Buddha Rashmi Vesak

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The illuminated Seemamalaka of the Gangaramaya Temple

On Vesak full moon poya this year, Sri Lanka will be in the centre of all Buddhist celebrations. The Buddha Rashmi at the Gangaramaya Temple will be the crowning glory of it all.

Podi Hamuduruwo decorates the reliquary

Words Yomal Senerath-Yapa and Keshini Peiris | **Photography** BT Images

Vesak, commemorates the birth, enlightenment and *Parinibbana* of the Buddha. This year, the Buddha Rashmi will be a window into the sanctified Buddhist practices in Sri Lanka.

Honour of place is given to the *Pratipatti pooja,* which means that leading our lives according to those Buddhist teachings with the ultimate goal of *Nirvana* is the best we can do to honour the Great Teacher. *Aamisa pooja*, or the outwardly ways in which we show our devotion are also an integral part of Vesak as this too has spiritual reasoning. The Vesak lantern illuminated with a candle is not only a sight of serene joy at night; but it also symbolises the enlightenment of the Buddha.

The two concepts of Buddhism will be at the heart of the Buddha Rashmi 2017, the

biggest national festival for Vesak. The Vesak Zone is organised in Colombo spanning James Peiris Mawatha, Jinaratana Mawatha, Perahera Mawatha and Uttarananda Mawatha, the Vesak Kalapaya also enlivens the area around Temple Trees and the Galle Face Green. Now an annual event organised by the Gangaramaya Temple, the Buddha Rashmi 2017 festival is the brainchild of Podi Hamuduruwo, the Venerable Galaboda Gnanissara thero, Chief Incumbent of the Gangaramaya Temple. The festival will take place consecutively for five days from May 10 to 14 and the centre of attention will be the Beira Lake.

President Maithripala Sirisena together with Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe will officially declare open the festivities on the first day.

From full moon poya day on May 11 till May 14, *Bhakti Gee* – devotional songs, will be sung by choirs formed by staff of public and private institutions. The *Vesak Kalapaya* (Zone) will be made of all elements that are traditionally associated with the sacred Vesak celebrations. The main pandal or *thorana* will have scenes from the story of Sage Mahoshada. Vesak inspired creations by the Armed Forces, Civil Defence Force, Youth Services Council, The Tower Hall Foundation, and the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, the University of Visual and Performing Arts and other institutions will adorn the streets. There is also plenty of space for artistic work done by anyone who wishes to spread the "*Buddhalmabana preethi*", the true joy of being inspired by the Buddha. Students from 30 schools have been given the opportunity to create displays based on lessons in their textbooks.



Bhakthi Gee on the Beira Lake

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There is greater significance in celebrations in Sri Lanka this year as the Island will be in the heart of the United Nations' commemora-tion of Vesak. From as much as 100 countries, 400 delegates will fly in to share the spiritual bliss of the UN Day of Vesak (May 12 – 14) and partake in a Buddhist symposium and a cultural show. The Premier of India Narendra Modi will be in attendance as well. Thus, *Vesak Kalapaya* will also be celebrating a myriad of cultures influenced by Buddhism through showcasing how other Buddhist countries such as Thailand and Vietnam, Japan and India decorate their streets for Vesak. Their lanterns, lights and spiritual as well as many cultural observances in commemorating the blessed day will be displayed at the zone.

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On the Vesak poya day, even the most wayward strive to allow some spiritual light enter their lives through *sil* and meditation programmes that focus on the Buddhas doctrine.

Giving, is an integral part of the spirit of Vesak. It is considered to be the most generous month in the calendar, when food is lavishly provided and lives of a thousand animals are saved. *Dansals* crowd waysides, with a merry flow of free food and beverage to anyone who stops by.

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a statue of the goddess Kali Amman that is sculptured from marble. Here she takes the avatar of goddess Durga; brought to life by Indian craftsmen who abstained from any sinful and worldly acts until the statue was complete. Donated by businessman Nandana Lokuwithana, the statue will be placed in a shrine soon to be built at an auspicious location within the Gangaramaya Temple.

By experiencing *Aloka Pooja* or ‘the offering of lights’ and the diversity of Vesak celebrations, one’s mind will surely enlighten.

