

Vesak: A day of developing virtues

Posted on



May is a powerful and significant month that we celebrate with great reverence, highlighting both May Day as a celebration of Labor Independence and Vesak Day, which marks the Birth, Enlightenment, and Passing away (Parinibbāna) of Lord Buddha. Buddhists honor this day with a vibrant commemoration of these pivotal events. Notably, on Vesak Day, we reflect on the remarkable moments of the Buddha's first visit to his hometown, Kimbulwath Nuwara, after attaining Enlightenment, and his arrival in Sri Lanka eight years later as the revered Buddha.

This marked His third visit to the island and serves as a profound reminder of the freedom of the mind as taught by the Buddha. Additionally, this month also features another important observance— Workers Freedom Day. Recognizing the significance of mental freedom is crucial for our psychological well-being.

It is widely acknowledged that the Buddha is regarded as the wisest person in the world, earning the title 'Sarwagna' in Sanskrit. His profound teachings bring peace to humanity, making him a revered teacher. As stated in Pāli, 'Sukhō Buddhānan Uppādo' reflects the joy the world experiences when a Buddha arises. A Buddha emerges after tens of thousands of years (many Kalpas) in India, demonstrating the significance of his presence. Although his life began in Kimbulwath Nuwara, it was in the 'Royal Sal Garden' of Lumbini, on a Vesak Day, that Prince Siddhārtha was born. This was made possible by Queen Māyā's decision to return to her hometown close to her child's birth, resulting in the momentous occasion of his arrival in Lumbini.

After returning to Kimbulwath Nuwara, the baby prince was named 'Siddhartha' by the Brahmins, a name that signifies a successful person. In assessing the prince's future, five Brahmins confidently predicted that if he stayed within the palace, he would ascend to the throne and reign over all of India. However, one Brahmin made a powerful prophecy, stating that this prince would undoubtedly become a Buddha. King Suddhōdana, determined for his son to be the king of India, spared no effort in providing for Siddhartha. He constructed three magnificent palaces—Ramya, Suramya, and Subha—each designed for a different season. Eager to secure a lineage, the king arranged a marriage between Prince Siddhartha and Princess Yashōdharā, the daughter of the Shakya King, Suppabuddha. However, after 13 years of marriage, Prince Siddhartha experienced a profound disillusionment with life. During his regular visits to the park, he encountered the Four Great Sights: an elderly man, a sick man, a funeral procession, and a saffron-robed monk. These encounters ignited a transformative realization in Prince Siddhartha, compelling him to renounce worldly pleasures and embark on a quest to end suffering once and for all.

The 'Cankī Sutra' vividly illustrates a pivotal moment: as prince Siddhartha's family wept, he boldly shaved his head and donned a saffron robe, leaving behind all worldly comforts to embrace renunciation, known in Pāli as 'Abhinikkhamana.' After years of dedicated practice, the hermit Siddhārtha grasped the profound 'Four Noble Truths' and attained Enlightenment, becoming known as Gautama Buddha in

this era. This marks a significant event on Vesak Pōya Day. Following his Enlightenment, the Buddha passionately taught the Dharma, beginning with his first sermon, the 'Dhammachakkha Pavattana Sutra,' delivered to the initial group of ascetics, up to his final disciple, Subhadra Bhikkhu. He illuminated the path of Dharma, guiding beings toward purification. As highlighted in the Satipatthana Sutra: "This is the only way, Bhikkhu, for the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for reaching the Noble Path, for the realization of Nibbāna" – The Four Foundations of Mindfulness by Venerable U. Sīlānanda, Wisdom Publications, Boston. This clearly underscores the essence of the Buddha's teachings. From my perspective, devoid of any religious bias, these teachings are universally accessible and can be embraced by all for their well-being.

The Buddha's perspective is both insightful and accessible, resonating even with those not actively seeking to understand it. Suffering pervades the world and has persisted throughout history. This intrinsic aspect of life is articulated in the Dhammachakkha Pavattana Sūtra, particularly in the First Noble Truth, 'The Dukkha sacca,' which acknowledges the inevitability of sorrow.

It is universally acknowledged that every event has a cause; without a cause, nothing comes into being. This principle applies equally to the suffering experienced by humanity, which is explicitly stated in Pāli: "Yam picchang n. a labhati than. pi dukkhang," meaning that when individuals fail to attain their desires, frustration ensues, resulting in sorrow or Dukkha. Understanding this truth empowers us to confront and navigate the complexities of our existence.

Understanding the impermanence of the world is essential for addressing the root causes of sorrow. The Mahā Parinibbāna Sūtra offers profound insights into this concept. It recounts the words of The Lord Buddha just before his passing: "Ananda, do not cry or feel sorrowful. Everything that is born is destined to change, whether pleasant or unpleasant. Resisting the inevitable by clinging to the hope that things will remain the same is futile. No one can alter what is destined to occur." Embracing this truth empowers us to navigate life with greater clarity and acceptance.

The Dhamma presents certain challenges for those who may not be attuned to its subtleties. As stated in the Sūtra, "this Dhamma that I have attained is deep, hard to see, hard to realize, beyond the scope of conjecture, subtle, and to be

understood by the wise.” Such profound teachings may deter some individuals from engaging with this doctrine. However, the Buddha has outlined a straightforward approach to following the Dhamma with ease. He recognized that some beings possess a clear perception of reality, while others are obscured by various distractions and delusions. It’s evident that individuals display a wide array of abilities, qualities, and inclinations, which includes those who may resist the teachings. Moreover, some are motivated by a fear of future suffering, while others are inspired by a desire for a higher state of being.

The Buddha illustrated society as a vibrant pond of lotuses, showcasing a variety of colors blooming amid the waters. While some lotuses remain submerged, others boldly rise above the surface, untouched by the water. This serves as a powerful metaphor for the journey towards enlightenment, which anyone can embark upon, no matter their starting point. The path to a higher state of being is clearly defined through the ‘Thri Shiksha,’ or three fundamental practices: Sīla, Samādhi, and Paññā. These are: mastery of moral conduct, excellence in concentration, and development of wisdom. By embracing these practices, we can foster peace throughout the world.



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