

Vesak Day

Vesak Day (known also by the names of Wesak Day, Buddha Purnima or Buddha Day) is commonly regarded as the most important Buddhist holiday in Southeast Asia and in the Theravada and Tibetan traditions. It commemorates three events: the birth of Siddhartha Gautama, the man who became the Buddha; his Enlightenment; and when he died and passed into *parinirvana* (meaning “nirvana-after-death” in Sanskrit). Buddhist tradition chronicles each of these events as taking place on a full moon during the Hindu month of *Vaisakha* (considered the second month in the Indian national calendar and the first month in the Nepali, Odia, Punjabi, and Bengali calendars). The date of Vesak Day follows a lunar calendar, so it falls on a different day each Gregorian year, although it always falls in or around April, May or early June. In addition, different countries and traditions use different calendars. In 2020, many will observe Vesak Day on May 7th. The date of observance may vary around the globe. In the United States and other countries that do not have an official date of observance, Buddhists may observe Vesak Day on May 7th or on the day of celebration in their country of origin or Buddhist tradition.

History and Significance of Vesak Day

The historical Siddhartha Gautama was born in what is currently Lumbini, Nepal sometime between the years of 486 and 360 Before Common Era (BCE). According to Buddhist scriptures, known as *sutras*, Siddhartha Gautama was born into a royal family and lived a luxurious life, where he did not experience hardships, such as sickness and death. After he grew up, married, and had a child, Siddhartha Gautama left the palace in which he lived and saw people who were old and sick; he also saw a corpse and a wandering person who had abstained from all types of indulgences (known as an ascetic). Through this experience Siddhartha Gautama learned about suffering and realized that age, sickness, and death are fates that people cannot avoid. He decided to leave his home and become a holy man. Siddhartha Gautama travelled for a long time, looking for a way for humans to escape suffering, but he did not find a life of denial and asceticism to be any more rewarding than the luxurious life he grew up in. Instead, Siddhartha Gautama decided to embrace a path known as the Middle Way, which struck a balance between luxury and asceticism.

Generally, Buddhists believe in transmigration, where, upon death, people are reborn into new sentient forms if they have not yet stopped having desires and, therefore, live in a cycle of desire and suffering. When people achieve Enlightenment and escape suffering by distinguishing themselves from desire, they pass into a state called Nirvana.

According to Buddhist teachings, Siddhartha Gautama achieved Enlightenment one day when meditating on his life and experiences as he sat underneath a Bodhi tree in Buddhagaya, India. Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha, which is not a name but rather a title that means “the Awakened one.” He became a teacher and taught many disciples who also achieved Enlightenment. Buddhist tradition teaches that the Buddha shared the Dharma, or teachings, for 45 years after his enlightenment. Siddhartha Gautama is believed to have died at the age of 80 in Kushinagar, India peacefully surrounded by many disciples and followers. It is also believed that after he died, he entered the state of *parinirvana*.

Vesak Day, therefore, celebrates three key events in the Buddha's life: his birth as Siddhartha Gautama, his Enlightenment, and his passage into *parinirvana*. Historically, many Buddhists have celebrated all three events in the Buddha's life on Vesak Day, although some celebrate the three events separately. In East Asia today most Buddhists will only celebrate the *birth* of Siddhartha Gautama, while some will only celebrate his Enlightenment.

Observance & Scheduling Tips for Vesak Day

Vesak Day is celebrated as a public holiday in many Southeast Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Celebrations of Vesak Day vary according to country, culture, and tradition. Many Buddhists will visit their local temple; some attend for only part of the day, while others remain there throughout the day and until the full moon appears.

Temple celebrations of Vesak Day contain three main components: giving, virtue, and cultivation. Practices of giving usually involve bringing food to share or providing supplies for the temple. To practice virtue, many Buddhists will reaffirm their commitment to Buddhism's moral precepts (examples include refraining from eating meat in accordance with the Buddhist precept against taking the life of any living being and wearing simple white clothing in accordance with the Buddhist precept against wearing decorative necessities). Buddhists may also spend the day meditating on the Buddhist precepts (most traditions teach that there are **five precepts**, but other traditions teach eight or ten precepts). And finally, many will practice cultivation, which is often interpreted as doing good deeds, which can include chanting, meditation, and listening to sermons, as well as community outreach activities such as providing vegetarian meals to the poor.

On years when Vesak Day falls during the work week, Buddhist employees may wish to take a full or half-day off from work in order to participate in celebrations. Invite your employees to share if and how they observe Vesak Day and what practices they will be observing that day. Companies can also look into partnership opportunities with local Buddhist organizations to develop outreach efforts involving distributing food to the poor and other initiatives that many Buddhists engage in on Vesak Day. Since Vesak Day is observed on different days depending on Buddhist tradition and country of origin, managers should also invite employees to share which days, if any, they will be taking off work.

Greetings for Vesak Day

Appropriate greetings for Vesak Day include "Happy Vesak Day" and "Have a peaceful and joyous Vesak."

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