

Historical day

Vesak Day is dedicated to the historical Buddha and his teachings. Without them, we will have neither Buddhism nor true wisdom today. The arising of such a great being amongst us marks the highest point in human evolution. It means that we have truly reached the greatest extent of human evolution as a species, as a tribe, as a crowd.

To be part of a species, a tribe or a crowd, is to remain or return to our animal and instinctive state. We then, at least, momentarily, lose or forget our individuality, even our humanity—we tend to think and act as a herd. When this crowd behaviour reaches a very sophisticated level, it is called politics and religion.

Both politics and religion are power-based. Power means our ability to make others do what we want, often wrongly, even to destroy what is most precious to us—our lives, even culture or civilization itself. In terms of power, politics and religion act in an almost identical way. Both want to define us, shape us and hold us.

However, religion can be more powerful than politics, especially when its power extends over nations, even over the whole world. Then, the shadow of religion darkens us all—there are mass violence, sanctioned exploitation and abuse of others, and the dehumanizing of man into submissive creatures.

Both politics and religion move and hold crowds with promises and prayers. But religious hope is even more compelling. It effectively devalues our human lives with future images of some pleasurable rewards of an imaginative paradise or being in the eternal presence of some supreme being in the image of those who define religion.

The Buddha arose amongst us as one who has gone through practically all forms of religion and every suffering that can befall us in all possible worlds. The Buddha, in other words, is one who is well aware of the wiles of politics and the whims of religion. He teaches us the difference between other-power (which enslaves us) and self-effort (which liberates us).

Politics and religion constantly tell us how powerless we are when alone, but the group and crowd are powerful. The Buddha, on the other hand, declares to us that true power comes from the individual. We lose our self-power when we stop to think for ourselves and let others do the thinking for us. We only need to believe—our faith, we are told, will free us. But we are merely freed from the small cage of ignorance and let into a bigger cage of beliefs.

The Buddha declares that we will discover the greatest power—that of self-liberation—when we are truly alone and joyful. To be truly alone means to feel deep into our mind and touch our heart. When the heart is touched, it bursts into boundless joy. This joy destroys the bars of the prisons of our knowledge and limits of our senses.

Wisdom gives eyes to knowledge, it makes us understand ourselves. Otherwise, it is but views, very blinkered and tinted lenses through which we project our virtual life and world. Through the Buddha Dharma, we gain wisdom, which helps us see more clearly, more directly at true reality and enjoy true happiness.

The Buddha is born alone—a unique being in a universe of herded creatures. Even before he awakens as Buddha (when he is still a bodhisattva), he is often alone (but never lonely). Even as a child, he is sensitive to the world's sufferings, unimpressed by the crowd. Once, as a 7-year-old, he escapes from a festive crowd and sits alone under a jambul tree to taste the sweet joy of deep meditation.

As a royal youth, surrounded by sensual pleasures, he sees them all as impermanent. When he realizes that youth must end in age, health in sickness, and life in death, he has visions of himself, of everyone he loves, as an old man, a sick man and a carcass.

He is alone in his troubling visions, without anyone to explain what they really mean. What is the worth of having family, wife, even a child, when all must end in decay, disease and death? Surely, there is a way out of this prison of worldly existence. He turns to the only way he knows to seek his answer.

He leaves behind all his wealth, pleasures and power, even his family, wife and child—not because he loves them less but because he loves their freedom, our freedom, more. As a worldly man, burdened by decay, disease and death, he renounces the quest for what decays, sickens and dies to seek what is free from decay, from disease, from death.

He goes to the best teachers of his day for the answer to his questions, but he finds them still caught in the world themselves. Then, he decides to break the ultimate link to the world—his own body—to purge it of all impurities and to free himself of his body. Perhaps, he could free his “eternal soul” to enjoy the bliss of some eternal divinity. He finds neither soul nor eternity, and he almost dies in such harmful and worthless quests.

Even before his awakening, the Buddha realizes that we must have a healthy mind in a healthy body if we are to find spiritual liberation and awakening. Five holy men follow him, hoping they will be the first to benefit from his awakening. But when he takes the middle way of avoiding bodily torture and self-centred pleasure-seeking, they ignorantly judge him as a failure, and abandon him.

Left alone at the climax of his spiritual life, the Buddha continues his inner quest, certain that he is very close to his goal. Sitting alone and radiant under the Bodhi tree, he awakens to the truth and beauty of full liberation. He understands now that we should see our suffering for what it is: that is our sense-world of impermanence. We suffer because we work to make more of it than what it really is—this is called “craving.” This is the meaning of life.

The Buddha goes on to work out the path of ending this suffering: by keeping our body healthy, guarding our mind from wrong views, and cultivating the wisdom that frees us from suffering. We should not be fooled by the self and selfishness. We should not look for answers to problems that arise from within us, and never to doubt that we are capable to freeing ourselves from suffering. If we do not help ourselves, who can?

Vesak Day celebrates the arising of the historical Buddha; his attaining of buddhahood which opens the path of awakening for us; and his passing away, which is the final truth of his teaching—that the teacher, too, must die. This means that despite

our impermanence and humanity, we are capable of rising to divine levels and beyond by knowing, taming and freeing our mind.

In this sense, Vesak Day is the most “historical” of all our days. It is the day that reminds us of what history is really about; how we understand our own lives—the long spiral of human evolution, of our effort for awakening, and how we finally awaken to what is free from decay, disease and death—nirvana.

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