



A celebration of peace and illumination, Vesak reflects upon Lord Buddha's teachings on enlightenment. Decked with bright lanterns, colourful lights and elaborate depictions of the Buddha's life story, Colombo will glow dispersing the darkness of the night and bringing together all faiths this May.

Words Keshini de Silva



Innovative Vesak lanterns vie for coveted prizes

The Beira Lake glistens with bright reflections of colour, while the Seema Malaka sparkles beside it. Twinkling with lights, the dust-filled streets of Colombo come alive for the thrice-blessed festival of Vesak, amazing the multitudes that gather from across the country to witness Colombo's Vesak Kalapaya, the Buddha Rashmi Pooja.

For millennia Buddhists have been commemorating the birth, enlightenment and *parinibbāna* (passing away) of Lord Buddha on the full moon Poya day in May. Sri Lanka has a glorious history of Buddhist festivities since the time of the ancient kings of the Island.

Today celebrations are held across the whole Island, the National Vesak Festival culminating in Colombo with lantern (*kudu*) competitions; spectacular community light displays, or *thoran*, that display the teachings and life stories of Buddha; and alms-giving stalls, or *dansal*.

Yet, in the recent past, while terrorism swept the Island, the concrete jungle of Colombo saw a rapid decline in Buddhist tradition. When the final *thorana*, at the Manning Market in Pettah, ceased to operate Ven Galaboda Gnanissara thero, Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple stood up as a bastion of the faith and began rejuvenating the rich and colourful traditions. Students of the temple's Sri Jinarathana Vocational Training Institute erected a fine *thorana* or '*pandol*' and the Buddha Rashmi Pooja was born.

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Organised in collaboration with the Prime Minister's Office, the annual National Vesak Festival returns this month with its traditional pageantry and pride. This year too the festival promises to shine a rainbow of bright colour on Pittala Junction, Sir James Peiris Mawatha, Navam Mawatha, Perahera Mawatha, Sri Uttarananda Mawatha and the Beira Lake.

"Buddha Rashmi Pooja is a national festival that bring everyone together, the entire people of the country. A hallmark of the event is the participation of people from different ethnicities and religious beliefs. Last year, groups even came in from Jaffna to see Colombo's Vesak Kalapaya and we especially looked into their needs," says Ven Dr Kirinde Assaji Thero of the Gangaramaya Temple.

On Vesak Full Moon Poya Day (May 21), the Gangaramaya Temple holds its customary *sil* meditation programme, along with other religious observances, accommodating 6,000 devotees. At night a simple ceremony at the Seema Malaka under the patronage of President Maithripala Sirisena and Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe marks the start of Colombo's Vesak Kalapaya, which continues from May 21 till May 25, 2016. The army, navy,

air force, police and civil defence force have organised events for each of the five days, including grand floats with *bakthi gee* chorals that will be a stand-out attraction on the Beira Lake.

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Another special feature of Buddha Rashmi Pooja 2016 is the display of sacred relics at the Prime Minister's House, including the relics found at the ancient Neelagiri Stupa in the Eastern Province. Discussions led by the Prime Minister are also in progress regarding flying in sacred relics of Lord Buddha from abroad.



Be awed by beautiful Sri Lankan decorations (Courtesy Sri Lanka Navy)

Along the Beira Lake, three large platforms will showcase cultural performances until dawn. Three *pandols* will be set up under the auspices of leading corporations; uniquely the thero

said they represent the participation of other religious faiths in the festival. The streets will be transformed by creative Vesak lanterns competing for coveted prizes in the nationwide lantern competition. A range of prizes including vehicles will be presented to the most dazzling creations.

Many of the contestants come from afar to showcase their talents, some sacrificing their daily pay to participate in the five-day event. Taking this into account, the Gangaramaya Temple will be providing food and beverages to all contestants, and they will also be given a cash donation for their efforts. Work by students from 30 Colombo schools will be displayed and a children's activity programme has also been organised.

Buddhists across the world celebrate Vesak in their own unique way, adhering to traditions that have been passed down for millennia. To showcase this, the Gangaramaya Temple has invited the embassies and high commissions of countries such as India, Cambodia and Thailand that celebrate Vesak to display their own customary Vesak decorations.

Elucidating Lord Buddha's teachings of benevolence, peace, co-existence and acceptance, Buddha Rashmi Pooja 2016 not only illuminates the heart of Colombo - it will also awe your soul.

Buddha Rashmi Pooja

