

Vesak Baby

A popular public ritual during Vesak Day is the “lustration of the child Siddhartha,” sometimes called the bathing of the Buddha, which is not historically correct, as he is still the Bodhisattva then. The ritual is mainly based on such texts as the Acchariya Abbhūta Sutta (M 123) and the Commentaries, especially the Introduction of the Jātaka Commentary (J 53).

The Acchariya Abbhūta Sutta (M 123) says that the child Siddhartha is born totally pure, like a gem on a piece of exquisite Kasī cloth: neither he soils the cloth, nor the cloth soils him. Then, it is said:

“When the Bodhisattva came forth from his mother’s womb, two jets of water, one cool and one warm, seemed to issue forth from the skies, washing the Bodhisattva and his mother.” (M 123.19/3:123).

It is in this connection that we today mindfully “bathe” the child Bodhisattva Siddhartha, that is, recollecting the most fortunate appearance of the Buddha-to-be in our world for the benefit of all beings. There are other legends that say that he is able to walk and talk as soon as he is born, and when he walks, his feet do not touch the ground, but are supported by seven lotuses.

This is the ancient Indian way of saying that this is no ordinary child. He is born into the world, but is untouched by the world, like a lotus, although rooted in the mud, blooms beautifully in the bright sun. This also reminds us that, despite our defilements of greed, hate and delusion, we can rise free from them by practising the Buddha’s teachings of inner peace.

The baby Bodhisattva or child Siddhartha reminds us that we are still a baby or at least a child in our spiritual development. We still need a role model, that is, the Buddha. We need a method of personal development and mental cultivation, that is, the Dharma. But we must never despair as there are many others who have gone ahead of us: they are the true individuals of the holy Sangha, the great awakened saints.

May I study, practise and realize the true Dharma. May I not be distracted from the path of the true light by its colourful reflections, so enticing yet hollow and misleading. May I keep on moving, even if slowly or even if I have stopped for a moment.

May I have the energies of the Bodhisattva to never lag in my striving for spiritual awakening. May I have the wisdom of the Buddha to see things as they truly are, and his compassion to show others the right way, too.

When I am alone in my struggle for good and happiness, without my loved ones, my friends, or those I respect, may I recall the lone light of the awakened Buddha under the Bodhi tree. He sits alone in joy and light, and soon the bright dawn warms upon him. He never gives up.

As time flies by, may I put my best into life, and give my best to those around me, that the world may be a better place. When it is my turn to return to a new life, may I see with joy a new and better world, ever closer to the Buddha.

Bathing the baby Bodhisattva

Traditionally, we mindfully pour three ladles full of water over the image of the child Bodhisattva. As we pour the first ladleful, we should reflect:

“May my bodily actions be free from greed and other unwholesome roots.”

As we pour the second ladleful, we should reflect:

“May my speech and communication be free from hate and other unwholesome roots.”

As we pour the third ladleful, we should reflect:

“May my thoughts be calm and clear, free from delusion and other unwholesome roots.”

The three bows of joy

As we bow before the child Bodhisattva image or the Buddha image, let us exult in the three wonderful joys:

With the first bow, rejoice thus:

“The Buddha has arisen in this world and we still remember him as the world teacher. I aspire to be like the Buddha in his wisdom and compassion.

With the second bow, rejoice thus:

“The Buddha Dharma is still with us, and lives in us as long as we practise it. I aspire to taste the peace of its beauty and the clarity of its truth, and to share it with others. As I learn I will teach; as I teach I will learn.”

With the third bow, rejoice thus:

“The Noble Sangha of Saints is my true refuge. The acts and awakening of the great saints – monks, nuns, laymen and lay women – inspire me to seek liberation in this life itself, at least as a streamwinner. For those who aspire to become Buddhas, I rejoice in their courage and sacrifice.”

Revisioning Buddhism 52

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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