

## 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 (Nirvana); and when he died and passed into *parinirvana* (meaning “nirvana-after-death” in Sanskrit). According to Buddhist tradition, each takes place on a full moon during the Hindu month of Vaisakha (the second month in the Indian national calendar and the first month in the Nepali, Odia, Punjabi, and Bengali calendars). There are a number of different Hindu calendars, all based on both lunar and solar cycles, therefore, Vesak Day falls on a different date each Gregorian year, although it always falls in April, May, or early June. Different countries and traditions use different calendars, so the date of observance varies around the globe. In countries such as the United States that do not have an official date of observance, Buddhists may observe Vesak Day on the day of celebration in their country of origin or Buddhist tradition.

In Mahayana Buddhist countries, such as those in East Asia, the birth, Enlightenment, and *parinirvana* of the Buddha are celebrated as three separate events. The birth of the Buddha is traditionally celebrated on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the 4<sup>th</sup> Lunar Month, usually occurring around April or May. The Buddha's Enlightenment occurs on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the 12<sup>th</sup> lunar month (often occurring in December), while the *parinirvana* of the Buddha is celebrated on February 15<sup>th</sup>. In Japan, which uses the Gregorian calendar, Buddha's birth, Enlightenment, and *parinirvana* occur annually on April 8<sup>th</sup>, December 8<sup>th</sup>, and February 15<sup>th</sup>, respectively.

### **The Origins of Buddhism**

The historical Siddhartha Gautama was born in what is currently Lumbini, Nepal between the years of 486 and 360 Before the 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 married and had a child, Siddhartha Gautama left the palace and saw people who were old and sick, and those who had died. Through this experience, Siddhartha Gautama realized that people cannot avoid suffering, age, sickness, and death. He decided to leave his home, become a holy man, and look for a way for humans to escape suffering. Siddhartha Gautama traveled for a long time, 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.

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 Bodh Gaya, India. Siddhartha Gautama became the Buddha, which is a title that means “the Awakened One.” He

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 a state of *parinirvana*.

Generally, Buddhists believe in reincarnation, 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.

### **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 (for example, wearing simple white clothing in accordance with the Buddhist precept against wearing adornments). Buddhists may also spend the day meditating on Buddhist precepts. Finally, many will practice cultivation, often interpreted as doing good deeds. These deeds can include chanting, meditation, and listening to sermons.

When Vesak Day falls during the work week, Buddhist employees may wish to take a full or half-day off from work to participate in celebrations. Invite your employees to share when, 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 such as distributing food to the poor.

### **Greetings for Vesak Day**

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

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