Aspirations for Loving Kindness in Oregon State Penitentiary

On July 7, 2014, Oregon State Penitentiary hosted an exhibit of relics from Buddhist saints, including relics from the body of the Buddha himself. The Buddha relics are approximately 2,600 years old and were found in the ashes of his cremated body. This exhibit was offered to the prison by the Maitreya Heart Shrine traveling tour that is sponsored by Lama Zopa an esteemed Tibetan Buddhist master. This traveling show is offered with the intention of bringing an experience of loving kindness to individuals and the communities in which they are shown.

Roughly, sixty incarcerated adults signed up to attend the event. Prior to the arrival of the adults in custody, the shrine with the relics was created after being carried up the four flights of stairs leading to the chapel. Just as the cloths and brocades were unfolded to cover the tables and create the shire on which the relics would rest, an environment of quiet and peace unfolded in the room. Once the shrine was prepared, the room was sealed while the relics of the Buddha, three of his direct disciples and a handful of other great saints were placed in their viewing cases. The attendants lifted the relics from their traveling cases with their hands covered in white cotton gloves. Then they carried the items on the crown of their heads to the shrine where they were then placed with identification cards for the purpose of viewing. Once all the relics were placed, the room was then opened for guests to arrive.

There was a brief introduction given by the traveling attendants, Ms. Amanda Maitreya and Venerable Norbu. In their presentation, they described the tradition of relics as not being particular to Buddhism but many faiths honor and recognize the way in which items from the physical remains of great saints still carry and communicate the qualities of the masters from which they come. The intention of these relics in particular is to promote loving kindness. This is a feeling of basic wellbeing and appreciation of ourselves, those around us, and the world in general. Following the introduction people were welcomed to a closer viewing of the relics themselves and given a direct blessing from one of the Buddha relics as it was placed for a moment on the crown of the head as one of the attendants offered a prayer of loving kindness for the individual being blessed. The event lasted two hours but for many who attended the experience is one they will never forget.