

Vesak: A trilogy of Buddhist Festivals

Posted on

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Making keeribath to take as offering to the temples. Photo courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.

Vesak is the premier Buddhist festival in Sri Lanka and is held island-wide to commemorate the birth, enlightenment, and passing away of the Buddha, founder of Buddhism. Whether due to unusual coincidence or pious legend all three of these cardinal anniversaries fall on the full-moon day of May.

One of the oldest of living world religions, Buddhism has its origin in the 6th century B.C. in the Ganges Valley. The founder of Buddhism was an Indian prince, Siddhartha Gautama who later became known as 'Buddha', an honorific title which means 'enlightenment.' Buddhist legend claims that Prince Siddhartha left home and family to search for an explanation of the suffering he saw everywhere - the

seemingly inescapable cycle (even in the “good” life) of being born, growing old, dying and being reborn to again suffer. He wandered for six years seeking answers in the philosophies of his day, sometimes subjecting himself to extreme asceticism.

Siddhartha was unable to find satisfactory answers until one full-moon night in the flowering month of May. While seated under a peepul tree (*Ficus religiosa*, later renamed Bodhi or Bo for its sheltering of the Buddha) through a supreme mental feat, he came to understand the true nature of existence and the solutions he sought.

Building on the basic tenets of pure uncompromising truth, the Buddha, as he then came to be known, constructed a brilliant, profound and sophisticated philosophy that replaced faith with scientific reasoning and a code of ethics espousing unsurpassed gentleness and refinement. After years of wandering and teaching, at three times coming to Sri Lanka, the Buddha passed from the earth, attaining the bliss and release from suffering of rebirth, Nirvana. This was also on a Vesak full-moon day. Thus Vesak is celebrated today as a festival of great sanctity, emphasizing the noble Buddhist virtues, especially those of kindness and compassion to all living creatures. It is also a festival of much color and gaiety.

At every Buddhist temple all over Sri Lanka, ringing of temple bells announces the dawn of Vesak. Thousands of pilgrims, men, women, and children in austere white, make their way to temples to observe the Buddhist precepts (*sil*), to meditate and to listen to the Buddha’s teachings recounted by yellowrobed and shaven-headed monks.

The worshippers bring offerings of flowers, oil lamps, “joss” sticks, fruit, vegetable curries (no meat is offered as it entails the death of an animal), sweets, a milk-rice dish called kiribath and various foods to the temples. In the towns and villages, streets and homes are gay with decorations and lights. Large pandals (bamboo arch ways) are erected on roadsides, hung with paintings of Buddhist themes and lit up at night with hundreds of pulsating colored bulbs. Homes are decorated with pretty paper lanterns in various shapes and colors and Buddhist flags; small clay coconut-oil lamps are lit as offerings of light. Pantomimes re-enact Buddhist tales and legends on side-walk stages.

Crowds, good-natured and light hearted, amass to observe and participate, and traffic moves at a crawl. An important feature of the Vesak festival is the dansala or alms-stall where free vegetarian food, tea and soft drinks are pressed on all

passers-by. Most major towns in Sri Lanka have their share of Vesak activity but Colombo has by far the grandest. The main temples where festivities can be seen (and photographed without offense) are: Vajiraramaya, on Vajira Road; Gangaramaya near Lake Beira; and Kelani Raja Maha Viharaya in Kelaniya (about 7 kilometers outside Colombo). A spectacular celebration also occurs in Kandy at Dalada Maligawa - The Temple of the Tooth where the Buddha's tooth is enshrined. This year Vesak festival falls on the 13th and 14th of May. These days are public, bank and mercantile holidays island-wide; a time that all Buddhists pay honor to the master teacher of their faith.



Vesak is the full-moon day of May on which the Buddha was born, gained enlightenment and passed from this earth two millennia ago.

Photo courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.

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Top right: Coconut oil lamps are lit for the Buddha as offerings of light. Photo courtesy: Ceylon Tourist Board.



Performance of the Bakthigeetha (Buddhist songs) while holding paper lanterns during Vesak.

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