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BELIEFS

Long-Hidden Buddhist Relics Come to Southland

By Larry B. Stammer, Times Staff Writer

For believers, being in the presence of the 2,500-year-old cremated remains of ancient Buddhist masters is to be in the presence of the masters themselves. Devotees speak of receiving blessings and a sense of inner peace.

They speak, too, of miraculous things — of the pearl-like remains of the dead multiplying and changing colors — signs, they say, that those who have prayed near and honored the relics have faith.

Now relics of 30 Buddhist masters, which for thousands of years were hidden in Buddhist temples, shrines and statues in Asia, will be available for public viewing today and Sunday in a Santa Monica church. After stops in the San Joaquin Valley town of Ceres and in Oakland, the relics will return to Southern California for viewing Feb. 26 and 27 at a Buddhist temple in Santa Ana.

Organizers say the display includes relics of Shakyamuni Buddha, known as the Enlightened One, who was born as Siddhartha Gautama 2,500 years ago. Also on display, they say, are relics of the Buddha's disciples, Maudgalyayana, Ananda and Sariputra. There are relics of other saints and spiritual masters from the Chinese, Indian and Tibetan traditions.

Although tour sponsors acknowledge that claims of relics multiplying and changing their colors have not been scientifically verified, they say there is little doubt that the free public showing this weekend will fascinate people and, in many cases, inspire believers.

Some of the relics were salvaged from statues in Tibet, where they had been enshrined for thousands of years before the Chinese occupation in 1951, tour sponsors said. The Dalai Lama, museums and monasteries have

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donated the relics to Lama Zopa Rinpoche, spiritual leader of the Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition, based in Taos, N.M.

Lama Zopa Rinpoche is also spiritual director of the Maitreya Project, an ambitious plan to build what backers say would be the world's largest statue — a 500-foot-high bronze representation of a future Buddha — in northern India by 2010. The statue would sit on a 17-story building designed as a throne. The building would include two large prayer halls, one big enough to accommodate 4,000 people. (By comparison, the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in downtown Los Angeles seats 3,000.)

The traveling relics display is helping to publicize that \$250-million Buddha construction proposal. About half of the money has been raised in pledges so far, according to Victoria Ewart, who has been in charge of the tour as it has traveled across the globe in the last four years. Although the exhibit is not intended to raise funds, it may inspire people to contribute to the building effort, she said.

Plans call for the relics to be housed permanently in the enormous edifice in India. In the meantime, sponsors say the tour offers a rare public opportunity to view the relics close to home and to experience the benefits of being near the "essence" of the masters.

"When you are actually in the presence of the relics yourself, the relic contains the spiritual realizations of love and compassion of that teacher. They have a positive energy in them," said Carmen Straight, relic custodian and devotee from Canada.

The Buddhist relics have special qualities, the tour organizers contend. They say the cremated remains of Buddhist masters or others who attained spiritual realization are different from those of the average person. Common people produce only ash.

According to adherents, the relics of the masters, scholars, teachers and gurus — known as *ringsel* — include substances that look like pearls of different hues: the typical pearl color, white, green, red. Some are the size of a grain of rice. All are placed in colorful ritual containers within clear display cases.

Most extraordinary, the believers say the *ringsel* have been found to have multiplied and changed colors, a phenomenon they attribute to the devotion of believers and their prayers.

"They have energy to them. When people are coming with their own energy of prayer and devotion, that's what makes them change," Straight said.

At a recent tour stop in Washington, some visitors wept joyfully as they viewed the remains or were blessed by Buddhist monks.

The veneration of relics is not restricted to Buddhists. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, has a tradition of venerating the relics of saints and others that dates back to Roman times. Relics from 26 saints or blessed people — including St. Francis of Assisi, St. Patrick and St. Emydius, the patron against earthquakes — are embedded in the pedestal of the altar at the Los Angeles cathedral.

Neither are Buddhists the only ones to report miracles associated with such remains. Tom Serafin, a lay Catholic and founder of the Apostolate for Holy Relics, said there were accounts of saints and beatified people whose bodies were found intact long after their deaths.

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He recalled the story of St. Bernadette Soubir, who at 14 reported that she had seen the Virgin Mary at Lourdes, France. The girl died in 1879. Her body was exhumed in 1909 and was found to be "incorrupt," he said.

Msgr. Francis Webber, historian and archivist for the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles, said the bodies of saints and the blessed have also been known to exude a perfume-like aroma. He said it is called the "odor of sanctity. It's one of the things that can be associated with very holy people. It's accepted, but it's not part of doctrine. People can believe or not believe it."

The Venerable Tenzin Saldron, an American Buddhist nun, believes that the relics on the tour help put her in the presence of the masters themselves and the blessings they offer.

"I look at these relics and say, 'These come from the teachers.' That brings a lot of faith to me," she said. "Somebody may come in and not experience anything at all, and that would be OK. In my mind, I'd say if they believe it or not, I think they got a blessing."

*

The relics will be on display today and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., at First Presbyterian Church, 1220 2nd St., Santa Monica. The exhibit will be in Santa Ana at Bao Quang Temple, 713 N. Newhope St., on Feb. 26 and 27, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

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