

## What Vesak Means To Me by Piya Tan

Vesak Day is when my family and I would visit some obscure and uncrowded Buddhist temple (usually one we have not been to before), where we could enjoy the peace as we remind ourselves of this most sacred day.

In 1950, the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) declared Vesak Day to fall on the first full moon day of May. In other words, it is an uposatha or precept day. It is a day when we put more effort to keep at least the five precepts, by spending quiet time with the family, or keeping in touch with the Dharma, or alone meditating.

It is a day to keep in touch with our own self, away from the madding crowd. Those who share the same ideal can gather together to do this, too, and have Sutta Study and other retreat-like activities. In this way we will taste the true spirit of Vesak.

Vesak celebrates the Buddha's birthday. He was born a human being like any of us. This means that any of us can become Buddha if we want to, which is effectively becoming the most evolved of beings within a certain world-cycle. Or, it is like being the captain of a huge ship. If we cannot be the captain, it is good enough to be a good crew all journeying towards true liberation.

Vesak Day secondly marks "Buddha Day," that is the awakening of Gotama to true reality and becoming the Buddha. What does awakening (*bodhi*) mean? *Biological evolution* brings us to the highest level of growth as a species or group. Then we have to develop as individuals, that is, go through *the spiritual evolution*. While biological evolution brings us beyond the animal and subhuman levels, spiritual evolution brings us beyond the human and the divine so that we are truly liberated from all suffering, human or divine.

On the Buddha's parinirvana (final passing away), which is the third significance of Vesak, he reminds us to be "an island unto yourself; make the Dharma as an island" (D 16). This means that we have the potential to be truly happy, and to be liberated from suffering. The answer to life's problems lies within our minds. The answer is not "out there," but *in here* (in our minds).

The Buddha's message is very simple: if we do not help ourselves, who can? Religion is mostly based on stories and our idea of imaginary things in which we are told to have faith. But the stillness of mind is something we can all experience, if we spend some quiet moments alone meditating, say, watching the breath.

When our mind is calm, it becomes clear. In that clarity, we will notice there are destructive as well as wholesome patterns of behaviour. Often getting angry is a destructive pattern of behaviour; so is being constantly sad or depressive. We should spend some quiet time, and question such mental patterns. Ask WHY, then some answer will appear in your mind; ask WHY again, and so on, until we come to understand what is really going on. This final part, we have to find out for ourselves.

Then there is the wholesome pattern that we should notice in ourselves. It makes us feel really peaceful and happy. And it is not dependent on anything outside of

ourselves; for, such a state would be dependent on something else. We should seek for the non-dependent peaceful happiness within ourselves. Where does it come from? Seek and you will find it—in your heart.

Be at peace with your breath. It has always been there, trying to keep up with you. Just *let your breathing be* this time; joyfully observe it like you would watch a sleeping baby or a happy kitten or a colourful sunset.

The secret of Vesak is this: We can be truly happy by being *emotionally independent*: our happiness is not dependent on others or outside things or other people's ideas.

Buddhism, above all else, is about spiritual evolution. It is the transmission of stillness from the Buddha to us. Life's storm may rage around us, but there is always this eye of stillness where we are. This is the true meaning of Vesak.

May the spirit of Vesak be always be with you in the calm and clarity of your heart.

(As this is a reflection, you are invited to read it again so that you can relate to it. You might like to highlight sentences that you like, and reflect further on them.)

A very happy Vesak:  
may all good wishes be fulfilled and true happiness be yours!

Piya Tan

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