

Vesak: Buddhism's Triple Event

Posted on

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A typical cluster of Vesak lanterns made of paper and bamboo swing in the breeze



The crowds gather in their thousands in front of the huge illuminated “pandal” erected near a usually busy junction in Colombo. Today the traffic is stopped to allow the pedestrians who come in large groups, families, friends, sometimes whole villages. Lights of many colours often more than ten thousand make myriad patterns on the huge eighty foot pandal. Amplifiers blare out popular Buddhist songs in Sinhalese. Every half hour the music stops and a communicator narrates the story of the pandal over the public address system. Most of the crowd listen in silence. Some drift away. A few carry on other discussions. Some at the fringe of the crowd may even be having their own little musical party. Lovers hold hands.

The Vesak pandal is a unique Sri Lankan creation. A rare piece of folk art produced for the somewhat sublime enjoyment of the masses. The usual pandal is a huge screen made of several panels, each depicting a scene from a Buddhist story, usually a Jataka story about one of the Buddha's many previous incarnations.

The pandal is among the high points in the modern observance of Buddhism's triple event, the Vesak full moon. The full moon of full moons in the month of May which marks the day of the birth, enlightenment and passing away of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, 2531 years ago. Several weeks before Vesak dedicated groups of Buddhists, mainly in the cities begin the work of erecting the pandal which become such huge public attractions. The better ones carry on their “show” for almost a week after the two official Vesak holidays. For all the enjoyment the people have on the city sight-seeing tours on the two nights of Vesak, it is a deeply religious festival. Throughout the day every Buddhist temple is full of white clad devotees carrying on the many simple observances of Buddhist religious beliefs.

Fresh flowers are offered at the feet of Buddha statues. Joss sticks are burnt and coconut oil poured to keep the flares of temple lamps burning. Water is poured on to the roots of Bodhi trees held in veneration as a tree which sheltered the Buddha during meditation. Prayer flags are strung on the branches of the tree and on the fence that protects it.

Many hundred devotees gather in each temple to listen to the preaching of Buddhist doctrine, observe the eight precepts or "sila" of good living, read Buddhist scriptures, participate in discussions on aspects of Buddhist philosophy or meditate in the quiet shade of a tree.

But Vesak reveals all its colour as the sun sets and the full moon begins to shed its light on the gathering night. To this light is added many millions of others. Every Buddhist home "lights up" on this night, and many others too. With 67% of Sri Lanka's sixteen million population being Buddhists more than two million homes in Sri Lanka will have special Vesak illuminations.

From little clay lamps burning coconut oil lit at the entrance to a small rural shack or a hut in the jungle to the hundreds of such lamps lit all along the boundaries of larger homes, and the thousands of electric jets that light up richer homes and public buildings, the types of illumination has a genius, artistry, skill and purse would permit.



Buddhist worshipping at the Bo -tree Kelaniya temple on a full moon day (Janeth Rodrigo)



Joss sticks add their fragrance to the mountains of flowers offered to the Buddha On Vesak day



Devotees pour coconut oil to light the hundreds of clay lamps lit at the temples on Vesak day



Scent and light – joss sticks and clay lamps are among the offerings made to the Buddha.



A host of pink lotuses offered to the Buddha on Vesak



The best known of such illuminations are the special Vesak lanterns, the commonest twelve sided creation in paper and bamboo. These vary in size and style. The larger and more elaborate ones are whole clusters of lanterns some rising as high as a hundred feet with hundreds of small lanterns revolving around a giant mother lantern.

Some lanterns are designed as lotus flowers others as modern aircraft or even rockets exploring space. Some of the larger lanterns now rival the pandals with revolving panels depicting Buddhist stories and legends.

Vesak is also a participated festival which brings out in its simplest forms the Buddhist concept of love and kindness to one's neighbour. This is best seen in the many "dansalas" or alms halls which cater to the needs of the thousands of sightseers who come into Colombo or any of the other principal towns, the large numbers of pilgrims who gather at the ancient cities such as Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa and the millions who go for religious observances to the more than twelve thousand temples in the island. The dansalas are usually organised by eager youths or established community organisations. With the help of public donations they would supply food and drink in large quantities. From many coloured fruit drinks, bottled aerated waters, young coconut water, stimulating coriander juice to complete meals of curry and rice the "dansalas" ensure that every passerby would not be in need of victuals during the festival. It is a tradition coming down from the Buddhist kings of ancient Sri Lanka who provided great alms halls for the people.

At some junctions there will be theatrical performances by amateur players re-telling Buddhist tales. Elsewhere there are puppet shows some depicting the best skills of puppeteers from Ambalangoda in South Sri Lanka. Almost all buildings fly the five coloured Buddhist flag and often the Sri Lankan lion flag too emphasising

the intermingling of Buddhism in the Sri lankan polity. It is a night of peace and wonderful colour one discovers on Vesak and the expression of joy of thousands. It is a joy mingled with devotion unmistakable in the skill and achievement of the panda! maker and lantern designer as well as in the many forms of light that emanate from Buddhist homes. It is symbolic of the light of the Buddha dispelling the darkness of ignorance.