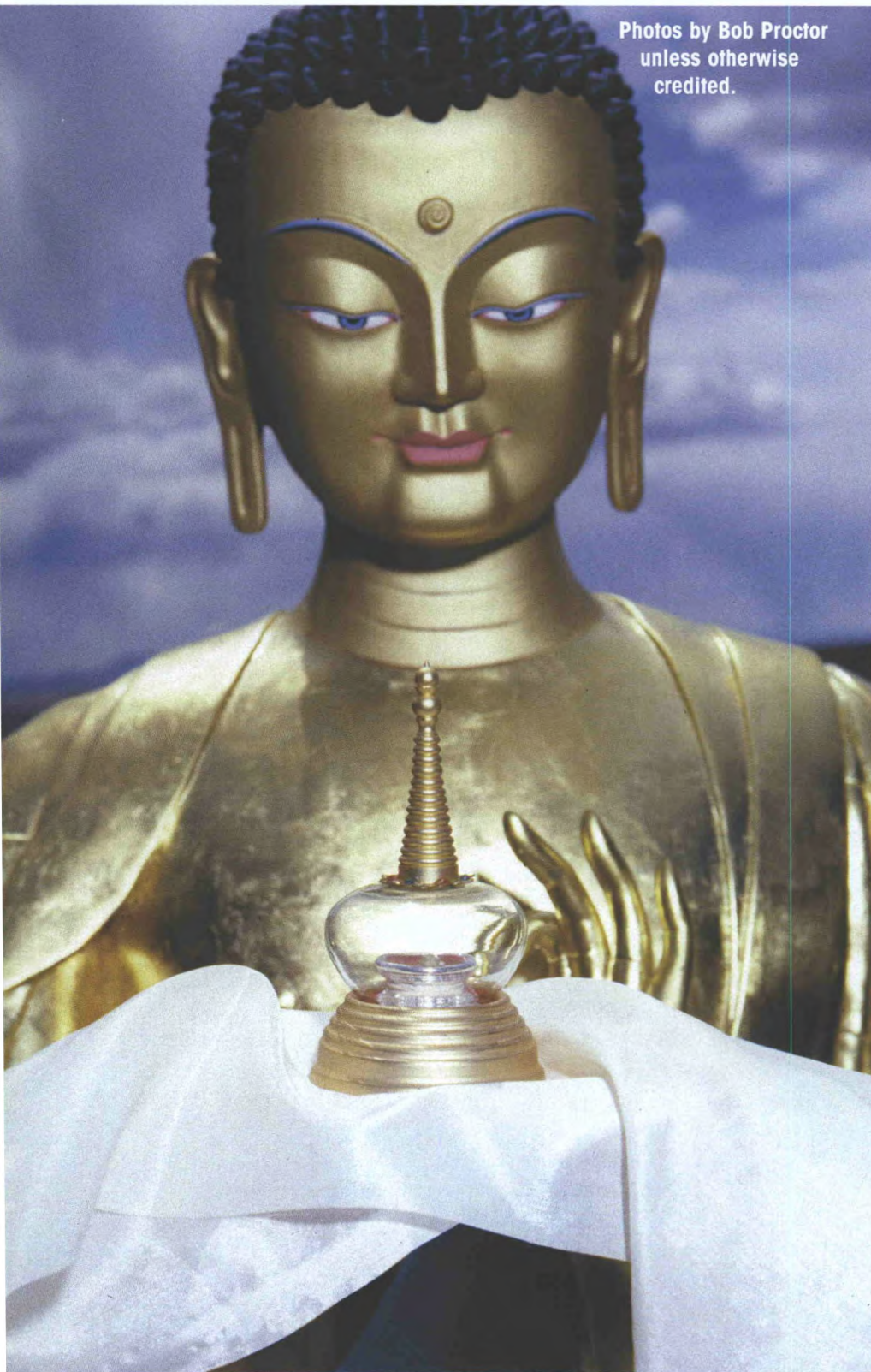


Relics On Tour

By Helen Chang

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Vicki Walker, 45, has been studying the Dharma for nine years. The names Shakyamuni, Ananda, and Shariputra are familiar to her. But tonight, they mean something much more.

She has tears in her eyes, and there is a gentleness about her. Her two sons, ages nine and twelve, are also bowed in prayer.

They have just met the relics of Shakyamuni, Kasyapa, and eighteen other great Buddhist masters that are touring the world, and tonight are visiting the town of Vail, Colorado.

The relics are displayed in tiny stupas amidst a majestic exhibition of lights, candles, khatas, and a graceful Maitreya Buddha statue.

Vicki returns to her seat, absorbing the significance of the event. "I just pray for wisdom and loving kindness," says Vicki. "I want it for myself, for my family and others."

Everywhere this collection of Buddhist relics goes, people are moved and inspired. This is the Heart Shrine Relic Tour, an exhibition of more than 1,000 relics from twenty great Buddhist masters, including Shakyamuni Buddha himself, which is touring the world over the next several years as a way to bring blessings and inspire faith in people. It is also a way to publicize the 500-foot Maitreya statue and development being built in northern India because the relics will eventually

Left: A Maitreya Buddha prototype, with a stupa containing relics. The relics of Buddhist masters, destined for the 'heart-shrine' of the Maitreya statue, have been 'on tour' since 2001.



THE MAITREYA PROJECT

The impetus for the Heart Shrine Relic Tour is the Maitreya Project, a pilgrimage development being built in northern India. At its center is a 500-ft Maitreya Buddha statue, about three times the height of the Statue of Liberty. It is a symbol of loving kindness, built to last 1,000 years.

With the Indian government as a partner, the development will include schools, a hospital, monasteries, pilgrimage facilities and parks, so it brings economic benefit to the people in the area. It will also be environmentally sustainable.

The interior of the statue will include several halls and pavilions, and a million pieces of sacred art. At the heart of the statue the relics will be permanently enshrined.

Inspired by Lama Thubten Yeshe and currently directed by Lama Zopa Rinpoche, the project is managed by an international team of architects, engineers, and other experts. It is targeted for completion by 2006.

be enshrined at the heart of the Maitreya Buddha statue.

Since March 2001, when the collection first started touring the world beginning in Taipei, Taiwan, thousands have had the opportunity to see the relics. And so will thousands more.

The tour organizers say the relics themselves are responding to this sea of faith in an unprecedented way: the relics are spontaneously multiplying. This is an auspicious result of the devotion being shown, and whether or not you believe, the relics themselves also contain so much energy that they can transform people's lives, organizers say.

"The Buddha Shakyamuni had such compassion for beings that, knowing that so many people wouldn't actually see his holy body after he passed into nirvana, he regenerated it in the form of relics," explains tour manager Victoria Ewart. "By paying respect to relics we create good karma – the merit to achieve enlightenment. So we encourage people to make offerings, prostrate, and circumambulate the relics.

"What has evolved during the last year is something truly incredible and very beautiful. If I had any doubts in the beginning – about the authenticity of the relics and the benefits of the tour – these have been dispelled systematically by the sheer human response to the relics.

"What began as a monumental act of kindness of Lama Zopa Rinpoche has gradually evolved into an interfaith event that reminds us of our basic human qualities – compassion, tolerance towards others and having a good heart."

Fulfilling a dream

Relics are tiny crystalline and pearl-like substances (*ringsel*) found in the ashes of highly realized masters' cremated remains. It is believed that the purity of the masters' minds and bodies create these ringsel, which remind us of the high consciousness of the masters, even after death.

Historically, relics are protected in temples and shrines. When many Tibetans fled their country due to the



People circumambulating the relics

Chinese invasion in the 1950s, the lamas, including Lama Zopa Rinpoche, salvaged sacred relics from the desecrated monasteries, stupas and statues.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche is fulfilling the life dream of his teacher Lama Yeshe by building a Maitreya Buddha statue. His collection of relics will be placed in its heart-shrine as a way to bless its visitors. Inspired by this vision, His Holiness the Dalai Lama contributed relics of the Shakyamuni Buddha from his personal collection. Others soon followed.

The organizers say the historical timing is significant. In the wake of the September 11 attack, wars, and economic uncertainty, the relics offer a cause for world peace. "Maitreya symbolizes loving kindness – love, compassion, tolerance for others," says Victoria. "Once you generate that in your heart, the result is peace in your own heart, and peace for others. Loving kindness is the cause and peace is the result."

Lawyer learns patience and humility

Victoria Ewart, 31, is a former technology lawyer from London, who has dedicated the next several years of her life to this mission. She is a student of Lama Zopa Rinpoche, who appointed her to the job.

Her assistant, Fleur Chyta, 32, was a Greek psychotherapist, who gave up her practice to offer service to Lama Zopa Rinpoche. She joined the relic tour nearly one year after Victoria.

For Victoria, the job is both a spiritual and a physical journey. When she started, she reeled from the obstacles. Her salary is one-quarter her previous



Shakyamuni Buddha's relics are divided out to eventually be placed in stupas.

Photo Mark Oatney

HOLYOBJECTS

pay. She travels from city to city, rarely staying more than two or three nights in each place. Every city brings new people, with new expectations. She rarely sees friends. Packing boxes, moving equipment, and unloading supplies is exhausting. Setting up and taking down the relic displays requires great patience. And her ego needs taming.

When Victoria arrived at Auckland airport for her first show, she was greeted by a prominent geshe, a long line of students holding *khatas* (offering scarves) and a Rolls Royce. Awestruck, Victoria turned to a nun and said, "I didn't expect this." The response was, "I don't think it's for you, dear."

Victoria said, "It was the beginning of my ego lessons. It's not about me. It's very easy to start believing in the adulation, and think you're a part of it, when in fact, you're just facilitating it.

"It's a constant practice. You're constantly working on your mind and feelings of self-pity – I should have more help, I should have a break now, I should be going on holiday. All the normal delusions of life, but the tour pushes you to the limit."

Once, Victoria complained to Lama Zopa Rinpoche himself, saying the obstacles were simply too great, suggesting that perhaps



For Victoria Ewart, left, the job as relic tour manager, is both a spiritual and a physical journey. She is pictured here with Maitreya Buddha, center, and assistant Fleur Chyta.

she should go on a Vajrasattva retreat, to purify negative karma. He looked at her and said, "This is your Vajrasattva retreat."

On the Road

Victoria, Fleur, and the relics travel in a large Dodge van, which some dub the "Dharma van," because the maroon and yellow-painted van is covered with images of buddhas, Taras, and mantras. [See next page.]

"The purpose of having all these images and teachings on the van is not decorative," says Victoria. "It is so that people seeing the van develop happiness and compassion by connecting with the Buddha, in however transitory or accidental a way."

In the back seat sits the Maitreya Buddha statue, wrapped in a gold-lined maroon cloak and strapped down by a safety belt. It stares straight ahead, with a serene smile. Its face is painted gold, with red lips, blue hair and a stupa on the top of its head. In the next seat is a large black bag containing the relics.

Everywhere they go – at traffic lights, pit stops or parking lots – people stop and look. Many do double takes on the statue. Others wave their hands and smile. Some just chuckle.

Yet something about the van seems to work. At the end of one show, when we are carrying boxes to the van, I notice two men standing near the back, holding coffee cups, and looking at the van. I ask if they needed anything. "No," they say. "We just thought we should stand guard, since no one was around watching the boxes."

Since May 2001 through December 2002, the Dharma Van has covered 30,000 miles, over nine states in the U.S.

The road trip is awash with miracles. Everywhere they go, Victoria and Fleur are met with synchronicities. Like the time in Sedona, Arizona, when they were upgraded to an amphitheater to display the relics, which would normally have cost \$10,000, but was given to the show at no charge. Or the sound technicians, who swore they had turned off all the music equipment when they left, but returned the next morning to find a cassette tape of invocations that had run all night, as if to pour out continuous blessings. Or the time in Taiwan, when a mandala was made showing the arhats, and the very next day, Rinpoche received a gift of an arhat relic. Or the time in Frisco, Colorado, when a

RELICS MULTIPLYING

Some relics are multiplying. Photos taken at different times verify this extraordinary phenomenon.

- Kasyapa tooth relic – a photo taken in June 2001 vs. a photo taken this year shows three additional relics, about the size of sugar grains.

- Ananda relics – a photo taken in June 2001 shows brown-colored relics, about the size of a rice grains. Another taken in August 2002 shows these relics have turned white in color, and one has grown to the size of a pearl.

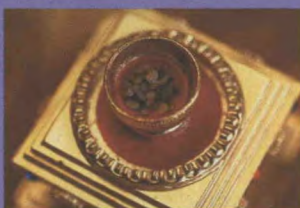
In the Buddhist tradition, when relics multiply or change color, that is considered an extremely auspicious sign, a result of great devotion.

BEFORE



The Kasyapa Buddha was two relics and now is five.

AFTER



The Ananda relics were brown in color and are now white. There is a brand new pearl sized one in the middle of the stupa.



AUTHENTICATING RELICS

Alan Kroboth, former president of the Cremation Association of North America, and author of the operation manuals used in all US crematoriums today, has performed more than 20,000 cremations. He says he has never seen anything like the relics among cremation ashes, and it would be very hard to find such substances. "It would be highly unlikely that you could, after a cremation, even after a modern cremation, locate anything like this in size."

Kroboth notes that funeral pyres used during Buddha's time would reach temperatures of 1,200 to 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit, depending on the type of wood. (Modern crematoriums in the US operate at 1,600 to 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit [871.1 to 982.2 degrees Celsius].)

After cremation, the only type of material left might be bone fragments, which would have turned completely to carbon. Such fragments could be carbon-tested for dates, but DNA testing would be ruled out, since all DNA is destroyed with cremations.

Some critics have suggested that relics may actually be gall or kidney stones, but Kroboth says this is unlikely, since such material would turn to gray ash, rather than become shiny or translucent as the relics are.

Instead, Kroboth says it would be better to take the relics to be tested for its chemical substances. In regular cremations, "It would be difficult to find the substances like you've described to me," he says.

We can rely on the lineage of the relics for authentication. These include His Holiness and heads of the different traditions. Lama Zopa Rinpoche also turns to oracles to check their authenticity. (Some relics were deemed unfavorable for display.)



Maitreya, Victoria, Fleur, and the relics travel in the "Buddha Van."



logistical difficulty was resolved, and a double rainbow suddenly appeared in the sky above the show venue.

Cell phone summons

At one show in Los Angeles, over 1,000 people packed into a Vietnamese temple for a blessing ceremony, many calling their loved ones on cell phones, telling them to come.

In Sedona, there was an animal blessings ceremony. More than 500 pets circumambulated the relics. One onlooker said the sight of a pet-owner guiding her rabbit to prostrate to the relics would endure in her memory for some time. Another time, Victoria and Fleur visited the Humane Society, and blessed the animals' drinking water. The cats and dogs were reportedly crowding the water bowls – highly unusual behavior, according to their keepers.

People see the relics for all sorts of reasons. One infertile couple came, hoping to conceive. Another woman said she cleared a karmic pattern after meditating with the relics. One reclusive stroke victim invited all his similarly stricken friends to come.

Human response to the relics

The Tour received an inspiring email from a lady in Taos, New Mexico after she attended the Relic Show held at the Denver Zen Center," Victoria said. "A practicing Tibetan Buddhist for some years, she nonetheless admitted to being pretty skeptical about the whole idea of a relic tour. But that changed for her when she meditated with the relics and attended a blessing ceremony (where

each person present is touched on the head with the relics of the Buddha). She said she felt a personal connection with the Buddha, that she had "met" the Buddha for the very first time. The Buddha became real for her.

"Recently the relics were displayed at a large, beautiful Vietnamese Temple in Los Angeles. About 10,000 people queued in the hot sun for up to two hours to view the relics for a few precious minutes. This Relic Show was organized by a lady called Phoung. Her father has a brain tumor and is virtually blind. He cannot walk unassisted.

"When he saw the relics, he said that something happened to him. He went to his doctor, who examined his eyes and pronounced his sight 70 percent improved. The doctor had no idea how this could happen and has ordered another brain scan. Meanwhile, Phoung's father is cleaning windows, walking unaided, and doing all the activities he couldn't do before. He says that his sight was restored by the blessings of the buddhas." ☸

Helen Chang is a freelance journalist based in Denver, Colorado, specializing in health, holistic and spiritual topics. She accompanied the Heart Shrine Relics Tour through part of America's Southwest. Email hchang@aap.net

TOUR SCHEDULE

For information about upcoming Heart-Shrine Relic Shows, or to organize one in your area, contact relictour@maitreyaproject.org or visit www.maitreyaproject.org for the full calendar of upcoming shows.