

reprint

# Many Paths

the monthly journal of

**CRES** promoting understanding among all faiths  
through teaching, consulting and writing

© Copyright CRES, Box 4165, Overland Park, KS 66204  
Volume 22, Number 3; 2005 March

*Opening hearts and minds and doors*



## March Holy Days

- 2 Bahá'í *Ala*—The 19th and final month is time for a 19 day fast.
- 8 Hinduism *Mahashivratri* Day of feast dedicated to the deity Shiva.
- 14 Sikism *New Years Day*
- 14 Christianity *Lent (Eastern)*—The First day of the Great Fast
- 16 Zoroastrianism *Ghambar Hamaspathermaedem begins*—Celebrates the creation of human beings; the deceased remembered.
- 17 St Patrick's Day
- 20 Buddhism *Spring Ohigon*—Jodo Shinshu Buddhists listen to the Buddha's teachings and meditate on the perfection of wisdom.
- 20 Christianity *Palm Sunday*—Celebrates the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.
- 20 Wicca *Ostara*—Celebrates the return of the Goddess-as-Maiden, the courting of the Goddess by the God, and the reawakening of the seeds in the earth touched by the warm glow of divine love.
- 20 Shinto *Shunk-sorei-sai*—The Spring Memorial Service is held at home alters to revere ancestors as kami.
- 21 Zoroastrianism *Now Ruz*—New Year's day; celebrates creation of fire and renewal of the world; Zarathustra's revelation.
- 21 Bahá'í *Naw Ruz*—New Year's day is celebrated with a feast.
- 24 Christianity *Maundy Thursday*—Celebrates the institution of the Lord's Supper by Jesus.
- 24 Judaism *Eve of Purim (begins at sundown)*—Purim celebrates victory over an oppressive ruler as related in the Book of Esther.
- 25 Christianity *Good Friday*—Commemorates the Passion of Jesus Christ.
- 25 Hinduism *Holi*—A joyous dedication to Krishna or Kama.
- 26 Sikism *Hola Mohallah*—A time for military preparedness.
- 26 Zoroastrianism *Birth of Zarathustra*.
- 27 Christianity *Easter*—Celebrates the resurrection of Jesus.
- 29 Buddhism *Guanyin Day*—China — see this month's essay

## Question Box

*How do I get this 12-page publication each month and support interfaith work in the Kansas City area?*

Glad you asked. Use the page 2 support form. You can also download much of *Many Paths* in a PDF file from our website. Our calendars are also available at [www.cres.org](http://www.cres.org).

**Many Paths** essays introduce readers to aspects of specific faiths, compare and contrast how the various faiths regard particular topics, or present material those of any spiritual path may find helpful.

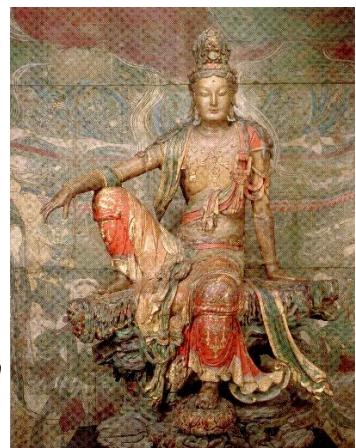
## Two Different Ideals

Two treasures from the permanent collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City



Luohan

Chinese, from Yizhou, Hebei province  
Liao-Jin dynasties (CE 907-1234)  
Tenth-twelfth centuries  
Pottery with three-color glaze  
40x31 in (101.6 x 78.7 cm)  
Museum purchase: acquired 1934



Boddhisattva Guanyin

Chinese, from Shanxi province  
Liao dynasty (CE 907-1125)  
Eleventh to early twelfth centuries  
Polychromed wood  
95 x 65 in (241.3 x 165.1 cm)  
Museum purchase: acquired 1934

Should one focus on saving oneself or others? Is salvation achieved through the head or the heart? Is Nirvana to be understood as the cessation of craving or as perceiving the everyday world without ultimate distinctions? On such questions, Buddhism developed two main traditions, both of which are supremely illustrated above.

The two traditions are Theravada ("Doctrine of the Elders") and Mahayana ("Great Vehicle"). Mahayana is found in Tibet, China, Korea and Japan, and is also called the "Northern" school, although its origins are in India where it arose as a reaction to the austerity and individualism of early Buddhist developments.

The Luohan represents the Buddhist ideal of Theravada Buddhism. (Equivalent terms meaning "worthy one" are *Arhat* in Sanskrit and *Arhant* in Pali). The Luohan is one who has reached the end of the Eight-Fold Path taught by the Buddha and is no longer subject to the wheel of rebirth. In early Buddhism, salvation was a full-time monastic pursuit, which the Lohan achieved by his own effort in withdrawing from the world. The Nelson figure is seated with his hand in *dhyana mudra*, meditation gesture, signifying profound concentration. His withdrawal from the mundane is emphasized by his strongly modeled face.

Here we have the major elements of Theravada Buddhism:

- salvation is achieved through meditation,
- it is an individual concern without responsibility to save others,
- it means withdrawal from the world to end cravings, and
- it is attained by self-effort.

In early Buddhism, the pattern for the religious quest is a disciple who attains saving insight, becoming a Luohan. The Luohan's primary virtue is *prajna*, wisdom.

With the Lotus Sutra, first translated from Sanskrit into Chinese in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE, the Luohan ideal was devalued; the peace attained by the Luohan is merely temporary repose. Luohans were thereafter sometimes represented as misguided in a selfish search. A contrary development elevated the Luohan as protectors of the Dharma (the Teaching of the Buddha). In a further permutation, Luohans were regarded as local genii, and Mount T'ien T'ai became the center of a Luohan cult.

**T**he celebrated Bodhisattva Guanyin is a powerful example of the second ideal. Unlike the Luohan, the Mahayana Bodhisattva stands at the threshold of ultimate enlightenment but, to help all other sentient beings in their quests, refrains from taking the final step into Nirvana. While often retaining the virtue of *prajna*, insight, the Bodhisattva becomes primarily an image of the virtue of *karuna*, compassion.

Some say the central teaching of the Buddha was *Sunya*, the Void, or Emptiness. This means that nothing exists of itself; all things appear to be what they are because of conditions and relationships and are transitory, in process. While Theravadans deal with the void of *things*, Mahayanists emphasize the void of the *self*. Texts like the *Vimalakirti Sutra* demonstrate that there is no self independent of others. In Hua Yen Buddhism, the entire universe is seen to be present by implication in every part; and since the sufferings of sentient beings (including animals and plants, which also undergo pain and decay) are infinite, the Bodhisattva's willingness to forego final personal Enlightenment makes possible the complete dissolution of the ego and utter identification with the Cosmos. Thus the only possible nirvana is paradoxically realized.

 Some might compare this to the Christian idea that he who seeks his life shall lose it, and he who loses his life shall find it. Our salvation is possible, in this view, only when we work on behalf of all others.

For the Mahayana, one need not become a monk and withdraw from the world to be Enlightened. Salvation is not a solitary quest, for bodhisattvas and other beings are ready to help. Indeed, in Mahayana, salvation is universal, not individual. Enlightenment is not the mere cure of compulsive cravings, but seeing the Whole in everyday life.

**G**uanyin is a favorite bodhisattva. The Sanskrit name is *Avalokitesvara*, meaning perhaps "shining lord" or "the lord who looks in every direction" or "the lord of what is seen." And what is seen is the created, suffering world. In China, the name is Guanyin, "regarder of sounds"—the cries of distress; in Japan as Kannon, in Korea as Kwan-um, and in Tibet as sPyan-ras gzigs, "with a pitying look."

The Nelson figure is remarkable in combining a sense of ease (the posture is known as "royal ease") with unquestionable alertness and readiness. Encountering Guanyin, larger than life, in an apparently informal pose, with a serene, surveying gaze, one is convinced that this being is ready to spring into action to respond to a cry for help while remaining perfectly centered.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, the feminine began to dominate the concep-

tion of Guanyin, although instances begin in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century, inspired, perhaps, by Indian sutras suggesting that the Bodhisattva transcends gender.

Far from the solitary image of Lohan, the bodhisattva personifies a characteristic of the universe which seeks to save us, to draw us toward Enlightenment; the spiritual nature of the world,

the *Dharmadhatu*, is itself compassionate. As some might compare the Bodhisattva's vow to the sacrifice of the Christ, so the *Dharmadhatu* might be compared to God's love in Christian thought, although the notion of universal salvation has not been a mainstream Christian teaching.

**S**ince the historical Buddha was both intellectually brilliant and paradigmatically compassionate, it is natural that his followers should have emphasized from time to time one virtue or the other. In the two Nelson images, we have the major personifications of *prajna* and *karuna* from the Theravada and Mahayana traditions.

All great world religions contain considerable variety. While Luohan and bodhisattva are contrasting ideals in one religion, but they also invite consideration of their fundamental kinship in a faith which promises a profound understanding of the transitory nature of the human situation and the transcendence possible when that is realized. They are kin with images from all religions which explore the human encounter with the sacred — that from which the meaning of our lives arises.

—VB

## On the Path

Dear Reader:

This sheet is an excerpt from our 12-page monthly newsletter. In addition to special features, in each complete edition you will find —



- Summaries of world and local religious news
- Comment, quotations, humor, poetry
- Essays to help us understand and appreciate each other
- A 4-page reference insert, a valuable aid and "keeper"
- Calendars of holidays, community and CRES activities.

If you are interested in promoting understanding among peoples of all faiths, please join our network with a contribution and your participation. Thank you.

*Vern Barnett*

**MAIL TO CRES, BOX 45414, Kansas City, MO 64171**

Enclosed please find my check to CRES for o \$35 o \$60 o \$100 o \$200 \$\_\_\_\_\_ to register my support for interfaith work. I will be pleased to receive *Many Paths* for the next 12 months.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City State Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Phones and email (optional) \_\_\_\_\_