

Vesak poya - Vesākhā uposatha

May 15, 2022

This day marks one of the most significant days among all the Uposatha celebrated by Buddhist practitioners all over the world. It falls on the day of the full moon in the month of May (May means vesākhā in the Pāli language). On this day we commemorate the significant events that took place in the life of the Noble Buddha. First, the birth of Siddhattha Gotama in Lumbini, Nepal, under the arbor of the Sat trees, where he was given birth by Queen Mahā Māyā. The second event was the supreme attainment of awakening (nibbāna) of the Buddha. The third event was the parinibbāna of the Noble Buddha at Kusināra. Under this full moon, the year 2565 begins in the Buddhist calendar.

1. BIRTH OF SIDDHATTHA GOTAMA

Siddhattha, in his last lives before becoming the Enlightened One, at the time when he was a divine being, inquired his fellow divine beings in the Tusitā realm about five matters on the most favorable conditions to be reborn in. Siddhattha inquired on the right time, the right region, the right continent, the right caste, and the right mother. Then, as a fully conscious divine being entered the womb of Queen Mahā Māyā. On the day of Vesākhā, a prince was born to the queen and King Suddhodana; he was named Siddhattha, 'the one who has found the meaning of existence'. Queen Mahā Māyā died seven days after the prince's birth.



2. ATTAINING BUDDHAHOOD

Buddha Gotama trained with many teachers in various meditative attainments, but eventually found that they did not teach the truth he was seeking. One day he found the right way to attain the truth. He sat down under the Bodhi tree and focused his mind on the path of attaining complete liberation from suffering. A few moments later, he attained full awakening and on the day of Vesākhā, he conquered the world of affliction.

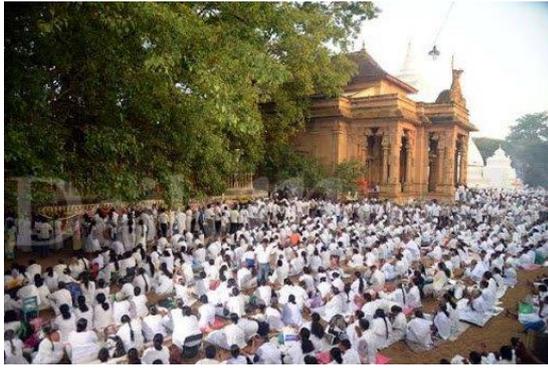
3. BUDDHA PARINIBBĀNA

At the age of eighty, Buddha Gotama announced that his departure, (parinibbāna), would take place at the third part of the night in the Sal grove of the Malla royal family, coincidentally on the day of Vesākhā uposatha.

THE CELEBRATION

Apart from Sri Lanka, Vesākhā is celebrated in many Asian countries including India, Japan, Singapore and Taiwan, it has also been celebrated for several years in our country in āramā Karuṇā Sevena, in the Czeck Republic. In Sri Lanka, many religious activities are organized during this period such as - Bodhi pūja (offering and ceremony to honor the Bodhi tree), Dansala (open day where visitors are always welcome, free distribution of food, coffee, tea and refreshments to people), devotional songs for Vesākhā (Bakthi Gee), pandols (thoran) and lanterns (kudu) etc.

GIFT-GIVING - DĀNA



On this holy day, dāna' (alms giving) plays an important role. It is a sign of sharing joy and peace with people.

Many monasteries across the country are full with devotees and pilgrims on this great occasion. Buddhist practitioners usually dress in white robes, come to the monasteries and participate in traditional ceremonies. Many of them spend the whole day at the monastery, strengthening their

resolutions to follow the Buddha's teachings. In the monasteries, Buddhists bow, recite (sometimes for hours, kneeling or sitting on the ground), meditate, offer flowers to the Buddha on the altar, light oil lamps and burn incense sticks. People believe in the fulfillment of their wishes and requests, praying mostly for the well-being of their daughters and sons, health, happiness and protection. These traditional ceremonies have their value in meeting people's religious and emotional needs. There is a spiritual atmosphere everywhere.

In Sri Lanka in general, the family always comes first and one of the main responsibilities of every family member is to participate in Buddhist celebrations. Every full moon celebration is also a day of fasting, when no meat is to be eaten. Such a traditional lunch consists of the popular vegetarian national dish 'rice curry' full of fresh and fresh vegetables. As a meat substitute, people usually add chopped soya pieces to the dish or omit the meat altogether. During the week of Vesak (Sinhala), the sale of alcohol and meat is usually banned, and slaughterhouses are also closed. Birds, insects and animals are also released by the thousands in what is known as the 'liberation of life' to give freedom to those who are captive, imprisoned or tortured against their will. To celebrate Vesak is also to make efforts to bring happiness to old people, those who have some physical or mental disability and to those who are ill. On this day, Buddhist devotees distribute gifts, donate money, or do volunteer work in various charity homes across their country.

VESAK THORANA

The most eye-catching tradition of this celebration is that each family decorates their homes from the outside with colorful twinkling lights and hanging paper lanterns with fringes of different colors. During Vesak celebrations, electrically lit pandals called 'Vesak thorana' are erected in public places around the island, usually sponsored by donors, religious societies and social groups. Each pandal (structure) illustrates one story from the 550 stories of 'Jātaka kathā' or stories from the past lives of the Buddha. At the time of Vesak, the streets are filled with people listening to these Jātaka stories and admiring the individual Thorana. Each city boasts different stories and Thorana and at the end of Vesak the city with the most beautiful Thorana is awarded. At first glance, this pandala looks more like a carnival attraction, flashing all its colors, glittering and shimmering. Several loud alternating melodies play in the background and one of the narrators tells several short legends, carried to the rhythm of these tones.

Pandals, or thorana in Sinhala, have a thousand-year history. Thoranas were traditionally built as decorative arches over entrances on important occasions. They are a sign of importance and integrity. That is why you might



see them at the entrances of monasteries. There are many types of pandals made of different materials. Some have deep religious and cultural significance. In contrast, the modern pandal on Vesak has only less than a century of history. In 1913, a structure with Buddhist paintings illuminated by oil lamps was on display in Ambalangoda. However, the modern illuminated Vesak pandal using electricity was first seen in 1956. This is the beginning of the famous Thotalanga pandal, which is still exhibited every year.

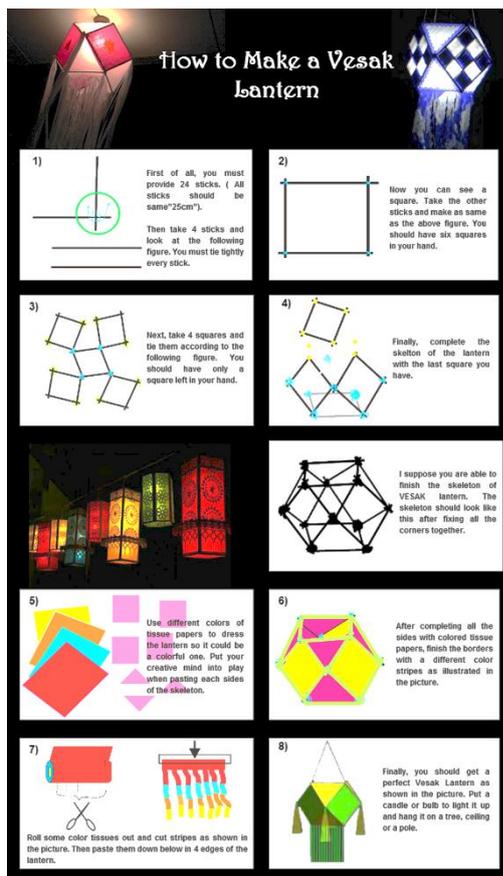
VESAK LUCERNY

Lanterns called 'Vesak kudu' are lit in most houses in Sri Lanka on Vesak poya day. The lighting of the lantern signifies an offering in memory of the Buddha who brought the teachings of the Dhamma. In ancient times, people used clay oil lamps for lighting. When candles became popular, colored lanterns of different shapes and colors were used. Many associations hold Vesak kudu competitions, with the makers of the most beautiful lanterns being rewarded with valuable prizes.

LANTERN MAKING

The original and surviving custom is not to buy lanterns but to make them by hand at home. The production consists of cutting 24 wooden sticks of the same size, approximately 25 cm in diameter, and gluing them together to form the perimeter of the lantern structure. Traditionally they are glued

together with rubber. It is then decorated on the outside with colored crepe paper, to which a light, candle or small bulb is added at the end. Fringe cut from crepe paper is added to the lantern and glued to each edge of the lantern's rim. Traditional lanterns are white or in the colors of the Buddhist flag, which can be decorated in different ways as shown in the picture. All the streets are lit up these days, lanterns are not missing as a decoration in any house, people also carry it in parades around the town or village.



BUDDHIST FLAG

Many different variations of the Buddhist flag are sold in different parts of the world. Most of them resemble the Buddhist flag that came into use in the late 19th century, but a few flags come from other traditions and bear little resemblance to the original flag. Very few flag variants are used

outside their country of origin, so the original flag remains in use around the world as an international symbol of Buddhism that can represent every sect and school of the religion.

THE COLORS AND SYMBOLISM OF THE BUDDHIST FLAG



The international Buddhist flag consists of six vertical stripes. The first five stripes are blue, yellow, red, white, and orange. The last stripe contains all these colors together. These are the six colors that are said to have emanated from the Buddha's body when he attained enlightenment, and each represents a practice or value of the Buddhist faith.

- The blue stripe (nīla) represents the light shining from the Buddha's hair and symbolizes peace and universal compassion for all beings,
- The yellow stripe (pīṭa) represents the light shining from the Buddha's skin and symbolizes the Middle Eightfold Path, which avoids all extremes and signifies balance and liberation.
- The red stripe (lohitaka) represents the light shining from the Buddha's muscles and represents the blessings that come from practicing the Buddha's teachings.
- The white stripe (odāta) represents the light shining from the Buddha's bones and teeth, symbolizing the purity of the Dhamma teachings and the freedom they bring.
- The orange stripe (mañjēṭha) represents the light from the Buddha's heels and lips and symbolizes the unshakability of the Buddha's wisdom.
- The last stripe (pabbhassara) represents the light shining from the Buddha's palms and is the combination of all these five colors in the aura spectrum. It symbolizes the truth of the Buddha's teachings.

Variants of the flag usually replace one of the stripes with a color that is significant to a particular branch of Buddhism. The symbolic value of this change can vary greatly from school to school, but the fact that many schools retain the basic aspects of the flag pattern represents the unity of Buddhism worldwide.

THE HISTORY OF THE BUDDHIST FLAG

The International Buddhist Flag was first designed in 1885 by the Colombo Committee in Sri Lanka. It was used locally the same year, but the flag did not immediately spread to other countries. The shape of the flag was changed to more closely match national flags in 1889, when it was presented to the Emperor of Japan. Shortly after, it began to spread around the world. The process was slow, but in 1952 the World Community of Buddhists adopted the flag as an international symbol of their faith. The approval of this organization made the flag significantly more popular and helped it spread around the world, especially in countries where Buddhists were a religious minority. The flag has long since become a common part of Buddhist communities, and so is commonly seen wherever the Buddhist faith is found.

PAYING HOMAGE TO THE BUDDHA

According to tradition, the Buddha instructed his followers how to pay homage to him. Just before his death, he saw his faithful guide Ānanda weeping. The Buddha advised him not to cry and instead to understand the universal truth that 'all composite things' (including his own body) must disintegrate. He advised everyone not to weep over the disintegration of the physical body, but to consider his teachings (the Dhamma) as their teacher, because only the truth of the Dhamma is eternal and not subject to the law of change. He also emphasized that the way to pay homage to him is not just by offering flowers, incense, and lights, but by making a genuine and sincere effort to follow his teachings.

The days of Vesak Poya end when the full moon has passed.

Bhikkhunī Visuddhi