

Continuing a Noble Tradition

Posted on

If Vesak is a festival of lights, a celebration of the liberation from worldly bonds, then one of the most ostentatious salutations of that transition is the giving of alms. And the most animated form of that offering is pleasantly cheerful. They happen along the streets. It is a beautiful practice where the giver and the receiver are happy. It speaks of sharing, collective spirit, and setting aside differences to proclaim a noble teaching. The Dansal tradition in Sri Lanka has become a great way to demonstrate the islanders' hospitality.

Words Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane. **Photography** BT Images.



In its manifest form, Vesak, the pinnacle of Buddhist celebration on the full moon day in May, commemorating the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha, is elaborate to the

core. In a comingling of the spiritual and the material realms, an embodiment of convergence between religion and culture, the holy of holies in the Buddhist calendar has nuanced into a very home- grown celebration. One of the most interactive and immersive practices of Vesak is the Dansal tradition – the very manifestation of Buddha’s teaching on giving alms, which is today a vibrant social event that brings communities together in feeding everyone who desires to partake of a meal or a drink offered by these popular wayside booths brimming with energy and excitement. Vesak was not this grand and flashy. It hardly spilled over to the streets until after the seventh century, so say pundits referring to the events recorded in the Great Chronicle of the islanders – the Mahavamsa. It was grand in its spiritual expression, where the temple, the clergy, and the Dhamma were central to the commemoration. Demonstrating that anything sublime or divine could be given a fresh spin or a makeover, one of Sri Lanka’s ninth-century kings, Sena the Second, had, together with his subjects, sponsored food, drink, and clothing for the needy. According to some writers, it was the beginning of the celebratory mood associated with Vesak. The Mahavamsa also states that kings offered rice cooked in milk to the clergy and donated robes. In a bid to lead by example and no doubt display their religiosity, ancient kings had set up magnificent stalls serving food at the four gates to the city to people leaving after paying their obeisance to the Buddha, ensuring that the devotees completed their observances with a meal sponsored by their monarch. So, the practice of giving alms had begun to evolve in the mid- period of the country’s first powerful kingdom, Anuradhapura (437BCE-1017CE), reaching grandiosity in the second major kingdom, Polonnaruwa (1070-1236), which by then, according to the thirteenth- century literary text, Poojawaliya had transformed into a popular national festival under the reign of one of the period’s admired kings, Parakramabahu the First.



The Vesak Pandal (thorana) depicts significant scenes from a Jataka story.

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The Dansal concept or the 'alms hall' is a manifestation of Buddha's teaching, a central tenet of his preaching, of eliminating desire, of charity through denial, sharing material wealth, and providing physical support to the needy. Thus, the 'alms hall' follows the teaching of Amisa Dana, which refers to feeding the clergy and the laity with food, clothing, shelter, and medicine. Giving alms, central to Buddhism, was always a subdued affair of people offering alms to the monks in the temple and the laity who observed Sil on Vesak.

When the practice spilled over to the streets, it was meant to feed those who could not afford a meal, people experiencing poverty. Gradually, Dansal became a resting stop for people packing the streets to watch the festivities. The evolved celebration of Vesak, with grand street decorations and dedicated Vesak zones showcasing myriad lantern designs,

from the octagonal-shaped that symbolizes the four noble truths and the noble eightfold path to lotuses and even airplanes, boosting the design quotient to new heights, the sprawling 'pandals' that depict the life of the Buddha from his many births, street plays and choirs draw huge crowds, who amble at their own pace taking in the roar of the festivities. To their delight, there is no shortage of people graciously offering them refreshments.

A once pious practice has evolved tremendously but retains its fundamental ethos of giving. Gone are the days when Dansal operated at dusk, ceremonially opened by the biggest donor to the sound of firecrackers. It was intended to serve the public traveling distances to 'see Vesak and stay on till late. However, it has become a day-long activity organized by local clubs, associations, and private and government institutions. It may be a youth group from a community, entrepreneurs, tuk or bus drivers, or members of a temple-based society. It is indeed a crowded landscape of generous givers.

As the month of Vesak draws near, small groups of men go from door to door soliciting monetary donations, which people could give according to their means. Then there are those that donate in kind, bags of rice, beverages, tubs of ice cream, and dry rations for this purpose.

The day begins with the 'smaller' Dansal dishing out boiled legumes, cassava or sweet potato, milk rice, iced beverages, herbal drinks, tea, or coffee. Rain or shine, no passers-by refuse an ice cream cone.

Saving the best for last, the most sought-after rice Dansal opens its doors after six in the evening to large crowds that wait patiently in long lines to savor the tasty food, a simple and authentic Sri Lankan vegetarian meal, a sumptuous ghee or yellow rice, accompanied by signature dishes like the famous onion relish - 'seeni sambol', deep fried eggplant and sautéed potatoes, dhal curry, and maybe a soya bean curry. Although not an island staple, the noodles Dansal are also popular. What goes into making the side dishes often depends on the cost of vegetables and other accompaniments. The large-scale booths serving rice require generous funding, which, apart from people's donations, is mainly supported by traders in the area. When one hears the sound of firecrackers declaring the food stall open to the public, one is sure to find the most prominent donor or donors auspiciously cutting the ribbon. The sure sign of a dansal nearby is the loud music accompanying the noise and the activity in the stall. No one's turned away, and everyone waits patiently for their turn.

While a lot of behind-the-scenes work goes into organizing such an activity, including planning and soliciting donations in cash or kind, purchasing provisions, permission from local authorities, and public health inspectors, what makes people do it over and over again every year is witnessing the fruit of their labor on the delighted faces of people that line up to eat. Importantly, it unites people for a common cause, women, men, and youth preparing the food, driven by an altruistic desire to give, thus making their Samsara journey shorter.



Lanterns in beautiful shades.



Making lanterns using contrasting colors.



Delicious yellow rice spread in banana leaves.



Food is prepared in large woks with the help of men and women working in harmony.



A cup of warm Beli mal tastes best with jaggery.



Passersby, stop by for a cup of refreshing drink.