

Why is Vesak vital for Buddhists and the World?



Vesak is a significant and revered occasion celebrated by Buddhists worldwide. It commemorates the Birth, Enlightenment, and Passing away (mahā parinibbāna) of Lord Buddha. Although these three days were traditionally celebrated together on Vesak day, they occurred on three different occasions at three distinct locations: The Birth at Lumbini, The Attainment of Nibbāna (Enlightenment) at Buddhagaya, and The Passing Away at Kushinagar in India. As the saying goes, “Sukhō Buddhānang Uppādō,” which means ‘It is happy the Birth of a Buddha.’ We are indeed fortunate to be born in a Buddha era and have the opportunity to learn and practice His peaceful and insightful Dhamma.

The following excerpt from the Ariyapariyesana Sūtra in the Majjhima Nikaya provides a comprehensive understanding of the Buddha’s Dhamma: “Then, monks, being subject to birth, seeing the drawbacks of birth, seeking the unborn, unexcelled rest from the yoke, unbinding; I reached the unborn, unexcelled rest

from the yoke: unbinding. Being subject myself of aging, illness, death, sorrow and defilement I reached the aging-less, illness-less, deathless, sorrow-less, unexcelled rest from the yoke: Unbinding. Knowledge and vision arose in me: Unprovoked in my release. This is the last birth. There is now no further becoming.” The Buddha’s insightful perspective is easily comprehensible and relatable, even for those who are not actively seeking to understand it. It is evident that not only individuals or countries, but also the entire world is currently plagued by suffering. This has been the case throughout history, as suffering is an inherent aspect of natural life, as defined in the Dhamma Chakka Pavattana Sūtra, the first sermon preached by the Buddha after he realized the Four Noble Truths. The first truth of “The Dukkha sacca” denotes sorrow.

It is a universally accepted truth that every event or happening in the world has a cause or reason behind it. Without a cause, nothing can come into existence. Similarly, the sorrow or suffering experienced by human beings also has its causes. This is clearly elucidated in the ‘Four Noble Truths’ in Pāli, which proclaims that “Yam picchangn. a labhati than. pi dukkhang”- meaning that when an individual fails to achieve what they desire, they become frustrated, leading to sorrow or Dukkha.

The understanding of the impermanence of the world plays a crucial role in comprehending the causes of sorrow. The Mahā Parinibbāna Sūtra provides an excellent insight into this. It narrates the words spoken by The Lord Buddha when He passed away, “Ananda, do not cry or be sad. Everything that is born is bound to change, be it pleasant or unpleasant. Therefore, it is futile to resist the inevitable by hoping that things will not change or decay. No one can change the inevitable.”

The Lord Buddha himself introduced meditation on Vesak Day, which falls on this month. As such, those who follow the footpath of the Lord Buddha can begin their meditation practice this Vesak season.

The Four Noble Truths, a fundamental component of Buddhist philosophy, can be challenging for those who are not attuned to its subtleties. As the Sūtra states, “this Dhamma that I have attained is deep, hard to see, hard to realize, beyond the scope of conjecture, subtle, to-be- experienced by the wise.” These sophisticated teachings may deter some individuals from embracing this doctrine.

However, The Buddha has identified a simple way to follow the Dhamma process with ease. The following passage is derived from the Sūtra, where the Buddha described his process of surveying the world. He noted that some beings had a clear perception of reality while others were clouded by various distractions and delusions. He observed that individuals possessed a range of abilities, qualities, and inclinations, including some who were receptive to teachings and others who were resistant. Additionally, some individuals were motivated by a fear of future suffering, while others were guided by a desire for a higher state of being.

The Buddha compared society to a pond of lotuses, where different colored lotuses bloomed and grew in the water. Some lotuses remained submerged in the water, while others rose above the surface without touching it. Similarly, according to the Buddha's findings, anyone can start their journey towards enlightenment from the very beginning and progress towards a higher state of being.

We refer to it as 'Anugāmi Dhamma Patipadāwa', which translates to a simple and structured approach to practicing the Dhamma. This approach allows individuals to progress from an elementary level to a more advanced one in their spiritual journey. At the outset, one can begin by following the 'Thri Shikshā' or three fundamental practices - Sīla, Samādhi, and Paññā.

The Buddhist philosophy espouses that by embracing and practicing Dharma, one can overcome sorrow. By cultivating moral conduct or Sīla, an individual can easily reach Samādhi or mindfulness, which in turn enables them to practice meditation and gain wisdom. To acquire wisdom or Paññā, an individual must first train their Samādhi. This is particularly relevant in the context of psychology, where individuals often face mental pressure during their day-to-day lives, also known as Dukkha, due to the unrest of their lifestyle. This is primarily because many individuals do not make time to introspect and focus solely on their outer world. However, by taking the time to reflect on themselves, they can gain insight into their inner world.

The cultivation of a clear and peaceful mind can be achieved through the understanding of Dharma, aided by meditation. This is emphasized in an introduction to a meditation e-book titled 'Meditation and the Brain.' Meditation has been practiced, debated, persecuted, and developed for thousands of years due to its mysterious ability to allow the human mind to turn back upon itself for

contemplation.

Current Western research on meditation is primarily focused on its potential to alleviate cognitive aging-related deficits, as well as its ability to mitigate the symptoms and neural abnormalities associated with neurodegenerative and psychiatric disorders. From a psychological and scientific standpoint, these studies provide valuable insights into the significance of meditation. The Lord Buddha himself introduced meditation on Vesak Day, which falls on this month. As such, those who follow the footpath of the Lord Buddha can begin their meditation practice this Vesak season.

In this auspicious Vesak month, it is worth noting a significant event - the visit of Lord Buddha to Kelaniya at the invitation of King Mani Akkhika of a Nāga tribe in Sri Lanka. While the Buddha went on to visit many other places in the country, the crux of Buddhism lies in following His Dhamma. It is imperative to understand that the essence of Buddhism does not lie in fulfilling rituals such as Vesak lanterns, pandals, or the singing of Bhakthi Geetha. Instead, the Vesak celebration should focus on the spiritual growth of the mind and body, emphasizing the importance of following the Dhamma.

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