

# VISAKHA BUCHA

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Visakha bucha is an annual holiday observed traditionally by practicing [Buddhists](#) in [South Asian](#) and [South East Asian](#) countries like [Nepal](#), [Singapore](#), [Vietnam](#), [Thailand](#), [Cambodia](#), [Malaysia](#), [Sri Lanka](#), [Myanmar](#), [Indonesia](#), [Pakistan](#) and [India](#). Sometimes informally called "[Buddha's Birthday](#)," it actually encompasses the birth, enlightenment ([Nirvana](#)), and passing away ([Parinirvana](#)) of [Gautama Buddha](#).

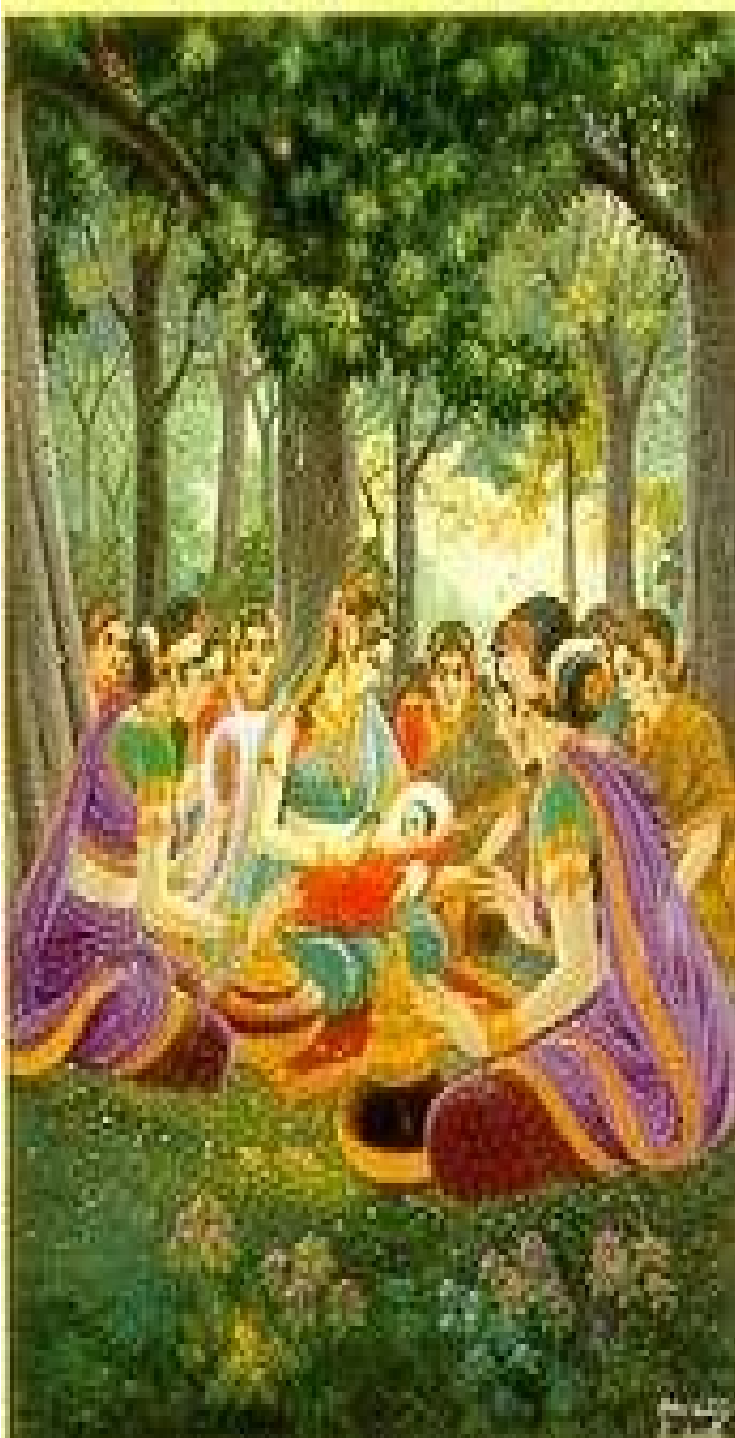
## History

The decision to agree to celebrate Vesak as the Buddha's birthday was formalized at the first Conference of the [World Fellowship of Buddhists](#) held in [Sri Lanka](#) in 1950, although festivals at this time in the Buddhist world are a centuries-old tradition. The Resolution that was adopted at the World Conference reads as follows:

“That this Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, while recording its appreciation of the gracious act of His Majesty, the [Maharaja of Nepal](#) in making the full-moon day of Vesak a [Public Holiday in Nepal](#), earnestly requests the Heads of Governments of all countries in which large or small number of Buddhists are to be found, to take steps to make the full-moon day in the month of May a Public Holiday in honour of the Buddha, who is universally acclaimed as one of the greatest benefactors of Humanity.”

## **The celebration of Vesak**

On Vesak day, devout Buddhists and followers alike are expected and requested to assemble in their various temples before dawn for the ceremonial, and honorable, hoisting of the Buddhist flag and the singing of hymns in praise of the holy triple gem: The Buddha, The Dharma (his teachings), and The Sangha (his disciples). Devotees may bring simple offerings of flowers, candles and joss-sticks to lay at the feet of their teacher. These symbolic offerings are to remind followers that just as the beautiful flowers would wither away after a short while and the candles and joss-sticks would soon burn out, so too is life subject to decay and destruction. Devotees are enjoined to make a special effort to refrain from killing of any kind. They are encouraged to partake of vegetarian food for the day. In some countries, notably Sri Lanka, two days are set aside for the celebration of Vesak and all liquor shops and slaughter houses are closed by government decree during the two days. Also birds, insects and animals are released by the thousands in what is known as a 'symbolic act to liberation'; of giving freedom to those who are in captivity, imprisoned, or tortured against their will. Some devout Buddhists will wear a simple white dress and spend the whole day in temples with renewed determination to observe the eight Precepts Devout Buddhists undertake to lead a noble life according to the teaching by making daily affirmations to observe the Five Precepts. However, on special days, notably new moon and full moon days, they observe the eight Percepts to train themselves to practice morality, simplicity and humility.



## **Bringing happiness to others**

Celebrating Vesak also means making special efforts to bring happiness to the unfortunate like the aged, the handicapped and the sick. To this day, Buddhists will distribute gifts in cash and kind to various charitable homes throughout the country. Vesak is also a time for great joy and happiness, expressed not by pandering to one's appetites but by concentrating on useful activities such as decorating and illuminating temples, painting and creating exquisite scenes from the life of the Buddha for public dissemination. Devout Buddhists also vie with one another to provide refreshments and vegetarian food to followers who visit the temple to pay homage to the Enlightened One.

# Vesak in Japan

In Japan, Vesak or [hanamatsuri](#) is also known as: *Kanbutsu-e* , *Goutan-e* , *Busshou-e* , *Yokubutsu-e*, *Ryuge-e Hana-eshiki*. It is not a public holiday. It is based on a legend that a dragon appeared in the sky on his birthday and poured [soma](#) over him.

It used to be celebrated on the 8th day of the fourth month in the [Chinese Lunar Calendar](#), based on one of the legends that proclaims the day as Buddha's birthday. At present, the celebration is observed on April 8 of the Solar Calendar since the [Meiji government](#) adopted the western solar calendar as the official calendar. Since the 8th day of the fourth month in the lunar calendar commonly falls in May of the current solar calendar, it is now celebrated about a month earlier.



## Vesak in Sri Lanka

Vesak is celebrated as a religious and a cultural festival in Sri Lanka on the full moon of the month of May, for a duration of one week. During this week, the selling of alcohol and flesh is usually prohibited, with abatoirs also being closed. Prisoners who are eligible for parole are often released. Celebrations include various religious and alms giving activities. Electrically lit pandols called *toranas* are erected in various locations in Colombo and elsewhere, most sponsored by donors, religious societies and welfare groups. Each pandol illustrates a story from the 550 [Jataka](#) Katha or the 550 Past Life Stories of the Buddha. In addition, colourful lanterns called *Vesak koodu* are hung along streets and in front of homes. They signify the light of the Buddha, Dharma and the Sangha. Food stalls set up by Buddhist devotees called *dansälas* provide free food and drinks to passersby. Groups of people from various community organisations, businesses and government departments sing *bhakti gee* or Buddhist devotional songs. Colombo experiences a massive influx of public from all parts of the country during this week.

# Visakha bucha in Thailand





**MOST IMPORTANT** holy days of the year for Thai Buddhists all include the word "**Bucha**", which means to pay homage. **Asahara Bucha** commemorates the day the Lord Buddha preached his first sermon. **Makha Bucha** marks both the occasion when 1,350 of the Buddha's disciples gathered without prior notice and listened to the Buddha elaborate some of his most important teachings in a sermon, as well as the day he foresaw his own death and attainment of **Nibbana (Nirvana)**. But the most auspicious of the three is **Visakha Bucha**, which simultaneously commemorates three important anniversaries in the life of **Siddharta Gautama**, the Lord Buddha: his birth, his enlightenment, and his death.



Buddhism first arrived in the land that is modern day Thailand over 2,200 years ago, when the **Indian Buddhist Emperor Ashoke (or Asoka)** sent missionaries to Southeast Asia to spread the religion. That a religion such as Buddhism, which is based on a philosophy of seeking within oneself, should have been so actively spread may seem a bit strange. But Emperor Ashoke was at heart a warrior, and was determined to spread the religion of his empire even by force, if necessary. The first records of Buddhism in Thailand are from **Nakhon Pathom**, west of Bangkok, in the great fertile plain of the **Chao Phraya river**. With the migration of the Tai people from the north much later, and their comingling with the **Mon, Khmer and Lao** peoples, this already established religion became the faith of the fledgling kingdoms and eventually of the Kingdom of Siam. The immigrants brought with them their own animistic beliefs, and such is the flexibility of Buddhism, these superstitions happily coexist with the mainstream of Buddhist thought to the present day.

The Lord Buddha was born as **Siddhartha**, the crown prince of the Kingdom of Sakyas, south of the great Himalayan mountain ranges in an area corresponding to Nepal and the northern state of Bihar in India. Despite his high birth, Prince Siddhartha was concerned about the problems of poverty and suffering of the ordinary people of the kingdom that was his birthright to rule. He constantly searched for ways in which he might alleviate the hardships of his future subjects, but realized that the lofty eminence of his position was not the platform from which he could do this. Finally, he renounced his title, bid farewell to his wife and son, and walked away from his great wealth and splendid palace to seek knowledge from the famous teachers who dwelt as hermits in the forests that then covered the land. Siddhartha lived a life of great austerity as he sought to learn the truth from these sages, but none could satisfy his constant thirst for answers to the perils and tribulations of life. As a last resort, he wandered alone in the forest until he came to a Bodhi tree, under which he sat and began to meditate.



On his 36<sup>th</sup> birthday, Siddhartha reached a state of understanding of the world, and spoke of **four noble truths** that had the power to liberate the minds of men who could realize them. They are:

- The Truth of Suffering - Existence is suffering
- The Truth of the Cause of Suffering - Suffering is caused by desire
- The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering - Without desire, suffering ceases to exist
- The Truth of the Path - The eight-fold path is the way to eliminate desire

The Eight-fold Path is comprised of eight elements of living that must be done correctly. They are Right Understanding, Right Mindedness (Right Thought), Right Speech, Right Bodily Conduct, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Attentiveness, and Right Concentration. It was the discovery of the four truths and the eight-fold path that ultimately paved the way for Siddhartha to attain enlightenment, and earn the honorific title of **Buddha, the Enlightened One.**

**On Visakha Bucha Day**, Buddhists from throughout Thailand demonstrate their high regard for the **Triple Gems of Buddhist philosophy**: The Lord Buddha, the great teacher; The Dhamma, Lord Buddha's teachings; and The Sang ha, the brotherhood of Buddhist monks. In Chiangmai, many of the faithful participate in a procession to **Wat Phrathart Doi Suthep**, the famous monastery on the mountain overlooking the city. The procession leaves Chiangmai at sunset and winds upwards 9 kilometers through the forest in the bright moonlight. The congregation arrives at the temple at about 3:00 a.m., where they wait until daybreak to fulfill their intentions of paying homage to the relics of the Lord Buddha housed there, and to make merit.



At the first light of dawn, the devout worshippers offer food to the monks and then, in turn pay their deep respects to the Buddha relics in their ancient sanctuaries. These relics were received at the temple over 400 years ago by **King Gue Na** of Chiangmai, from the monarch of the realm of Chiang Saen on the banks of the distant **Mae Khong river**.

Although **Wat Phrathart Doi Suthep** has since been enlarged and renovated, the sanctuaries housing the invaluable relics are those that date from the distant past.

The final element of the pilgrimage to this famous monastery, following a day of sermons, is the candle-lit procession around the **Bhote**, the principle chapel of the temple. The followers walk three times around the **Bhote** clockwise, each clasping three incense sticks, a lighted candle and lotus buds. The air is filled with burning incense and smoke from the candles as the faithful complete this most sacred of Buddhist celebrations.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

THANKS FOR YOUR ATTENTION