

A choice Vesak

Vesak day marks the birth, awakening and passing away of the Buddha, the most highly evolved of beings in our universe. We all evolve as a species or group so that we become better at what we are doing, in our case, as humans. At this point in our evolutionary history, we have used our common wisdom and abilities to be able to live together in highly complex groups, called society.

This is as far as biological evolution brings us. We have evolved as perhaps the most intelligent and successful group of beings on earth. We can be good at almost anything we put our minds to it. We are highly capable to doing good as well as bad things. We desire pleasure and happiness, and reject pain and suffering.

On a broad level, we can define “good” as what brings pleasure and happiness to us as individuals and as a group (society, country, and world). “Bad” is what brings us pain and suffering. Let us use the word “morality” for all these ideas about good and bad to facilitate our discussion.

There are two kinds of morality: the worldly and the spiritual. Worldly morality is the kind of behaviour we show or put up with because it is right (the law), it is proper (etiquette), it is to our advantage (politics), and so on. The difficulty here is that different societies, even different individuals, define this kind of morality in their own way, such as, which side of road to drive on, or how to dress properly for the occasion.

There is a higher kind of morality, the spiritual, which is more of an individual nature. This is the ability to understand and accept the fact that we cannot really be happy all by ourselves when there is suffering around us. Just as we do not like suffering, others too feel the same.

It is for this reason that prince Siddhattha gave up all his worldly happiness and pleasures, his family and status, to seek the truth that would liberate us from suffering. With his awakening as the Buddha, we can say that he did not really give up his family at all. He merely left behind the narrow, biological concept of family for a broader, unconditional idea of a spiritual family.

This notion of a spiritual family is still seen today in the monastics who keep to the Buddha’s teachings. As a rule, they are available to us whenever we need them. In our troubles, we can approach them for spiritual comfort and counselling, which our biological family is unlikely to be disposed to give.

A community of lay Buddhists who, guided by the Buddha Dharma, consistently shows wisdom and compassion, too, is a spiritual family. Such Buddhists, when their lives are touched and moved by Dharma are capable of giving spiritual comfort and counselling to anyone who needs it.

In the Buddha's teaching, wisdom is the proper understanding and use of knowledge. We may know a lot of things but we may be selfish with them or do not know how to use them for our happiness and the happiness of others.

Wisdom starts with the willingness to accept ourselves just the way we are, and others just the way they are. In doing this, we are also showing compassion to ourselves and to others. For, compassion is being kind to ourselves even when we do not deserve it, to others even they do not deserve. (Kindness shown when the other party deserves it is called "gratitude.")

As Buddhists, we choose to see others as mirrors of ourselves. We love life and fear death, so do others. We desire happiness and owning things, so do others. We value pleasure and love, so do others. We need truth, so do others. And our minds must be calm and clear to enjoy all these things. That is why the Buddha recommends us to keep to the five precepts.

Vesak Day is a reminder to us of the Buddha's boundless compassion. He freely taught the liberating truth in an age when religious knowledge was monopolized by a priestly elite. But as Buddhists, anyone can study the suttas, meditate and associate with others. We often take this for granted, even forget about such basic nature of the Buddha's teachings.

At least once a year, especially on Vesak day, we should get down to the basics and ask ourselves basic questions and answer them in meaningful (not speculative) ways. What is the meaning of life? -- Things are never perfect or satisfactory, no matter where you look. What is the purpose of life? -- To learn from all this, so that we can find true happiness and liberation.

May you have a choice Vesak.

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