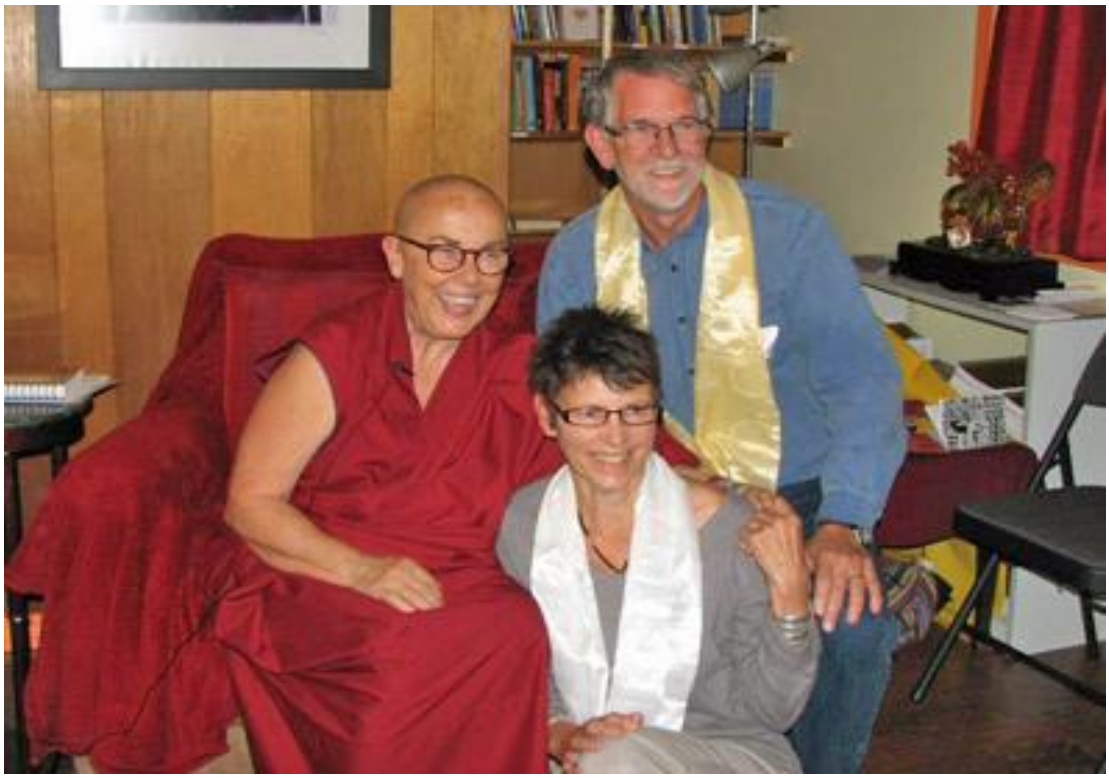
I hadn't organized my schedule well, so I ended up having to fly across country again, from New York, to spend a week in Canada with Colleen and her crew in a little town 350 miles north of Vancouver called Williams Lake. From the time I left home at 5 in the morning east coast time (Lana's place on Second Avenue and 19th Street) till I got to Gendun Drubpa at 5 p.m. west coast time, I had spent 15 hours on the road – practically the time it takes to get to Europe and back! You can't avoid going via the airline's hubs, even when they're in the opposite direction of your destination, in this case Dallas-Fort Worth, where American is based.



My flights for this leg of teachings at Lama Zopa Rinpoche's centers.

The last time I was at the center, three years ago, it was at Marilyn and Barrie Dickson's lovely place in the country, where they had built a little gompa. There's a stupa there, built on the instructions of Lama Zopa Rinpoche. Now, however, the center is based in town, in a house that Colleen's sister owns. We all had lunch one afternoon near the stupa by the lake. I stayed for nearly a week at the center in town.

From New York I traveled back to the western coast of North America to teach at FPMT's Gendun Drupba Centre in Williams Lake, in Central British Columbia. (Below): Marilyn and Barrie Dickson used to run the Williams Lake center. Photo Gendun Drubpa Centre.



Gendun Drupba's Enlightenment Stupa, built according to the instructions of Lama Zopa Rinpoche. The stupa is about 40 minutes southeast of the city of Williams Lake on the shores of Spokin Lake. Photo Gendun Drubpa.

Four students took Buddhist Refuge, and another four renewed their vows, when I was in Williams Lake. Colleen, the center director, organized for each who took Refuge for the first time to receive a tsa-tsa, or small plaster image of a buddha. Photo Gendun Drubpa Centre.

From there I flew to Mexico City, back the same route to New York, then on to Miami and Mexico.

It'd been years since I'd been in Mexico; can't remember when. This time I did quite a little tour of the country, mainly visiting places I hadn't been before. Alejandro García picked me up at Mexico City airport and went everywhere with me, translating and organizing things. He's involved with FPMT Mexico.

Alejandro García translates my words into Spanish for students at Lama Zopa Rinpoche's center in Guadalajara, Khamlungpa Center. Photo Khamlungpa Center.

Our first flight was to Aquascalientes, 500km northeast, where I had been before. But they have a new center now, run by Victor Efren, where we stayed.
One of the men there, Rogelio, is very devoted to teaching at a couple of local prisons, one for juveniles. We went. I was so impressed! In each place, the director and the staff were such sincere people, truly showing interest in helping the inmates get educated and be involved in personal development programs. And they were proud of what they had achieved; one of the prisons Centro de Readaptación Social Varonil El Llano had been reviewed as one of the best institutions in the country in 2010 and 2012 by the National Human Rights Commission, Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos.

In Aguascalientes we visited two prisons. Here we are outside the juvenile prison Centro Estatal para el Desarrollo del Adolescente. And me with the director of the prison below. Photos Bengungyal Center.

The director of the Aguascalientes juvenile facility again (left), me, and Roger Pallares (also below), a Bengungyal Center student who teaches regularly at this juvenile facility and another prison in Aguascalientes. I was so touched by Rogelio's dedication to bringing Lord Buddha's teachings into the prisons (below). Photo Bengungyal Center.

Then another 500km northwest to Torreon. This place is famous for being one of the most violent cities on earth – poor Torreon, being famous for that! I didn't witness anything when I was there, just like the times I've been in Israel and you hear about the violence: it just seems like a normal place. But when you read the numbers, it's horrific.

In an article online in October last year, I read that there's been a 16-fold increase in murders since the coming of one of the cartels in 2007. Apparently there were around 1,000 killings in 2011, up from 62 in 2006. But these days, a police chief said, nearly 90 percent of the cartel have been murdered or arrested, "and they're nearly finished," he predicts.

I read another article online about how the cartels, among others, are devoted to the "skeleton saint" known as La Santa Muerte. The author of the article, Russell Contrersas says, "The origins of La Santa Muerte are unclear. Some followers say she is an incarnation of an Aztec goddess of death who ruled the underworld. Some scholars say she originated in medieval Spain through the image of La Parca, a female Grim Reaper, who was used by friars for the later evangelization of indigenous populations in the Americas.

The different aspects of La Santa Muerte, "the skeleton saint." Photo Time Magazine.

"For decades, though, La Santa Muerte remained an underground figure in isolated regions of Mexico and served largely as an unofficial Catholic saint that women called upon to help with cheating spouses.

"It wasn't until 2001 when a devotee unveiled a public La Santa Muerte shrine in Mexico City that followers in greater numbers began to display their devotion for helping them with relationships and loved ones in prison. Economic uncertainty and a violent drug war against cartels that has claimed an estimated 70,000 lives also are credited for La Santa Muerte's growth."

Clad in a black nun's robe and holding a scythe in one hand, Santa Muerte has different manifestations: A red La Santa Muerte, her bestselling image, helps in matters of love. Gold ones aid with employment and white ones give protection. Meanwhile, a black Santa Muerte can provide vengeance.

Meanwhile, I had a very nice time in Torreon. Carmen the director, and Grace and Raquel, whom we stayed with, and the other center members, all were very kind. We had several teachings, and a public talk given in a mall downtown was packed. People were moved. A local paper did a story about the visit, and we were interviewed on a local radio station. There was much energy everywhere for the Dharma.

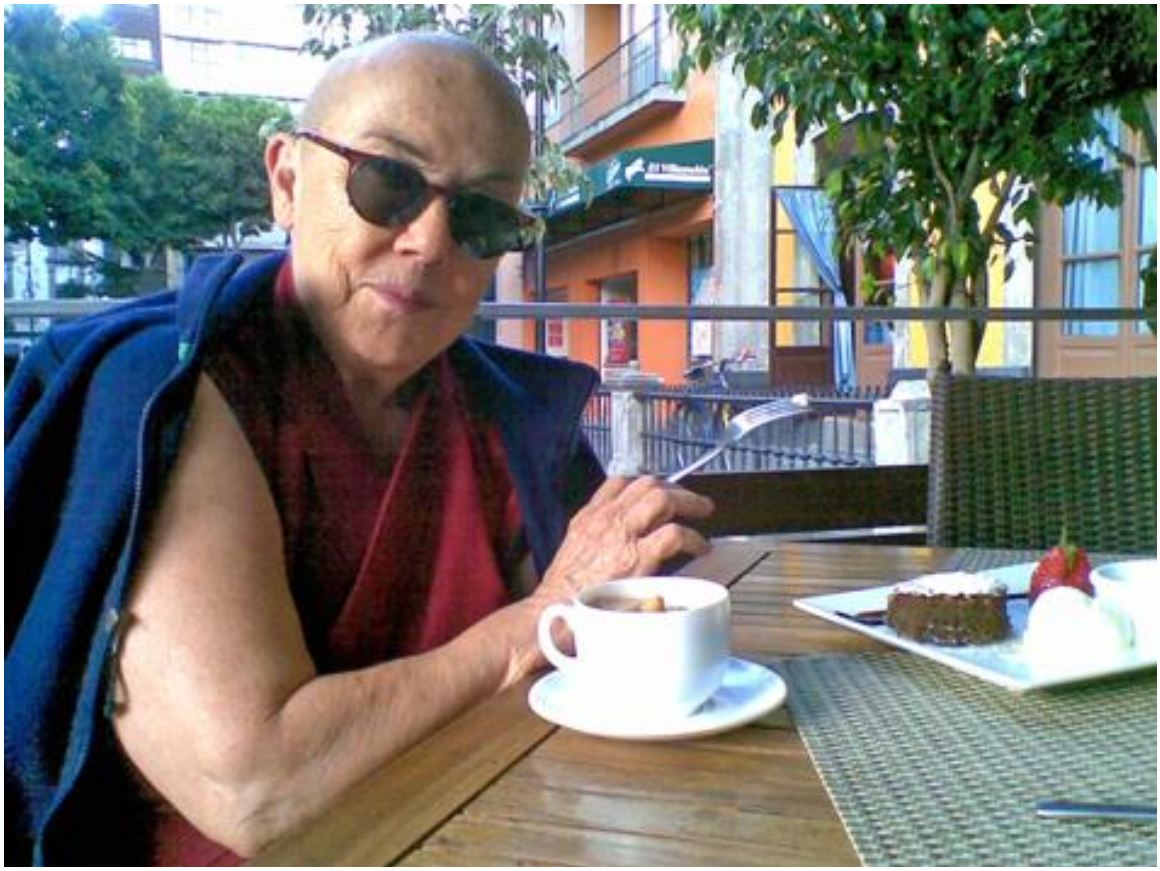
After the public teaching at the mall in downtown Torreon several people came up and asked me to bless their malas. So much enthusiasm for the Dharma in Mexico. Photos Rinchen Zangpo Center.

Next was Guadalajara, 700km south of Torreon. There seems to be enthusiasm among the students here to reinvigorate their work in the prisons. And then to the beach: Cozumel, a little island on the Gulf of Mexico, just south of Cancun. It's run by my English friend, Moya Mendez, who runs a business there with her husband Sergio. I stayed with Paula. If you like the beach, which I do, it's a perfect place! They have a resident monk there Ven. Losang Nyingje; there don't seem to be many sangha in Mexico.

I love Cozumel's white sand. Photo Ken Thomas.

With the students of Cozumel's Yeshe Gyaltsen Center (above and below). Photo Yeshe Gyaltsen Center.

Finally the Big City: Mexico City itself, México, D. F., our final stop. Depending on what boundaries you use, there are 8 million or 22 million people living there – the latter is the population of Australia! There was just an evening talk there, so the rest of the time was spent with Alejandro walking around downtown. Inevitably it felt to me like a big European city: you can't escape the huge Spanish influence. And I liked it a lot: the streets, the architecture, still plenty of the 16th century. We visited the Palacio de Bellas Artes: just beautiful. And afterwards we had a piece of cake called "Lolita Ayala" after the most famous TV newscaster in the country! And I must say I had the best shoeshine ever, from a traditional bolero. And the subway wasn't bad at all.



Enjoying an extra hot latte and a piece of "Lolita Ayala," the Mexican chocolate cake named after the country's famous TV newscaster, in Mexico City. Photo Alejandro García.

Walking around Mexico City you see 16th century architecture everywhere. Photos Alejandro Garcia.

Traditional Día de Muertos ofrendas in Mexico City, or Day of the Dead offerings: offerings of food, drink, incense, candles, flowers and other gifts for ancestors and the recently deceased. According to Wikipedia: "The holiday focuses on gatherings of family and friends to pray for and remember friends and family members who have died. The intent is to encourage visits by the souls, so the souls will hear the prayers and the comments of the living directed to them." Photo Alejandro García.

After three weeks, I flew out of the country and on to Puerto Rico for a week, about 2,000 miles east as the crow flies but, of course, I had to go via Miami. This center was started years ago by students of Geshe Sopa, one of Lama Zopa Rinpoche and Lama Yeshe's main lamas from Sera Je. Now it's overseen by Yangsi Rinpoche, who also runs Lama Zopa Rinpoche's center Maitripa in Portland. I've been here a few times also. Stayed with Veronica and her partner. They seem to like Buddhism in San Juan: a strong center, very devoted students.

Looking out across the Atlantic from one of the Spanish forts, in Old San Juan.

Looking west across Fort San Felipe del Morro.

Teaching at Yangsi Rinpoche's center in San Juan. Photo Ganden Shedrup Ling.

I did a nine-week editing retreat in Puerto Rico at least 10 years ago. Veronica found me an apartment in a resort on the south side of the island. it was December and pretty cold at Land of Medicine Buddha in northern California. I really wanted a warm place. It was heavenly: a three-minute walk to the beach from my house. I decided I'd be incognito during my stay, so got myself a piece of dark pink cloth, the stuff they make bathing suits out of, and wore that as a sarong. I sat in the sun in my sarong, edited in my sarong, went for walks in my sarong, even swam in my sarong. But I couldn't escape: people seemed to know I was a Buddhist nun: I'd regularly get the prayer mudra. I also, foolishly, would swim with my glasses on. I don't like putting my face in the water, so I'd do backstroke, or just float. My glasses were swept away by the waves one day. I can't see a thing without them so had to take a taxi to a faraway Walmart and buy three pairs of +3 reading glasses – I am very farsighted: the lower part of my triple lenses is something like +10 – and wear those for at least a week until my new ones came from San Francisco. I like to remember that time as my ideal scenario for a retreat – a perfect environment, perfect weather, perfect ocean. But I conveniently forget to remember that when dusk fell so did miniature silent flying creatures who would feast on my body, which would itch for weeks.