

On The
History of Vesak



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On the History of Vesak



Today is Vesak, the most universally observed of all Buddhist celebrations or holidays. Traditionally it is believed that the Buddha was born, awakened and passed into final Nirvana on the same day, the full moon of the second month of the ancient Indian called Vesakha, which corresponds to the modern April-May. For at least the last 60 years Vesakha has been widely pronounced as Vesak, the Sinhalese way of saying it. Why not the Thai (Waistkha), the Tibetan (Sa Ga Dawa), the Korean (Seokga Tansinil) or the Vietnamese (Phat Dan) forms? Or for that matter, why not the Pali/Sanskrit Vesakha? Because in 1950 the inaugural meeting of the World Fellowship of Buddhists was held in, paid for and very much dominated by Ceylon, and so that country's way of saying it became current.

Vesakha has not always been a major celebration in all Buddhist countries. In Thailand it was only a low-key ecclesiastical holiday until 50 years ago, as was Magha Puja and Wan Asanha Bucha. The big holidays and celebrations were Hindu ones; Songkran, Loi Krathong, etc. and in the north of the country Inthakin, the water throwing festival, and several others. In Sri Lanka campaigning in the early 1880s to have Vesakha made a public holiday continually failed until Colonel Olcott went to London to petition the British authorities and finally succeeded in 1885. Malaysian Buddhists hardly celebrated it at all until the

dynamic American monk Venerable Sumangalo popularised it and began petitioning the British government to make it a public holiday in the 1950s. Although the majority of Singaporeans have always identified themselves as Buddhists no move by any of them to make Vesakha a public holiday was made until 1947. In 1950 after receiving several petitions the government formed a committee to look into the possibility of making Vesakha a public holiday but found little public support for it. It only became a public holiday in 1955.

Interestingly, there is very little information about how or exactly when the Buddha's birth, Awakening and passing was celebrated in most Buddhist countries in ancient times. The records are blank except for India and Sri Lanka. The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang who was in India in the 7th century wrote this concerning how and when Buddhists celebrated these events.

"The Bodhisattva was born on the 8th day of the second half of the month of Vesakha ...But the Sthavira school hold that it was the 15th day of the second half of Vesakha. It is said in the ancient records that the Buddha entered Parinirvana...on the 15th day of the second half of the month of Vesakha ...But according to the Sarvastivada school he entered Parinivana on the 8th day of the second half of the of the month of Karttika. The Tathagata attained full awakening on the 8th day of the second half of the month of Vesakha on the Indian calendar. But according to the Sthavira school the event occurred on the 15th day of the second half of

Vesakha. The Bodhisattva was born on the 8th day of the second half of the month of Vesakha... But the Sthavira school hold that it was the 15th day of the second half of Vesakha.”

So it would seem that the Mahayanists and the Sthaviras (the Indian version of Theravada) disagreed on the days these events occurred, although not the month. Exactly how the celebrations were conducted Xuanzang gave no information. However, he did say something about the Vesakha celebrations at Bodh Gaya. “Each year on that day the monarchs of various countries and the monks and laymen of different places gather here in hundreds of thousands and bathe the Bodhi Tree with scented water and milk to the accompaniment of music, flowers and lamps burning continually and vie with each other in making offerings to the Tree.” Vesakha was first celebrated on a wide scale in Korea during the Silla period in about the 7th century when what was called the Lotus Lantern Festival (Yeon Deung Hoe) was inaugurated. People would make lanterns in the shape of lotus flowers and hang them in temples, a tradition that has continued until today.

At the beginning of the 5th century an earlier Chinese pilgrim, Faxian witnessed how Vesakha was celebrated in Patna. “On the 8th day of the second month (i.e. Vesakha) there is a procession of images. They construct a four-wheeled car and erect upon it a tower of five stages made of bamboo lashed together, the whole being supported by a central post... so that it looks like a stupa. Then they cover it with fine white linen which they later paint with bright colours. Having made

figures of devas and decorated them with gold and silver they place them under canopies of embroidered silk. Then on each of the car's four corners they make shrines in which they place images of the Buddha in the sitting posture flanked on each side by bodhisattvas. About twenty such cars are each somewhat differently decorated. During the day of the procession monks and lay people gather in great numbers with chanting, music and the offering of flowers. After being invited to do so by brahmacariyas (lay people keeping the ten Precepts for the day) the cars enter the city and then stop. All night there is chanting and music by the people who have gathered from many different regions." This is most interesting because it is the earliest reference to the chariot festivals, still done in Nepal and parts of India.

The earliest reference to Vesakha celebrations in Sri Lanka is from the 1 st century BCE. It must have been a major, probably the major, religious festival. In the Mahavamsa the reign of some kings is measured by how many Vesakhas they had celebrated. But exactly what form the celebrations took the chronicle gives no information. The Mahavamsa reports that Sena II "celebrated the Vesakha festival with the poor, giving them food and drink and clothing as they desired." The Chinese pilgrim Faxian spent two years in Sri Lanka at the beginning of the 5 th century. He witnessed one festival of the Tooth Relic during which large brightly coloured depictions of all the Jataka stories "looking completely life-like" were set up on each side of the roads in the capital. Again, this is interesting because it could well be an account

of how Vesakha is celebrated in Sri Lanka today. At main intersections in many cities and towns large plywood boards with illustrations of Jataka stories or events in the life of the Buddha painted on them are erected. Nowadays most of these pandols as they are called, are illuminated with thousands of light bulbs, some of the figures move, and loudspeakers explain each story. In Faxian's day they would have been illuminated by oil lamps.

A practice that has become widespread and popular and widespread in recent decades is having a statue of the baby Prince Siddhattha and tipping water over it. This is in imitation of the legend that when the holy prince was born that water fell from the sky to wash him. This is a lovely way of honouring the Buddha and something children can participate in, but it has no precedence in Sri Lankan history. It originated in Japan from where it was introduced into Sri Lanka several decades ago.