

Celebrating the Birth and Life of Buddha

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Each spring Buddhists throughout the world celebrate the holiday of Vesakha, or Wesak. This day honors the birth, life, and teaching of Shakyamuni Buddha. Early Buddhist scriptures recount that the Buddha was born, enlightened, and died on the full moon day of the fourth lunar month, "Vesakha." Whereas in southern Asia the festival encompasses all three major life events, in northern Buddhist traditions the Buddha's birth is especially emphasized. Many Asian and western Buddhists now celebrate the holiday jointly on May 8th.

There are many wonderful and marvelous stories about the Buddha's birth that inspire faith and devotion. In Lumbini Park in 463 B.C.E. Queen Maya, the wife of King Suddhodana of Kapilavastu, gave birth to the child. He was subsequently named Siddhartha, "he who fulfills all wishes." Becoming intensely aware of the suffering of the world, Siddhartha renounced his throne at the age of 29 and began a strenuous search for an answer. Six years later on the full-moon night of Vesakha while meditating quietly, he found the cause and cure of this age-old problem. The moral purity of his heart and mind caused others to refer to him as the Buddha, "the Awakened or Enlightened One."

The Wesak Festival in Asia occurs at the end of the dry season, just as the monsoon brings refreshing and vital rain. Echoing this event, participants ladle tea or sweet water during the ceremony over a statue of the baby Buddha standing upright upon a fountain. The tea or water represents the 'water of the spirit' that flows during meditation. We offer at the main altar gifts of fruit, flowers, candles, and incense, which represent the grateful offering our hearts and lives to the teachings of the Buddha. The temple hall and grounds are decorated with a multitude of flowers as well, showing the joy of the occasion, the beauty of faith, and the blossoming of spiritual wisdom in our hearts. We sing songs of praise and after the ceremony ring in the Buddhist new year on the temple bell, each toll a vow to repent a hindrance or cultivate a virtue.

Celebrating the life of Buddha reminds us that as human beings each of us can accomplish what he did - realization of our True Nature, also called 'Nirvana' or 'eternal peace and joy.' As Buddhism teaches that all beings inherently have this Buddha Nature, the practice of purification and conversion is not the exclusive province of our religion. My late master Rev. Jiyu-Kennett emphatically taught, "All roads lead to the goal. Walk the one that's best for you." The awakening of any being is the awakening of all beings. We all share in the spiritual success of each other.

At the end of the Wesak ceremony, the precentor chants an offertory wishing that the light of the Buddha's teaching will illuminate and assist all beings of this world. The offertory ends, "We pray that the seed of Buddhahood will bud and blossom into the Flower of Enlightenment so that its beauty may fill the universe."

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