VAS IN ESALA THE ANNUAL RAIN-RETREAT BY THE BHIKKHU

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Esala Pōya in July is the beginning of a centuries-old custom originated in India during the time of the Lord Buddha. Today, Vas or the rain retreat begins on Esala Pōya and is observed with much dedication in Sri Lanka and in other Buddhist countries as well. It marks the beginning of a period of seclusion for the Buddhist clergy, a period of personal purification, which they do in meditation and solitude. The most fascinating story in celebrating Esala Pōya and its many happenings in the life of the Buddha is the beginning of the rain-retreat tradition and its moral basis. Centuries after, today, as we live amid limits to travel and movement, the practice challenges us to transform it to our liberation.

July in the Buddhist calendar is the month of Esala. Like Vesak and Poson Poya days before, Esala Poya is a momentous day for Buddhists globally, as many noteworthy events took place in the life of the Buddha on a day like Esala Poya. Prince Siddhartha was conceived in Queen Mahamaya’s womb on the day of the full moon.

Adult Prince Siddhartha and his wife, Yasodhara's son Rahula was born on Esala Poya. Significantly it was on this day that Prince Siddhartha, having witnessed an old man, a sick and deceased, renounced his earthly life to take on the new life of an ascetic in search of meaning and Enlightenment. As his quest continued, having finally achieved the Dhamma, he preaches his first sermon on an Esala Poya.

In Sri Lanka, while all these events in the Buddha's life are remembered every Esala Poya, it also marks the beginning of Vas, known as the rainretreat period for the monks, which is marked ceremonially. The practice of Vas and its institution among the Buddhist clergy has a historical narrative associated with the Buddha and the commencement of his public ministry following his profound attainment of the Dhamma.

Following attainment of the knowledge of the Dhamma, Buddha desiring to share this truth with others was in a dilemma of choosing individuals who would have the capacity and the intellect to comprehend the Dhamma that he had attained with much suffering and difficulty. Then the Buddha thought to whom I should preach this Dhamma mentioned in the Ariyapariyesana Sutta, as follows.

"This Dhamma that I have attained with struggle is deep, difficult to understand, subtle, deep, contrary to common belief. Those delighting in passion, their minds obscured in darkness, will not understand."

The Buddha thought that such a profound Dhamma could not be understood and experienced by a world delighting in attachment and passion and is cloaked in darkness.

Still, the Buddha continued to contemplate how best to spread the Dhamma for the good of humanity. The Ariyapariyesana Sutta provides a beautiful metaphor to portray the significant realization that sprang in the Buddha's mind as he grappled with the question of whom to preach the Dhamma. It is a fact that the use of metaphors in the Pali Canon to symbolize the state of a troubled mind is used the whole time.

The Buddha beautifully compares the different levels of people in society to a lotus pond in the following words: "It is as if a pond is permeated with red, white, and blue lotus, born and growing immersed in the water. They flourish permeated with cool water from their root to tip, never standing above the surface. Even so, some

might rise up and emerge from the murky water."

By surveying the world, the 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 Buddha decided to teach the Dhamma anyway so that those with eyes to see and ears to hear could come forth in conviction. "To whom should I teach the Dhamma first? Who will quickly understand this Dhamma?" declared the Buddha. He then decided to teach the Dhamma to an old friend Alara Kalama, who was wise and intelligent, as well as to Uddaka Ramaputta. However, sadly, both had passed away several days earlier.

The Buddha then traveled to the deer park in Isipathana in search of five ascetics, his friends with whom he had previously wandered searching for the truth, to teach his profound understanding.

Thus, he began his public ministry on an Esala Poya day when he provided a complete understanding of the Dhamma through his first sermon, the Dammachakkapavattana Sutta (the bunch of Dhamma) to five ascetics, Kondangna, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Mahanama, and Assaji.

The five ascetics finally realized that their previous search was a miserable and shabby one, as they were seeking understanding where none can be found. The ascetic Kondangna attained the first state of awakening described as Sotapatti.

As the Buddha completed his first sermon at Isipathana, the rains set in, thereby cutting his missionary work. He was forced to stay on, which he did, as spending the rainy season in retreat. Regardless of the forced state of immobility in the rainy season, he continued his work on the Dhamma. This was Buddha's first rain-retreat. As the Sasana of Bhikkhus began to grow, he declared that all clergy should observe Vas during the rainy season. Why did the Buddha decree that the rain-retreat period of Vas should be practiced annually by the Buddhist monks?

'Vas' is a period of retreat observed during the Vassana or rainy season, beginning on the full moon day of Esala Poya in July for three months until Vap Poya in

October. This practice used to coincide with the monsoon in North India. It was a period when the monks ceased or significantly reduced traveling to teach the Dhamma. However, while indoors, the monks continued to be fixed on meditation and solitude while giving Dhamma sermons and guiding the laypeople and the junior monks alike in spiritual development. It was and is a period of personal purification for the monks.

The monsoons and the rainy seasons of today may not be as predictable as they used to be in the days gone by. Long before climate change became an urgent problem to be addressed, the monsoons were considered a blessing upon the earth. In India, the rainy season that began in July had lasted for three months. Rains, as we often experience today, can wreak havoc and devastation as well. However, in the days of the Buddha, the rain was a symbol of a new beginning. Of rejuvenation. When all living species, the fauna, flora, animals, and insects spring forth in abundance. It was and still is a time of hope and new creation. In the time of the Buddha, in North India, we can visualize not perfectly laid streets but muddy paths and a heavily vegetated landscape used by people. So, it was only natural that when there was an abundance of species and vegetation on the ground during the rainy season, they were likely to be trampled by people and insects killed underfoot. In this historical background, one has to understand the establishment of Vas among the Buddhist clergy.

India, after all, was and still is the land of many vibrant religious practices. There were also Thapasa, Achelaka, Paribrajaka, and Brahminism in practice. The six sectarian teachers Purana Kassapa, Makkhali Gosala, Ajita Kesakambala, Pakuda Kaccayana, Sanjaya Bellatthiputta, and Nigantha Nataputta had many followers of their doctrines, which the Buddha did not accept. People in that time followed these different teachers and hence, believed in a plethora of ideas and followed a miscellany of practices in adherence to these various teachings.

Among them, Nigantha Nataputta was significant. Considered the founder of Jainism, Nigantha was such an extremist that he had renounced all forms of earthly bondage. He was also an intense proponent of Ahimsa or non-violence. He lived naked, walked barefoot, and advocated a religious life of physical discipline and self-mortification. Scrupulously revering even the life of a creature as small as an insect covered his nose to prevent them from entering his nostrils, lest that led to murder. The teachers of religious sects that preceded Buddhism practiced the rain-retreat annually to avoid the possibility of killing creatures on the ground that

emerged during the rains when they were out and about traveling. Even today, in India, millions practice this extreme level of non-violence. The annual religious festival of Kumbh Mela is a derivation from ancient practices where thousands congregate at the bank of a river, many naked, some covered in human ash, to wash away their sins.

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 Katina Anisansa (merit).

“Look at the Bhikkhus who, regardless of whether it is summer, winter, or the rainy season, continue with their travels, walking on the grass and thus destroying them while killing the insects. Ascetics outside the Sasana live prudently inside their hermitages during the rainy season. Even the free birds of the air spend the rainy season protected inside nests. Therefore, the behavior of the Bhikkhus is unacceptable.”

This censure of Bhikkhu behavior tells us that in the time of the Buddha, ordained monks wandered freely into villages even during the rainy season, trampling foliage and killing insects and worms on the ground. However, one realizes that this accusation is not reasonable from the story of Chakkupala Thera, who had accidentally stepped on insects, killing them in the process of engaging in walking meditation. This incident was reported to the Buddha by other monks who had witnessed it happening. However, in all wisdom, the Buddha explained that the monk had not seen the insects, hence not intended to kill them, thereby liberating him from the sin of killing and the consequence of karma. Those who were ignorant of the Dhamma looked upon such acts as sinful and unmeritorious. However, amidst the unwarranted criticisms, the Buddha laid down the decree and instructed the monks to enter into a fixed location.

Today, it is customary for Bhikkhusto observe Vas in their resident temples. If not, there is also the practice of lay hosts inviting a Bhikkhu or Bhikkhus to spend the rain-retreat season in residences specially prepared for this purpose. With an invitation, the beginning of the rainretreat period assumes ceremoniously.

The invited are taken in procession to their lodgings. The lay hosts who undertake the meritorious deed of providing for the needs of the monks during this period of seclusion do it with much dedication. However, there is no hard and fast rule that

the laity must invite the monks to observe Vas. Whether invited or not, the monks have been observing Vas from ancient times. The rain-retreat custom is a voluntary exercise by the monks. Therefore, whether they receive an invitation or not, it is a deed undertaken by a Bhikkhu and observed alone by a Bhikkhu. After all, even the monks residing in predominantly non- Buddhist countries and localities go into a time of Vas. It is also known that monks purify the vinaya before observing the vas retreat.

Today ironically, we begin the period of Vas amid a pandemic, when we have been forced to live in seclusion with restrictions to our movements, which is very much like the rain-retreat custom that decreed that the monks stayed indoors without traveling. These restrictions can be challenging and stressful to all people. However, what is essential is that we follow these boundaries with understanding and wisdom. If we do so, it will lead to a state of mental liberation while safeguarding us against the coronavirus. Using this restrictive time in our lives as an opportunity to cultivate patience by looking at it meditatively will help build mental strength and boost our immunity against the virus.

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