

Vesak Day

Vesak Day (also known as 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. Buddhist tradition chronicles each of these events as taking place on a full moon during the Hindu month of Vesakha, which is a lunar month. Vesak Day follows a lunar calendar, so Vesak Day falls on a different day each year, although it always falls in April, May or early June. In addition, different countries and traditions use different calendars. In 2017, the United Nations and many countries will observe Vesak Day on May 10. 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 10th 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 486 and 360 Before Common Era (BCE). According to Buddhist scriptures, known as *sutras*, he 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 ascetic. Through this experience he 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. For a long time he travelled, 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. He instead decided to embrace a path known as the Middle Way, which struck a balance between luxury and asceticism.

Generally, Buddhists believe in transmigration, where 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 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 while underneath a Bodhi tree in Buddhagaya. He 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. He is believed to have died at the age of 80 in Kushinagar, Northern 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, though some celebrate the three events separately. Finally, today most Buddhists in East Asia will only celebrate the birth of Siddhartha Gautama, while some only celebrate his Enlightenment.

Observance & Scheduling Tips for Vesak Day

Vesak Day is celebrated as a public holiday in many South East Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. Celebrations of Vesak Day vary according to country, culture and tradition. However, 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 these 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 the 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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