

## Vesak For Trees

### Reflections for 2023

This year, 2023, Vesak is celebrated on many different days in the world: 2023 is an intercalary year for the lunar calendar (there are two 2<sup>nd</sup> months). Following the solar year (our normal calendar), Vesak is on the full moon of May. But due to the extra 2<sup>nd</sup> month, those following the lunar calendar celebrate Vesak on the full moon of June.

Some countries such as Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Malaysia celebrate Vesak Day on the full moon of May (lunar 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 3<sup>rd</sup> month, that is, 4<sup>th</sup> May), while others like Thailand and Singapore celebrate it on the full moon of June (lunar 15<sup>th</sup> of the 4<sup>th</sup> month, that is, 2<sup>nd</sup> June).

The UN General Assembly, by its [resolution 54/115](#) of 1998, recognized internationally the Day of Vesak to acknowledge the contribution that Buddhism, one of the oldest religions in the world, has made for over two and a half millennia and continues to make to the spirituality of humanity. This day is commemorated annually at the UN Headquarters and other UN offices in various countries.

### Vesak Day and the Buddhist Oikoumene

In the First Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists (WFB) held in Sri Lanka, 25 May 1950, the 129 Buddhist delegates from 30 countries recognized the **first full moon day of May as Buddha Day or Vesak Day**. Yet we have countries like Thailand, Singapore and Korea celebrating Vesak on different day. Does this mean that we do not yet have a Buddhist oikoumene, a world Buddhist community or even fellowship? We need to reflect on this and for posterity to resolve.

Like most modern religions, most Buddhist temples and centres look forward to Vesak mainly because it is a day when they would receive the most donations. We are more often caught up with the colourful rituals, impressive chants, talks by elite Buddhists or distinguished non-Buddhists. How much do we really recollect its real significance of **renunciation** by the Buddha? We need to reflect on this, too.

### The trees of Buddhism

For this Vesak, let us reflect on the significance of **trees** in Buddhism. We know that the Buddha was born under a sal tree (*Shorea robusta*) in Lumbini Park, a beautiful garden. He awakened to Buddhahood under the Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*). The Buddha taught the Dhamma in the open under many different trees, including the mango tree (*Mangifera indica*). He passed away under the twin sal trees.

Whenever we see a big tree, we should visualize the Buddha under it or recall the Buddha teaching the Dhamma. Trees remind us that the Dhamma is still with us, that we should practise it if we want to live truly well.

How many of us have really seen a beautiful garden and felt its spacious beauty? In Singapore, we have the remarkably beautiful and spacious Jurong Lake Gardens, with its trees, lake and Floating Wetlands. The garden is a beautiful space for our meditation, yoga and walks, and to recall the Buddha whenever we see a big tree.

The Jurong Lake is surrounded by the Burmese banyan (*Ficus kurzi*). I noticed a little Bodhi sapling (*Ficus religiosa*) growing on a pontoon of Floating Wetlands

### **The Buddha and the Yoga Sutra**

From my researches, I recently learned 2 new things. The first is that the Buddha knew various methods of bodily postures (*āsana*), gestures (*mudra*) and exercises (*yoga*) that helped him in his meditations. However, it was through his own mental focus (*samādhi*) that he awakened to true reality and taught the noble eightfold path.

Later, Patañjali compiled all these practices of the Buddha into an ancient classic called **the Yoga Sutra** (earliest 200 BCE). Patañjali also used the noble eightfold path model to structure his teaching on the Eight Limbs of Yoga (*aṣṭaṅga yoga*). This was the beginning of what we know as Yoga today; it is deeply rooted in early Buddhism.

### **Roots of Āyurveda**

The Buddha was also familiar and skillful with natural health and medicines. There is a whole chapter in the Mahāvagga of the Vinaya called “the chapter on medicine” (*bhesajja khandhaka*). The early monks and nuns knew enough about medicine and healing for their own practice (but never as a livelihood). This is to ensure their health and safety especially when living in solitude in the forests.

This early Buddhist knowledge of medicine and healing were adopted and compiled into the ancient Indian medical manuals like the Caraka Saṁhita, the Suśruta Saṁhita and the Aṣṭaṅga Hr̥daya (note the “eightfold” again). These came to be the foundations of Āyurveda (“life knowledge”) whose real roots are in early Buddhism.

### **Vesak is everywhere**

We should not think of Vesak as being merely a day in the year, but rather as the START of our chance to get on the path of awakening from ignorance and suffering. This Vesak path goes through the garden of beautiful trees that reminds us of the Buddha and his teachings. Even in the darkness of the night, the very same MOON that shone on the Buddha shines on us today, reminding us that it is the same Buddha Dhamma that we can and should practise.

Let Vesak Day remind us that when we are mindful, aware and wise in our ways in the world, we will learn not to be driven around and drowned in the false ways of the world. Otherwise, we will find it is too late in life to change. Vesak is not just a day, but everyday of our life. Vesak is our opportunity to become a better person, shining like the bright Vesak moon over the world, reflecting the light of the SUN that represents the Buddha

Dhamma coming through the trees, shading us, feeding us, letting us breathe joy and life in our daily lives.

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