Celebrating Vesak with Spirituality

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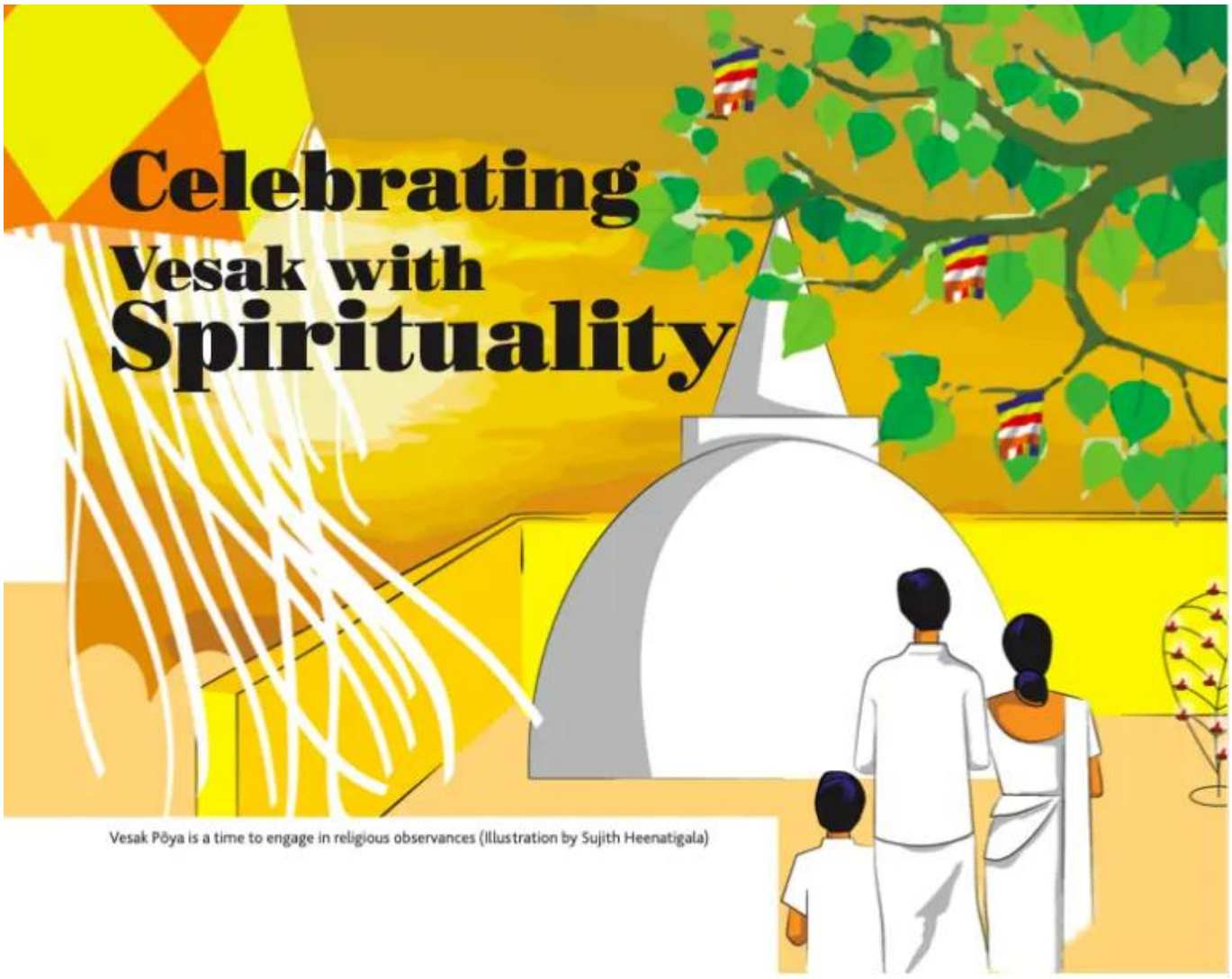

Vesak Pōya is a time to engage in religious observances (Illustration by Sujith Heenatigala)

Vesak Pōya is an important festival to Buddhists and non-Buddhists around the world. It signifies three important events in the life of the Buddha, Celebrating Vesak with Spirituality namely, Birth, Enlightenment, and the Passing of the Buddha (Parinibbāna). Furthermore, the Buddha made his first visit after Enlightenment to his hometown of Kimbulwath Nuwara to see His father, King Suddhodana, and other relatives on Vesak day. Another significance

of this day, especially for Sri Lankans, is the Buddha's visit to the country.

Ven Diyapattugama Revatha Thero, Chief Incumbent of the Siriwardhanaramaya Temple, Colpetty, explains that while these events heighten the festival's significance, the most crucial aspect in the life of a Buddhist is the teachings of the Buddha – Dhamma.

It is believed that a Buddha brings great peace to the world and is reflected in the Pali phrase 'Sukkho Buddhanang Uppado.' For this reason, a Buddha always emerges after tens of thousands of years (many kalpas) in India (Dambadiva). Gautama Buddha was from Kimbulwath Nuwara, but he was born in the royal Sal Uyana in Lumbini. The reason being that Queen Maya decided to travel to her hometown close to the baby's birth, and on the journey, Prince Siddhartha was born. After that, the Queen and the baby Prince were brought back to Kimbulwath Nuwara by relatives. The Birth of Prince Siddhartha is the first significant milestone in the life of the Gautama Buddha on Vesak Poya Day. In relation to Vesak Poya, the second significant milestone in the life of the Gautama Buddha that occurred on that day was that he understood the Four Noble Truth of life and attained Enlightenment. King Suddhodana built three beautiful palaces known as Ramya, Suramya, Subha for each season for the young Prince who was 16 years old. The King wanted the young Prince to appreciate the wealth of the kingdom. Furthermore, the King also arranged the marriage between Prince Siddhartha and Princess Yashodhara, the daughter of the Sakya King, Suppabuddha. However, after 13 years of marriage Prince Siddhartha became disillusioned with life. He observes the 'Sathara Pera Nimithi' or the Four Great Signs, an elderly man, a sick man, a funeral procession, and finally, saffron-robed Priest. These four sights were the reasons for Prince Siddhartha to leave all worldly pleasures and seek the end to suffering. According to the 'Canki Sutta,' while his entire family was in tears, having shaved his hair and donning a saffron robe, the Prince left mundane comforts behind him and left the palace (renunciation). Thus, it is believed that at the young age of 29, a Bodhisattva who is seeking Enlightenment will realize about life, and as Prince Siddhartha had seen the Four Great Signs, he understood life and left home.

After years of meditation and reflection, the hermit Siddhartha having understood the Four Noble Truths, attained Enlightenment and thus became the Buddha. This is the second milestone in the life of the Buddha, which is signified by the Vesak Poya. From that day onwards, the Buddha preached the Dhamma to many people starting from his first five disciples (Paswaga Thausan) to Subhadra Bhikkhu, His last

disciple, and showed them the path of the Dhamma. For over 45 years, the Buddha taught the Dhamma, and at the age of 80, he passed away (Parinibbana), which is the third significant milestone of the Buddha's life on Vesak Poya.

In addition to the three significant milestones, the Buddha made his first visit to his hometown of Kimbulwath Nuwara, also on Vesak Poya. It is said that King Suddhodana, the Buddha's father, had sent an envoy headed by Minister Kaludaai to Rajagaha Nuwara to invite the Great Teacher, the Buddha to visit Kimbulwath Nuwara. However, upon arrival, the entourage listened to the Buddha's sermon on the Dhamma, and they became ordained. However, seven days later, having remembered the King's invitation, it was communicated to the Buddha on Medin Full Moon Day. The Buddha accepted the invitation and began the journey to Kimbulwath Nuwara, which took two months, and arrived on Vesak Poya day.

Another important event is the Buddha's visit to Sri Lanka on Vesak Poya day during his eighth year after Enlightenment on the invitation of King Mani Akkhika of the Naga tribe. The Buddha had visited Kelaniya and delivered a sermon to the people of the Naga tribe. God Sumana had been present on this occasion, and he invited the Buddha to visit Samanala Kanda. Upon arrival, the Buddha placed his footprint on the stone slab on the invitation of God Sumana. From that day onwards, Samanala Kanda was known as Sri Pada, and thousands of people visit this site annually. On this same journey, the Buddha visited Deegavapi, the Sri Maha Bodhiya, Magul Maha Seya, and Shaila Chaitya in Anuradhapura before returning to Jethavanaramaya in Savath Nuwara in India.

In the present day, prominence has been given to Ahmisa pooja, which includes Vesak lanterns, pandals, the singing of Bhakthi Geetha, and people making this occasion to enjoy. However, Vesak has a more profound significance and should also be a time to engage in the Dhamma. During this time in the pandemic environment, when people are stressed and under pressure, we should partake in religious observances and obtain a deeper understanding of the Dhamma on Vesak Poya. At the time of his passing (Parinibbana), seeing Ananda Thero weeping, the Buddha advised him by saying, "Ananda, do not cry or be sad. Every pleasant aspect in this world is bound to change. Thus, it is futile to prevent this by saying do not decay or not change. No one can change the inevitable."

In the Buddha’s first sermon to the five disciples, he emphasized this fact in the Damsak Pavathum Sutta, which describes the Four Noble Truths. In the section on Dukka, the Sutta says that when we do not receive what we expect and what we want, there is sadness. In psychology, this fact is explained where people experience mental pressure during day-to-day life. Thus, by understanding the Dhamma, a person would have a clear and peaceful mind. During this pandemic period, there is uncertainty in terms of employment, education, business, and the fear that

loved ones and those close to you may fall ill, resulting in stress and anxiety. Furthermore, the new normal of social distancing, sanitizing all equipment, and touchable surfaces have resulted in a stringent lifestyle with many rules and regulations, which causes stress. Watching or reading the news regularly could also cause anxiety and fear amongst the people. This constant fear of the virus and having to adhere to strict rules and regulations can cause obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and insomnia. Thus, there are many challenges that a person would have to face in daily life.

We should celebrate Vesak this year simply and charmingly. The country does not need to overspend on Vesak lanterns, massive pandals, large-scale dansal, and Bakthi Geetha competitions. We should focus on assisting the poor and taking care of the sick. We should either go to the temple or at home, worship the Buddha thrice a day and engage in meditation. This will provide great spiritual benefits. You can engage in Anapanasathi Bhavana if you feel stress, anxiety, and mental pressure as described above, focusing on the impermanence of life. If you are a person who loses your temper regularly, then engaging in Maithri Bhavana would be beneficial. Many Sutta describes that the Dhamma and Bhavana are good medicine for the mind and body. Thus during this pandemic period, by engaging in such spiritual activities, you will be able to develop your immunity as well. This year Vesak celebrations should focus on the spiritual growth of the mind and body.

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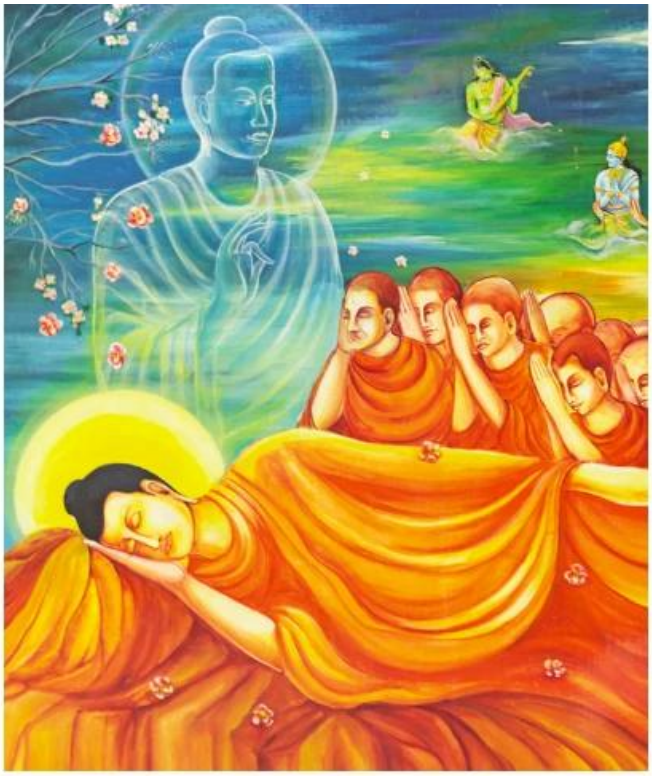

Vesak is the thrice blessed festival and signifies the Birth, Englightenment and Parinibbāna of the Buddha (Photographs taken at the historical Anjali Paura Purana Maha Viharaya).

Colorful Vesak lanterns can be seen during Vesak festival.