The Esala Moon is Rising for a Spiritual Period

Posted on



The rising of the Esala moon marks the beginning of a timeless tradition that dates back to the era before the Lord Buddha. It is a time when Bhikkhus around the world observe the Vinaya Rules, known as ‘Vas Viseema’ in Sinhala, for three months from July to October, during the rain retreat. Just as Vesak is celebrated worldwide, the Vas season holds great significance for all Buddhists. It is a time for spiritual development and the cultivation of wisdom, making it an important period for everyone, not just Bhikkhus.

We know that rain is essential for all human beings, animals, and the whole plant world, as without any water, all beings and plants would die on this planet. But on the other hand, sometimes we can see it is very harmful to some areas in some countries, causing floods and mudslide disasters. The same thing, which is very helpful to us, unfortunately, would be harmful to us occasionally. But without rain, we have no water resources, no water to drink, no electricity, and cannot even cultivate. So we must be patient and prevent natural disasters like thunder, lightning bolts, flooding, and mud sliding in the rainy season. If we think about it mindfully, it would also be a meditation in this rainy season.

Esala Poya is a momentous day for Buddhists globally, as many noteworthy events in the life of the Buddha happened on this day. Prince Siddhartha was conceived in Queen Mahā Maya's womb on an Esala full moon day. Prince Siddhartha and Yasodhara's son Rahula was born in the same month. Significantly, it was on this day that Prince Siddhartha, having witnessed an old man, a sick person, a deceased person, and an image of a monk, renounced his earthly life to take on the new life of an ascetic in search of the reason for Dukkha (grief) and the way of getting rid of grief. Finally, achieving his goal of Enlightenment, he preached the First Sermon on an Esala Poya day.

What stands out on the Esala Pōya day was the preaching of the First sermon to Five Ascetics, in search of the truth of the soul but this was not a sudden incident. The Buddha searched for individuals with the capacity and the intellect to comprehend this Dhamma that he had realized with much difficulty. It is said in the following words in the Ariyapariyesana Sutta: "This Dhamma 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 Sutta.

Thoroughly scrutinizing society, the Buddha found the answer to it. The Buddha compared the different levels of people in society to a lotus pond, which is full of vivid colors of flowers. Again, in the Sutra, "It is as if a pond is permeated with red, white, and blue lotuses, born and growing immersed in the water. The flourish permeated with cool water from root to tip, never standing above the surface. Some have emerged from the murky water level up."

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By surveying the world, The Buddha realized that the world has 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 Buddha decided to teach Dharma and thought. “To whom should I teach Dharma first? Who will quickly understand this Dharma?” Then the Buddha agreed to teach the old friend Ālāra Kālāma, who was wise and intelligent, as well as Uddhaka Rāmaputta, who had both sadly died several days ago. Again, He looked for five ascetics, friends also searching for the truth, and went to Deer Park in Isipathana to teach the profound understanding.

After reaching Isipathana, an ancient secret place in India, The Buddha preached the first sermon, the Dhamma Chakka Pavattana Sutta, to the five ascetics, Kondagna, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Māhānāma, and Assaji. In this first sermon, Kondagna ascetic realized the Dharma and attained Sōtapatti, the first step, and later all ascetics realized the truth.

The rainy season began as the Buddha completed the first sermon at Isipathana. Regardless of the discomfort in the rainy season, he continued the work on the Dhamma preaching. This was the first rain retreat of the Buddha. But a few years later, when the Buddhist monks began to grow, he declared that all Bhikkhus should practice the rainy retreat or observe Vas during the rainy season. This practice coincided with the monsoon in North India. So, it was a period when the monks ceased traveling to teach the Dhamma. However, while indoors, the monks continued to be fixated on meditation and solitude, giving Dhamma sermons to laypeople and junior monks alike. It is a period of personal purification for the monks as well. Therefore, it is a very important period for Buddhists to practice spiritual development.

In ancient India, many religious sects annually practiced the rainy retreat to prevent insects and creatures on the ground from dying and crushing foliage under their feet. For example, the extremist ascetic Nigantha used to practice the rain retreat, staying indoors for three months.

The following Acharanga Sutra depicts it well: “When the rainy season has come, and it is raining, many lives and seeds 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).

Consider the Bhikkhus who continue their travels regardless of the weather, harming insects. Unlike them, ascetics from other sects stay inside during the rainy season. Even birds seek shelter during this time. This is why observing the rain retreat is important, as it provides an excellent opportunity to practice Dharma for everyone.

In the Ariyapariyesana Sūtra, it is emphasized that individuals should commence their journey on the path of Dharma based on their individual capacity and understanding. Some may begin by offering flowers, performing pujā to Buddha, and reciting simple stanzas while engaging in basic meditation. This act of offering flowers is considered a form of meditation, symbolizing the contemplation of death. Those with a deeper understanding are encouraged to delve further into the study of Dharma and engage in meditation to enhance their well-being.

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