

How calm the mind and body are in the rainy season

Posted on



Beneath the sacred Bodhi tree, the Buddha shares the Dhamma with disciples and celestial beings in a moment of profound enlightenment and peace.

Rainy season typically begins in July, known as Esala in the Buddhist calendar. As Esala is meaningful for Buddhists globally, Vesak, Poson, and Esala form a significant spiritual triplet. Vesak commemorates the Birth, Enlightenment, and Passing of Lord Buddha. Poson is celebrated by Sri Lankans to mark the arrival of the Arahata Mahinda Thero, while Esala marks the 'Rainy Season Retreat' known as Vassāna. This tradition dates back to ancient times, to the period of the Buddha in India. Nowadays, when the rain starts, it continues for many months in India as well as Sri Lanka.

In ancient India, various religious sects observed an annual rainy retreat to prevent

the death of ground insects and other creatures, as well as to avoid crushing foliage underfoot. For example, extremist ascetic 'Nigantha' practiced the rainy retreat, staying indoors for three months. The following passage from the Sutra depicts it well. "When the rainy season has come, and it is raining, many lives spring up, and many seeds just spring up. Knowing this, one should not wander from village to village, but remain in one place during the rainy season." The people criticized the Buddhist monks for not practicing Vas like the ascetics and the wandering mendicants of the time.

One such criticism of the Bhikkhus is recorded in a book on 'Kathina merit' (Kathina Ānisansa). "Look at the Bhikkhus who, disregarding whether it is summer, winter, or rainy season, continue with their travels, walking in the grass, and thus destroying them while killing the insects. Ascetics outside the Bhikkhu sect stay inside their hermitages during the rainy season. Even the free birds of the air spend the rainy season protected inside nests." Though it is an extremist's idea, Lord Buddha has to take care of it and ask His disciples to observe the rain retreat. Anyhow, it is a vital period, because, in the rainy season, common people get an excellent opportunity to practice religious services. As stated in the 'Ariyapariyesana Sutra,' all common people cannot start the 'Dharma way' from the same point or with hither knowledge. They have to start it according to their knowledge capacity. So, some people can start it by offering Pūjās to Lord Buddha and chanting stanzas with light meditation. That means, though Buddhism is a 'way of searching for wisdom for a wise person,' it can be followed by an unlearned person as well.

Although we discussed the topic of 'Rainy Season Retreat,' there are three other foremost things to be fulfilled by Buddhists. These are the birth in the mother's womb, the renunciation of the Kingdom, and the preaching of the First Sermon to the Five Ascetics who were searching for the truth of the soul. This is not a sudden incident that occurred on an Esala Full Moon Pōya Day, but rather a time when the Buddha was searching for individuals who would have the intellect to comprehend this Dharma He had realized with much difficulty. It has been explained in the 'Ariyapariyesana

Sūtra' as follows: "This Dharma that I have realized with difficulty is deep, difficult to understand, subtle, contrary to common belief. Those delighted in passion, and obscured in darkness, will not understand," – Ariyapariyesana Sūtra.

Thoroughly scrutinizing society, the Buddha found the answer to it. The Buddha compared the different social levels to a lotus pond filled with vibrant flowers. It is

depicted in the Sūtra as: “It is like a pond filled with red, white, and blue lotuses, blooming and thriving in the water. Some flowers have emerged from the mud and have passed the water level as well.” By surveying the world, the Lord Buddha realized that it contains people with different levels of understanding: people with keen faculties and those with weak faculties, people with good and bad attributes, and those who were easy to teach and those who were not. Following this realization, the Lord Buddha decided to teach Dharma and thought, “To whom should I teach Dhamma first, who will quickly understand this Dhamma?” Then the Lord Buddha agreed to teach Dhamma to the wise and intelligent old friends Ālāra Kālāma and Uddhaka Rāmaputta, but sadly, both had died several days ago.

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Again, Lord Buddha sought out five ascetic friends who were searching for the truth with Him and went to the Deer Park in Isipathana to teach the profound understanding. After reaching Isipathana, an ancient secret place in India, Lord Buddha preached the first sermon, the Dhamma Chakka Pavattana Sūtra, to the five ascetics, named Kondañña, Vappa, Bhaddhiya, Mahānāma, and Assaji. In this first sermon, ascetic Kondañña realized the Dhamma and achieved his first realization (Sōtapatti). After a few sermons, all the ascetics realized the Truth about life, the ‘Four Noble Truths.’

As Lord Buddha delivered the first sermon at Isipathana, the rainy season also began. Despite the discomfort of heavy rain, He continued to teach Dharma to those eager to learn. This marked the first rainy-season retreat of The Buddha, according to Buddhist history. However, a few years later, as the number of monks began to increase, He declared that all adult monks should willingly observe the rainy retreat (Vas) during the rainy season. This rainy-season practice coincided with the monsoon in North India. As a result, monks stopped traveling to teach the Dharma and instead chose to meditate in solitude while giving Dharma sermons to people. Therefore, this rainy season is a very important period for Buddhists to practice spiritual development.

According to the old customs, monks declare only one precept, reciting the sentence three times as ‘I observe Vas in this temple, I observe Vas here, in these

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three months.’ Though it is generally called an observation, it is actually a determination. So, what does observance of Vas mean? Its main rule is to avoid leaving the temple premises during the three-month rainy season. If they must go out, there is also a rule for that, called ‘Sattāha karani’. That is, the monk observing the Vas must return before midnight on the seventh day if he leaves the temple during this season. If he cannot return within seven days, he loses the right to continue the Vas period, even if it is not his fault.

This rainy season is also a meditation object for a meditator, which is the essence of practical Buddhism. Meditation is not limited to seclusion or religious individuals; it allows everyone to find calmness and serenity in the mind and to gain some relief from mental problems by using it as a form of mental therapy. Western scholars who have practiced meditation for many years have introduced it to Westerners as a mental therapy, using scanning methods like CT, MRI, and EEG while someone is meditating. We can see that meditation is very beneficial for individuals to lead fulfilling lives, rather than adhering to numerous beliefs.



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