

Vesak Day and Global Civilization

มองวันวิสาขบูชา หยั่งถึงอารยธรรมโลก

พระพรหมคุณาภรณ์ (ป.อ.ปยุตฺโต)

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Vasak Day and Global Civilization

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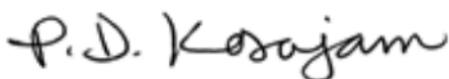


Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University (MCU) has been privileged to witness and play a crucial role in developing and hosting successful UNDV celebrations from the beginning in 2004/2547 to 2011/2554 (except in 2008/2551 – the celebrations were held in Hanoi, Vietnam). As always, we are all very grateful to the Royal Thai Government for its constant support, and thank the Thai Supreme Sangha Council for its blessings, guidance and support. We are indebted, also, to the United Nations for recognizing the thrice-sacred Buddhist holy day.

It has been 2554 years since the death of our Great Teacher, and we have gathered here from across the globe, from many nations, to again pay tribute to his birth, enlightenment, and death – occurring on the same day in different years.

For the celebrations this year, the International Association of Buddhist Universities (IABU), created during the UNDV in 2007/2550 by the participating Buddhist higher institutions, plays an important role. The IABU Secretariat now plays a major role in our celebrations, particularly in the academic program of the conference.

This publication could not have been possible without the persistence, hard work, and dedication of MCU's scholars and staff. I wish to thank all members of the International Council for Day of Vesak and the Executive Council of the International Association of Buddhist Universities, and the Editorial Committee for their devotion. I am also grateful to our many donors, sponsors, and volunteers.



The Most Ven. Prof. Dr. Phra Dharmakosajarn
Chairman, ICDV & IABU
Rector, Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya
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Vesak (Visakha Puja) Day



Meanings and Practices

The word “Visakha Puja” refers to a Buddhist merit-making ceremony commemorating the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, and passing away.

Visakha Puja is an abbreviation derived from the Pali term Visakhapunnamī Puja. It is sometimes written as Vesak, which is founded on the Sanskrit term Vaisakhapurnamī Puja, and it means the ceremony of the full moon day in the sixth month.

The full moon in the sixth month is one of the sacred days in the Buddhist calendar, recognized as the day of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and Nirvana (passing away), which miraculously occurred on the same day.



Significance of Vesak Day

Among the sacred and holy days in Buddhism, Vesak is considered the most important day in terms of its ancient significance and international recognition. It is universally renowned and celebrated throughout all Buddhist countries.

In Thailand, the Vesak ceremony is believed to have been started in the Sukhothai Era, and perhaps was transmitted via Sri Lanka, where Vesak has been celebrated for a long period of time. The Book of Noppamas clearly mentions the Vesak ceremony in Sukhothai. Afterwards, in the Ayutthaya Era, it is considered to have been conducted as both royal and public grand rituals, for a duration of three days and three nights. The observance of this sacred ceremony fell into

decline after the kingdom was conquered. It was restored in the reign of King Rama II of the Rattanakosin Dynasty. At that time, there was a royal behest in 1817 announcing the Vesak Ceremony as the most important annual celebration in the kingdom.

The royal behest concerning the Vesak Ceremony in 1817 stated that His Majesty the King desired to make supreme merit that would result in a most marvelous virtue far beyond what he had already accomplished. Thus, His Majesty the King asked the monks' council, in which Somdet Phra Ariyawongsanyana (Mee) was president; then he restored the ancient royal ritual of the Vesak ceremony as originally observed by King Bhatika of Sri Lanka. Since then, the Vesak

ceremony has been a royally announced Buddhist holiday, taking place for three days.

However, the celebration has declined in importance over time.



A century later in the reign of King Rama IV when people still held to tradition, the King realized the significance of the grand assembly of great disciples, which is called Caturanga Sannipata (meeting of the four auspicious occasions). Thus, he came up with the celebration of Magha Puja for the first time and added one more sacred day to the Buddhist calendar.

In 1957, there was the magnificent celebration of 25 centuries of Buddhism. After the ceremony, the Thai monk council agreed that the full moon in the eighth month, during which the Buddha gave his first teaching to the five companions (pañcavaggiya), is one of the most blessed days, since it is considered to be the first day of the establishment of Buddhism. That day has been revered and properly celebrated as Asalha Puja since 1958.

Furthermore, there was another holy day called “Atthami Puja”, on the eighth night following the full-moon of the sixth month. It is the day commemorating the Buddha’s funeral. The Atthami Puja ceremony is no longer observed as there was a lack of history found to substantiate

it. It was not well known and it is not now included as a national holiday.

Internationally, Buddhism's main holiday is Visakha Puja, though it is sometimes differently calculated and named. For example, Buddhist countries in South East Asia celebrate Visakha Puja day in the sixth lunar month, while it is celebrated on the eighth of April in Japan. It is called Visakha Puja in Thailand, but Vesak or Wesak in Sri Lanka. However these terms describe the same event.

Nowadays, there is an encouragement for the Buddhist world to hold the same Visakha Puja celebration on the full moon night of the sixth lunar month (May) and for it to be called "Buddha Day".

Visakha Puja day commemorates the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and Nirvana (passing away), which miraculously occurred on the same day. These events relate directly to the Buddha, who established Buddhism. The events occurring on Vesak Day made it possible for there to be Asalha Puja and Magha Puja later on. Vesak Day is the day on which Prince Siddhartha was

born and the day he became the Buddha; later he gave his first sermon and there occurred the meeting of his chief followers. Consequently, Wesak Day is considered the most important day.

It is a miracle that the three main events of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and passing away occurred on the same day. Vesak Day is therefore not only a holiday, but a day marking this miracle. And this miracle is one facet of considering the Buddha a 'miraculous person' (acchariya-puggala).

However, no matter how important or miraculous the events that occurred on Visakha Puja day are, they only happened to the Buddha. For Buddhists, the moral practices that we adopt for our own benefit are that we have great respect for the Buddha and have great faith in him; we realize that it is difficult to follow his example.

The importance and wonder of Buddhism is its practicality and effectiveness. The three remarkable events on Vesak day are both miraculous and practically important. Therefore, the practicality of the Buddhist teachings is recognized as the true significance and true

marvel, far more than the aforementioned ones. The true value and miracle of Buddhism is that we can follow the teachings and apply them to everyday life.

The perfectly corresponding nature of the three occasions marked by Vesak Day engenders faith in the Triple Gem. Nevertheless, the deeper meaning of such a miraculous coincidence is to remind us of the Buddha's teachings and to carry out his teachings correctly.

The Buddha defined material worship ("amisa puja") as veneration by giving articles such as flowers, incense, candles, and food. Even though these offerings are necessary, they are considerably inferior to the practice of Dhamma ("patipatti puja"). Practicing the Buddha's teachings is the most supreme form of reverence and produces the most beneficial results for the practitioner and for the peace of all people. The practice of the Dhamma keeps Buddhism alive. Dhamma practice is supported by the offering of material things, but without Dhamma practice, material worship is meaningless.



The Meaning of Vesak Day in Terms of the Buddha's Life:

The Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and passing away occurred on the same day. The significance of these three events are similar in meaning.

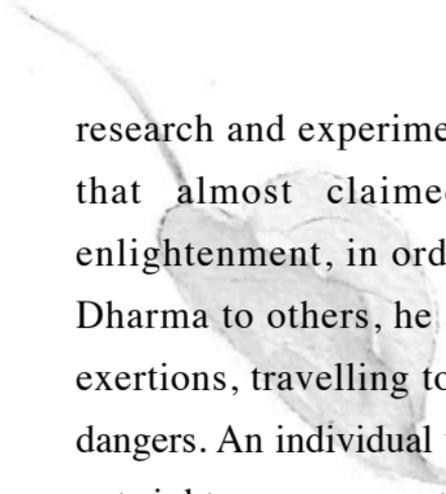
His birth reminds us that everyone begins life equally as a human being. The Buddha, however, possessed special characteristics. He was able to learn and be trained, continually improve himself, and through his effort and wisdom he was able to become the world's greatest leader, revered by both humans and divinities. The Buddha shared

with us the benefits from his enlightenment. The Buddha encouraged us to continually reflect, practice, and improve ourselves to become better persons.

The Buddha's attainment of enlightenment reminds us of the results of right effort and proper wisdom. The Buddha was not content to rest with this attainment, but he rather shared with others his achievements and brought great happiness to the world. This attainment of Prince Siddhartha, a human being, transformed him into the great Buddha. His enlightenment entailed realizing the Truth (Dharma).

The occurrence of the Buddha allows the Dharma to arise in the world. The Buddha's compassion and wisdom spread to all corners of the world like a beacon of light. He taught the holy life which brought peace and happiness to all.

Moreover, his attainment of enlightenment shows us that the attainment of excellent deeds is not easy. The Buddha himself made extreme efforts; he practiced concentration and meditated without complaint and patiently conducted



research and experimented for six years, a task that almost claimed his life. After his enlightenment, in order to deliver the light of Dharma to others, he also made great physical exertions, travelling to places despite trials and dangers. An individual who really desires to carry out righteousness must act with devotion, effort, and persistence for the public welfare.

His Nirvana (Passing Away) brings us to recall his great life as a human who passed away naturally. The truths he discovered and revealed to the whole world, however, are still true and eternal, never changing, never perishing, and lighting the way of wisdom for all humankind to reach true happiness. In addition, the Buddha also established the order of monks to carry on the guiding light of Dharma on his behalf. He could only be content to finish his ministry when he felt secure enough that his everlasting Dharma, which brings everlasting peace, would live on. With this mission accomplished, he could enter Nirvana. To reach the eternal truth and achieve the never-ending state of well-being, it is our responsibility to perform our individual and social duties.

However, in order to further comprehend the underlying meaning of these three occurrences of the Buddha's life, the accomplishment of enlightenment is acknowledged as the essential factor. Every single human being is born and dies. But the person's life between birth and death is what matters.

The main factor that transformed Prince Siddhartha into the Buddha and gains our high esteem is his enlightenment, along with his determination to reach this goal and his unstinting assistance to others after this attainment. However, the birth and the passing away are also essential because the Buddha's realization of enlightenment was based on his being born as a human being.

The Buddha's enlightenment and his devoted service to the world are of primary significance in engendering awe and respect for Buddhists. These qualities are also recollected by Buddhists as seen in the many descriptions extolling his virtues.



Vesak Day Meaning in Terms of Great Events in Human History:

The aforementioned meanings of Vesak Day, although they are profound and significant, are yet limited to the Lord Buddha's life. In truth, the Vesak Day entails a broader meaning which represents Buddhism's principles and corresponds to the fact that the birth of the Buddha is the establishment of Buddhism. The origin of the Buddha and of Buddhism is recognized as a momentous and distinctive phenomenon that brings a new era to human history. The Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and passing away principally mean the following:

1. The birth of the Buddha is the declaration of independence for the human race.

The birth of Prince Siddhartha is also considered as the birth of the Buddha.

The symbol of Prince Siddhartha's birth is his announcement, which is called the Asabhi Vaca ('declaration of courage'), stating: "Aggo hamasmi lokassa, jettho hamasmi lokassa, settho hamasmi lokassa," which translates as: "I am the greatest in the world, I am supreme in the world, I am distinguished in the world."

His speech was made to the world of human beings, which was mainly influenced by the reverence of gods and divinities. The word "jettha" (supreme), for example, was used for Brahma, the great god. At that time, people believed that their lives and their society were determined as good or bad because of the power of divine beings. Humans had to simply obey the gods' commands in order to keep their lives, families, and society happy, and they had to pray and offer sacrifice for the gods' kindness.

As soon as the Buddha was enlightened, he announced the teaching that revolutionized beliefs

and practices of humankind: that humans are superior animals who have the potential of learning, training, and improving themselves to become better persons. When a man disciplines himself and progresses in righteousness, and is equipped with perfect wisdom, then that man becomes an excellent one, who is called a “Buddha,” to whom all gods and even Brahma the great Lord pays respects. Hence, only the human who can complete the highest task of becoming a Buddha should be praised as the “Agga” (the greatest), the “Jettha” (the supreme), and the “Settha” (the excellence), not the gods or even Brahma himself.

According to this principle, Buddhism has made people aware of their capability, and encouraged people to continually improve their life, livelihood, behavior, moral standards, and wisdom. They should realize that a peaceful, contented, and independent life can only be reached with the help of self-discipline and great self-development, not by the hands of gods. A person should not waste time praying and pleasing the gods, but rather should improve himself to

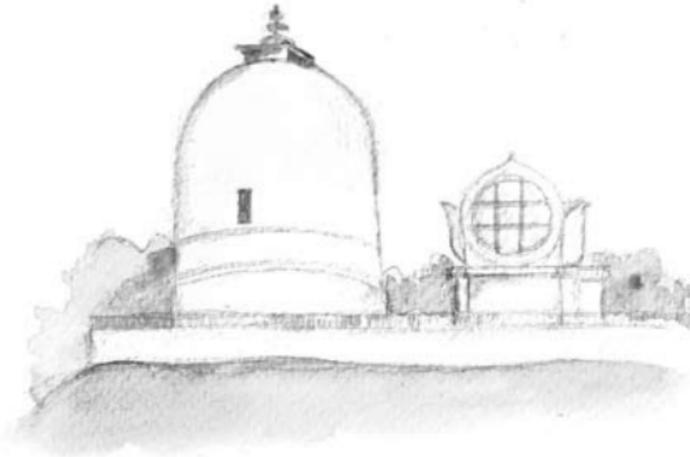
become a noble person with the help of his own intelligence.

The Buddha's birth or the beginning of Buddhism is a great reformation in human history, with the announcement that the primary power defining a person's fate is self-development and action based on wisdom, which understands the truth of nature; the primary power is not the power of the gods.

2. The enlightenment of the Buddha is the disclosure of the great Dharma.

The freedom of the human race that the Buddha declared right after his birth is only achievable because of enlightenment. When human beings truly understand nature and act in righteous ways according to Dharma – developing their wisdom and awakening to the truth – then they can become a 'Buddha,' a supreme being.

The attainment of enlightenment is the convergence of human wisdom and the truth of nature (Dharma). After the Buddha's enlightenment, he uttered the verses beginning with, 'Yada have patubhavanti dhamma...', which can be translated as follows: 'Whenever the Dharma



appears to an excellent person, who makes effort and pays close attention, then all doubts vanish. By realizing the truth and all causes for the truth ... by understanding the cessation of all conditions ... Mara and his retinue is vanquished, like the sun shining brightly in the sky.”

The Dharma is the ultimate truth of nature, surpassing the gods and the divine powers. Even the gods are subject to the power of nature: they are subject to the natural law of causality. When humans have comprehended this truth, they should endeavor to improve themselves, to practice correctly in accord with Dharma. Humans are capable of developing wisdom and realizing the highest truth.

When the Dharma is attained, people are free to live in harmony with nature, whose laws are certain. People do not need to wait for the dictates of the gods or of Brahma, whose wishes are unknown and whose emotions are variable.

3. The final Nirvana (passing away) of the Buddha is an encouragement for a heedful life.

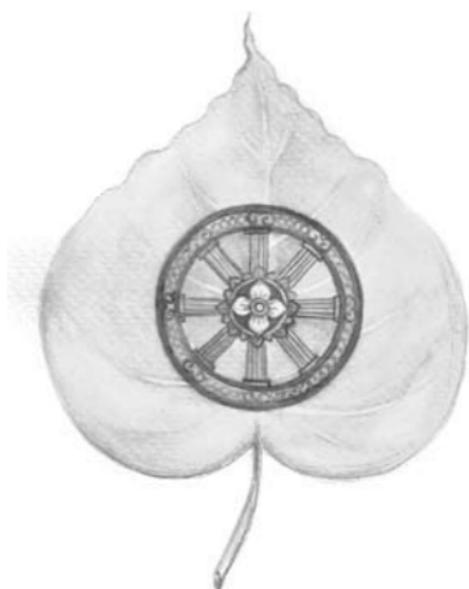
One aspect of Dharma or the truth of nature is that everything is uncertain, mortal, and dependent upon causes and conditions. This truth, especially that all life must come to an end, pertains to everyone.

While the truth advises us to improve ourselves, to acquire qualities, capacities, and knowledge for understanding the laws of nature and acting accordingly, our lives will only become delightful, peaceful, and free when the truth is fathomed and human conduct conforms to this truth. Simultaneously, the truth dictates that all life and all that surrounds us is uncertain and mortal, dependent upon causes and conditions. As a consequence, we cannot afford to be careless, or we may lose a chance to realize the true benefit that can be derived from the truth.

Accordingly, in order to make use of the Dharma that the Lord Buddha proclaimed to our world for the benefit of our lives and societies, for peace and freedom, we must to be careful and live in a way that is not careless.

Therefore, the Buddha uttered his final words (“Pacchima Vaca”), which symbolize the meaning of his Nirvana: “Vayadhamma sankhara appamadena sampadetha”, which can be translated as: “Monks, all conditioned things are of a nature to decay; strive to bring heedfulness to perfection.”





Veneration of Vesak Day

As long as the Vesak Day reminds us of the true meaning of the Lord's birth, enlightenment, and passing away, as well as encourages us to carry out his teachings carefully to bring about true happiness, then our veneration will be worthy and helpful to our lives and to society. This is the true value of Vesak Day which will help bring humankind to a new era of improvement proclaimed by the Buddha a long time ago. However, the following points should be considered as well.

On birthdays and memorial days of ancestors, respected teachers, relatives and friends, people perform activities to pay respect and gratitude towards that person. Likewise, on the day of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and passing away, all Buddhists perform a ceremony in order to pay respect and gratitude towards the great leader.

On the memorial day for an important person of a family, of a group of people, or of a country, there will be a celebration to commemorate that person. Similarly on Vesak Day, in commemoration of the Lord Buddha, the great benefactor for the human race, there will also be a great celebration.

Buddhists who wish to express their appreciation towards the great Lord, at least will be tranquil or recollect his words and teachings. This a way to venerate the Buddha. If they are able to concentrate and fathom the meaning of the teachings, this is an even greater form of veneration. If they understand the meaning and carry it out accordingly, then they will perform the "worship of practice", the greatest veneration that

Buddhists can perform on the Vesak Day.

Actually, worship of the Buddha is not to do good deeds for the Buddha himself, and he does not desire any advantage from us. Rather, the benefits from worshipping the Buddha arise for the worshipers, both in their individual lives and in society.

When we venerate the Buddha, our minds incline to goodness. We develop spiritual qualities, contentment, and happiness. When we venerate the Buddha, we bring the Buddha's virtues into our hearts, ensuring that we move forward in the way of righteousness and conduct ourselves in accord with the Lord's own conduct.

When we venerate the Buddha, we reflect on the Buddha's teachings, which we must make effort to practice, advancing in the practice until we reach perfection.

When we venerate the Buddha, it is a symbolic act for our worshipping superior moral persons and worshipping the Dharma—the truth. If a society worships in this way, it will uphold the truth; in return, the truth will protect society and bring peace and happiness.

If we are unable to recall the Buddha's words or any of his teachings, or we cannot perform any other activities, then we can just be serene and read or listen to the praises of the Lord Buddha's virtues. If while reading or listening, we experience faith, delight, or joy, this too is considered a form of celebration and worship on Vesak Day.







An Inquiry into Vesak Day and the Birth of Human Civilization



The Origin of Vesak Day among Buddhists

Question: Respectfully yours, according to the fact that the United Nations has agreed to mark Vesak Day as an internationally recognized day, this shows that Vesak Day is not only a sacred day for Buddhists but rather an important day for the whole world as well. In this regards, can you please elaborate on the subject of Vesak Day.

Let's begin with the question, "What is Vesak Day?"

Answer: Simply speaking, Vesak (Visakha Puja) is "Buddha Day", because it is the day that we hold a ceremony to pay respects to and to recollect the great qualities of the Lord Buddha. This ceremony is conducted to show that we are mindful of the Buddha's grace and favor he brought to the world.

It is called Buddha Day because it is the day of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and passing away. Also, it is considered to be the date of the origin of Buddhism since the Buddha himself is the founder of this religion.

Therefore, it can be concluded that Vesak Day is the day when we all pay respects to the Lord Buddha and are aware of his kindness that he performed for our world, especially his establishment of Buddhism, which has paved the path of splendor and happiness for humankind.

Because the Lord's birth, enlightenment, and passing away took place on the full moon of the Vesak month, the ceremony is normally held in the month of Vesak or the sixth month and



called Vesak (Visakha Puja).

Question: What is the story of Vesak Day?

Answer: The story of Vesak Day is not obvious on all accounts. Concerning some of the historical events and human activities there is clear evidence. But for other events and activities the evidence is not clear, even though proof exists that these events occurred.

The celebration of Vesak Day began because Buddhists wished to express their gratitude towards the Buddha's grace, by collectively conducting meritorious acts and acts of worship. It is uncertain when the first ceremony was conducted since there is a lack of clear evidence.

In the case of Thailand, it most likely began in the Sukhothai era and continued into the Ayutthaya era. However, the extent of observance during the Ayutthaya period is unclear since there was instability in the Kingdom; some people state that there was a break in observing this ceremony. The Vesak Day was reinstated during the reign of King Rama II of the Rattanakosin Dynasty, when Vesak Day was a great ritual day. The Supreme Patriarch Somdet Phra Ariyawongsanyana (Mee) was the head of the Thai monks' council at that time.

At that time, the government announced to celebrate Vesak Day for three days. It was a ritual and a meritorious ceremony, not a carnival or party; people joined to make merit, and to refrain from activities of vice, for example drinking alcohol and gambling.

Although it is uncertain when the Vesak Day was first observed in Thailand, it is clear that there has been a ceremony marking the Vesak Day since King Rama the Second up to the present day.

At the present time, the ceremony is held

for only one day, or just a portion of a day. There are efforts to promote the Vesak Day, for example the Buddhist week that takes place at Sanam Luang (“Central Park”), which is now in its seventeenth year. Since the establishment of Buddha Monthon in Nakhon Pathom province there has been a ceremony there. Moreover, the ceremony is observed for the public at temples around the country.

Question: How do other countries celebrate the Vesak Day?

Answer: In other countries, the birth of the Buddha is believed to be very important. In the case of Japan, the birth of the Buddha is assigned to accord with the solar calendar and held annually on April 8th.

In Sri Lanka, there is to this day a grand and earnest celebration. There are two public holidays assigned and people wear white, go to temples, observe the rites, set up almshouses, and perform shows with Dharma themes for one month. This shows how significant Vesak Day is in Sri Lanka. When people see the importance of Vesak Day, they recognize the importance of the Buddha.

When they recognize the importance of the Buddha, then they recognize the importance of Buddhism.

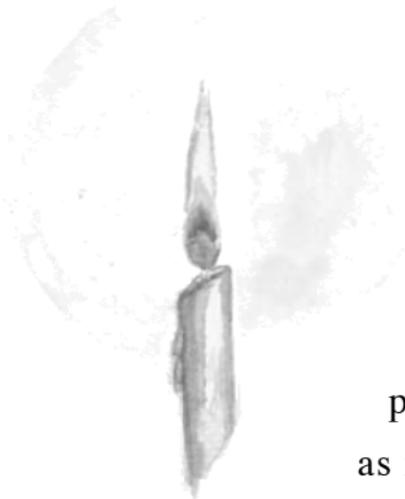


Observing the Vesak Day with Wise Awareness

Question: How is the Vesak Day important to Buddhists?

Answer: Vesak Day is important for all Buddhists because of the Buddha, the founder who established Buddhism. Thus, we call him the Supreme Teacher. When Buddhism is important to people, then the Buddha is important.

At a deeper level, the Vesak Day is important as a reminder to us to follow and practice the Buddhist teachings. At least, it reminds us of the true meaning of Buddhism and offers an opportunity for performing good deeds such as reviewing the teachings,



checking our understanding, and studying Buddhism. If we take this opportunity to remind ourselves and encourage the study of Buddhism, by building up a good understanding and applying ourselves to Dharma practice, blessings will spring up for ourselves, for others, and for society.

Each year Buddhists can agree on key topics to bear in mind, for example an emphasis on social conditions. Thai social situations can be examined in terms of strong and weak points, and social problems can be looked at, for example actions that lead to ruin (*apaya-mukha*), drug abuse, gambling, an obsession with supernatural powers, pleading for miracles, political turmoil from disharmony, etc. Pollution of the environment, indiscipline, and rampant corruption can also be examined. All Thai Buddhists must take responsibility for these conditions.

The responsibility for these social conditions rests especially on Buddhists, because these matters of degenerate behavior, for example activities of vice and government corruption run counter to Buddhist principles. Thai people must correct these problems in accord with Buddhist

principles if we want to say that Thai people are truly Buddhists.

As long as society is still corrupted and not in accord with Buddhist principles, it indicates that we need to reconsider, find out the root causes for the problems, and come up with proper solutions.

Vesak Day is an opportunity for us to get together, be united, and come up with a direction to address these problems. We must be prepared to discuss the problems, identify key points, and set up goals to develop religious affairs and improve social conditions. After the goals are established, appropriate measures are set down to effectively solve the problems.

Question: How is Vesak Day significant for people of the world?

Answer: Buddhism is important for the world as it is a vital source for human civilization, which can be discussed from the perspective of regional influence or from the perspective of the whole of human history.

Human civilization is the result of human activity from every part of the world. When



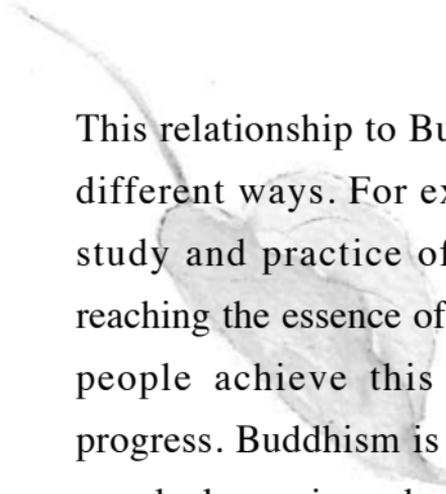
Buddhism was established, it added to the advancement of human civilization, as can be seen in the historical development in many countries and regions, and from its influence on the entire world. If we look closely, we see the important role that Buddhist individuals and institutions have played in the world.

When people worship and follow the Buddhist teachings, their behavior, state of mind, and perceptions change. When beliefs, practices, and ways of thinking are spread and become established, a new way of life, social customs, and culture is established accordingly, which we can call a new civilization.

In the case of Thailand, the roots of Thai culture come from Buddhism. Social development and advancements stem from the application of Buddhist principles. Regardless of the extent or the correctness of this application, it is indisputable that Thai culture was influenced by Buddhism.

A broad cultural analysis can be generalized into several subjects. Art (painting, sculpture and architecture), language & literature, jurisprudence, politics and governance have all been influenced by Buddhism. Moreover, ways of life and people's way of being (such as the practice of generosity) have been shaped by the Lord Buddha's teaching. Although the extent of applying Buddhist principles to life may vary between people, the benefit derived from application comes directly from Buddhism.

Although Thai people worship the Buddhist teachings, they have a unique historical background. When Buddhism was adopted by the Thai people, they may have chosen those aspects that suited their needs according to different situations.



This relationship to Buddhism can be viewed in different ways. For example, one may see the study and practice of Buddhism as a way of reaching the essence of the Buddhist teachings: if people achieve this goal then society will progress. Buddhism is a subject that needs to be regularly reviewed; we should measure our accomplishments and see how they correspond to our practice of the Buddhist teachings. And we should try to improve our understanding of Buddhism.

We cannot simply conclude that since Buddhism has been established in Thai society, we have fully become Buddhists. Some people might believe that the principles of Buddhism are certain and unchangeable, but misunderstandings of the principles can happen over time. As a result, checking the contemporary understanding of Buddhism and correcting it by comparing it with verifiable textual evidence is necessary.

Buddhism is a religion of wisdom and therefore Buddhists need to review their understanding of the teachings. In other words, Buddhists must engage in study because only

people who study the doctrine will be able to understand and apply it well.

In religions based on faith, beliefs and modes of conduct are set down and strictly defined. People do not need to doubt or question; they only need to believe and follow what has been taught. They do not need to know the reasons behind these teachings or to analyze them.

In Buddhism, in order to act properly, Buddhists must understand the teachings thoroughly. The level of success in applying the teachings is determined by our wisdom and by our ability to practice correctly – to recognize what is suitable for each individual and each situation, so that we can achieve the goal of Buddhism.

This matter carries some risk – a risk of ambiguity and error, which has certainly occurred before. At the same time, if we believe that human beings can improve themselves then we should let people prove that they can accomplish this especially by applying their wisdom. This is a unique characteristic of Buddhism, which gives people a liberty to think freely and develop wisdom.



*With the Origin of Buddhism,
the Countenance of
Civilization has Changed*

Question: How have the principles of Buddhism aided the world?

Answer: Buddhism is one of the most important sources in shaping civilization. For example, even by looking at limited periods of history, we can see the importance Buddhism had in shaping the course of events in the Indian subcontinent.

The people of India used to believe that Brahma is the greatest God, who created everything, and they offered sacrifices to supplicate the gods. They separated people into four different castes based on their birth: kshatriyas (warriors, kings, administrators), brahmans (scholars, priests, teachers), vaishyas (merchants), and sudras (labourers). They believed that the brahmans could communicate with the gods and knew the wishes of Brahma. It was the brahmans' duty to protect the teachings and they had exclusive access to education; members of the lower caste were prohibited from studying this knowledge.

When Buddhism was established, important changes took place in India. For example, Buddhism rejected the caste system, claiming that it is not family or birth that defines a person as good or bad, rather the value of a person is dependent on his actions. In addition, Buddhism discouraged people from supplicating the gods and offering sacrifices. Instead, people should look for results from their own actions.

If one believes that actions define the

quality of people, then people need to improve themselves: improve their behavior, their minds, and their wisdom, in order to become noble or excellent. Education is needed for this personal development, and for this reason Buddhism created a style of teaching known as “mass education”.

We can claim that the education system in India was transformed into education for the masses because of Buddhism. This is evidence that Buddhism was important to the development of world civilization, since India flourished and became a center of world civilization.

Concerning this mass education, the Encyclopedia Britannica states that during the reign of King Asoka (304-232 B.C.) the degree of literacy was greater than it is today. This is because afterwards Buddhism was more or less eliminated from India, in about 1700 B.E. (1157 A.D.). India then again became a nation in which education is reserved only for suitable castes.

King Asoka established the Buddhist principle of living peacefully together in society, even though people believed in different religions.

Although he governed as an absolute monarch, he allowed his citizens to worship their religion of choice. When he became a Buddhist, he practiced tolerance and loving-kindness, supporting different religions and promoting a state of harmonious co-existence, without quarrels and violence.

Westerners have tried hard to establish religious freedom because the West has experienced many religious wars and much religious persecution due to differences in religious beliefs. Westerners have fought with difficulty to bring about peace and tolerance, unlike in India where this occurred easily. King Asoka declared that his people should live with others in peace and harmony despite the fact that people believed in different religions.

This is another example of the development of civilization that has been studied by Western historians.

In the West, when the Greek Empire was destroyed the Roman Empire arose. When the Roman Empire was destroyed, the Barbarians rose to power and developed into the powers that exist

in the West today.

In India too, the ancient civilizations fell and were replaced by new rulers. The Nanda dynasty passed away and was followed by the Maurya dynasty. The Sakas defeated the Greco-Bactrian Empire, and then the Kushans were able to defeat the Saka dynasty. This was followed by the Gupta dynasty, which was later overrun by the Huns. After a time the Muslim Turks invaded, leading to the Mogul Empire. Eventually the Western powers exerted their power and England was able to colonize India for a long time.

The English were the first to study Indian history, and when they discovered the history of King Asoka they admired him. There are many books written about King Asoka, and even Thai people have learned about Asoka through the books written by Westerners. Westerners admire King Asoka because they realize the important role that Buddhism has had in the development of world civilization and the influence that King Asoka had after he converted to Buddhism.

King Asoka made these important contributions:

First, he made India a peaceful land where

members of any religion could live happily together.

Second, he was the one to encourage mass education by applying Buddhist principles and by establishing the temples (monasteries) as centers for learning.

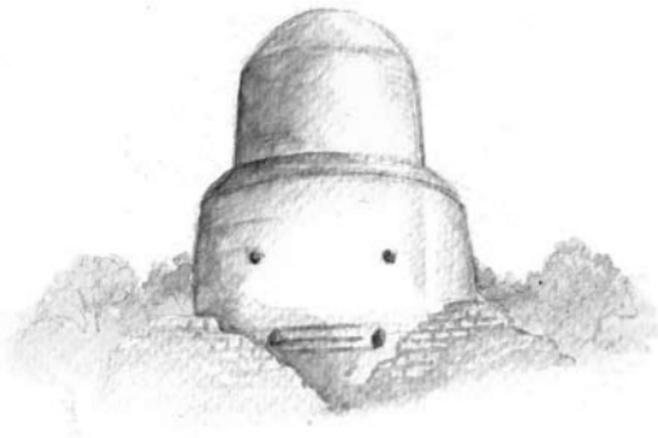


From Mass to International Education

Asoka the king built 84,000 monasteries, which were called “vihara”. Even in Thailand the term “vihara” is used to designate a monastery.

The monasteries built by King Asoka along with older monasteries that served as centers of education later expanded until some of these monasteries were combined into ‘great monasteries’ (maha-vihara). For example the University of Nalanda was established from six neighboring monasteries. These monasteries were combined into a single large monastery to encourage education.

Many different subjects were taught at the University of Nalanda. It was an international



center of education, attracting students from many different lands, including present-day Indonesia, Malaysia and China. The Venerable Xuanzang (602-664 A.D.) from China studied here, at which time there were 10,000 students.

The many universities in ancient India, including Nalanda, had important roles in promoting India's education and many branches of knowledge were developed such as mathematics, astrology and technology.

On the western side of India, Muslims who were regularly trading with India brought knowledge from India back to their countries. This was how people in the West learnt from these

ancient Buddhist universities in India such as Nalanda, Vikramshila, Odantapuri, Jagaddala, and Varendri.

It is widely known that much knowledge from India was passed on to the West from the Muslims. An example of this is the set of numerals most commonly used today (1, 2, 3...), which are often called Arabic numbers because Westerners believed they originated from the Arabic people. Later it was discovered that in fact they are Indian numbers, which were passed on by the Arabian people.

In some textbooks these numbers are now referred to as Hindu-Arabic numerals to indicate that the Arabs passed these numbers on to the West, but they originated in India, which shows the cultural connection.

The Muslims entered India in the 7th century, a time when the Buddhist universities in India were in a golden age starting from the 4th century.

It is written in the Encyclopedia Britannica (year 2000 edition) on India, the section on Society and Culture topic that: “Mathematics in

India was far more advanced than in any other country in the world.”

From the end of the 5th century to the 7th century A.D. there were many famous Indian mathematicians, especially Aryabhata I and his disciple Bhaskara I. These early Indian mathematicians were the first to use the symbol 0 and the decimal system; they also developed algebra. Aryabhata also correctly calculated “pi” as equivalent to 3.1416.

The decimal system arrived from India to Mesopotamia around 670th A.D. and then was adopted in Europe. The decimal system provided a big leap of development to the field of mathematics. There are those who admire this Indian invention of the decimal system as superior to any discovery by the Greeks.

Mathematics in Europe began to advance in the 13th century which was the time that the Indian universities began to disappear.

In regards to astrology, Aryabhata calculated that there are 365.3586 days in one solar year. Moreover, he stated in the 5th century A.D. that the earth is round, rotating around its

axis, and orbiting around the sun. He also developed the theory of lunar and solar eclipses.

A thousand years later, when Europe emerged from the Dark Ages and stepped into the Renaissance period, Copernicus (1473-1543), who graduated from the University of Bologna, declared in a book entitled “De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium” a theory that had an extreme impact on old beliefs. (The book was published the same year he died.) He stated in the book that the Earth is not the center of the solar system, but instead the sun is, and that the earth orbits around the sun. Later, Galileo (1564-1642) proclaimed this concept, and as a result, he was questioned by the Inquisition and forced by the Christians to abandon this idea. As a punishment he was locked in his house until he died.



In the field of medicine, it has been discovered that Indian doctors of this early period performed plastic surgery. (There are also accounts that the Buddha's physician Jivaka-Komarabhacca performed brain surgery.)

In the field of metallurgy there were many advancements. For instance, it was possible to create a rust-free metal, as proven by the seven meter tall metal pillar in Qutb Minar, which was built in 400 A.D. and has never rusted.

When the Turkish Muslims invaded and destroyed many important Buddhist sites (including all Buddhist universities) in 1200 A.D., it was recorded that some monastery libraries burned for three months.

Although ancient Indian civilization lost its power and many places and buildings are gone, it obviously had an important effect, both directly and indirectly, on the next generation of human civilization.

By looking into the past, we can see that Buddhism was very influential, but when speaking of India, it might be hard to separate society from religion. The term "Indian Civilization" is used

which combines both Buddhism and Hinduism. When speaking of India most people tend to think of Hinduism alone.

Some sciences or branches of knowledge may have existed before the start of Buddhism. Because Buddhism promotes study and education, these branches of knowledge were further developed. When examining this matter, we should look at how world civilization was shaped, at how India was a cradle of world civilization, and at the influence Buddhism had on shaping civilization in India.

Civilized people should study the origins of civilization in order to understand the causal nature of things. The results of human civilization and human creativity are not random and come about for a reason.

Therefore wise people who seek prosperity are not opportunists: they do not only focus on the current results of productivity or get overly excited by what products can be consumed. Such opportunism is not conducive to further development. If people reflect, however, on the origin of civilization and prosperity, then further

development is possible.

Foolish people get lost in excitement about present prosperity, while wise people consider carefully the reasons that lay behind prosperity.

King Asoka is an obvious example of someone who has been greatly influential. There were, however, many other people and institutions which took part in making Buddhism an important source of culture, influencing the course of events in Thailand, South-East Asia, and the entire world.







A Government Promoting Freedom of Religion Must Be Accompanied by Education Promoting Individual Wisdom

There are numerous examples of how King Asoka applied Buddhist knowledge to develop civilization. The freedom to worship the religion of one's choice is one such contribution to social evolution. Likewise, the origin of mass education, the founding of universities, and the governance of the state to bring peace and happiness to the populace, are developments based on Buddhist principles.

Early in his life, King Asoka was obsessed with power and sent his army to invade surrounding lands in order to be called the "greatest emperor of India." The kings of ancient times generally wanted to be the greatest monarchs in history or to rule the entire world. When they achieved success they would indulge in personal pleasures.

When Asoka converted to Buddhism, he realized this state of affairs and was saddened. As

a result, he changed his policy from “victory through war” (sangama-vijaya) to “victory by truth” (Dhamma-vijaya), that is, to overcome difficulties and problems by using the principles of Dharma. Instead of further empowering himself, Asoka used his power and property for the happiness of his people.

The reign of King Asoka is famous because of the improvement in education and the stone inscriptions he placed in many areas to declare state policies and to teach the citizens the Dharma. Moreover, he built roads, hospitals for humans and animals, and reservoirs. He helped the people to plant various kinds of grain. He planted orchards and forests, built rest areas for travelers, and supported Buddhism by organizing a Council (Recitation) and by sending monks to foreign countries in order to propagate Buddhism.

The sending of monks in nine directions to teach Buddhism outside of India also played a role in developing civilization. Some monks were sent to Suvarnabhumi, which includes Thailand and other South-East Asian countries. Others were sent to Sri Lanka, while the rest went to other

place in Asia, to Greece, and to Egypt. Many traces of this activity have been buried in the annals of history, until only recently have ancient objects been discovered that prove Buddhism reached these areas.

The more people search for evidence, the more information is revealed. In any case, it is certain that Buddhism played an essential role in the development of human culture.

Question: Was the reason why King Asoka established the policy of peaceful co-existence among religions because he was a Buddhist and applied Buddhist concepts?

Answer: Definitely. Buddhism does not discriminate according to religion, but sees all human beings as equal. Monks are sent to teach the Dharma for the sake of people's happiness. There is no similar concept in Buddhism to the Western concept of "converting" people. Instead there is the teaching: "You should pilgrimage for the welfare of the many folk, for the happiness of all humankind." This means that the monks should travel in order to do something meaningful to others and to teach them the Dharma. When

people understand the Dharma and cultivate their minds, their thoughts will change. They will understand what is right and wrong by themselves, without a need for force or persecution.

Buddhism teaches that human beings need to be trained, need to study, in order to grow in virtue and sharpen wisdom. It is not possible to insert goodness into someone else. A person must voluntarily learn by himself to seek self-improvement. What companions or spiritual friends can do is to give good advice and offer a supportive environment for self-improvement. This is the reason that we all need to live together with kindness.

Freedom of religion or freedom of thought is united with the principle of loving-kindness, which promotes open-mindedness and mutual concern. The expansion of Buddhism has followed these principles of freedom of thought and loving-kindness, in order that people gain an understanding so that they can improve themselves.

King Asoka did not exploit anybody because he believed that human beings are all equal, despite the fact that people uphold different religions. And not only killing people was considered by him to be a sin; he recognized that even killing or oppressing animals is inappropriate.



Equal Opportunity for Education is the Perfect Match with Governance for the Welfare of the People.

Question: Was the University of Nalanda an example of mass education?

Answer: Nalanda existed at the time when monasteries had greatly expanded and it became a center of higher education. As a matter of fact, mass education took place in all the monasteries because they were places where everyone, irrespective of caste, gender or age, went to study.

The monasteries were built after the Buddha had begun to teach. There were many people who were interested and had faith in Buddhism. The more opportunity they had to study with the

Buddha, the more knowledge they would acquire. They asked to live near the Buddha and thus the monasteries were established.

When people listened to the Buddha and had faith in him, they asked to live with him in order to study the teachings. They came to learn from the Buddha the way of spiritual development. In this way monasteries and communities arose, which provided an opportunity for people to be ordained as monks and to study and practice. In addition, the monk disciples of the Buddha taught people in the area surrounding the monasteries. Eventually, the monasteries became centers of education.

Later on, some monasteries united and attracted a large number of students. One such example is Nalanda University, which originated from a combination of six smaller monasteries and became one great monastery.

These “great monasteries” (maha-vihara) grew and developed into universities. Buddhists still use the term “Nalanda the Great Monastery” (Nalanda Maha Vihara), but Westerners usually use the term “Nalanda University.” The university

was destroyed in 1157 A.D.

More details about the great monasteries and universities can easily be found in the “History of Education” section in the chapter of “Ancient India: Classical India,” in the Encyclopedia Britannica (year 2000 edition).

Question: Was the University of Nalanda the first university of the world?

Answer: Probably yes. However, Westerners cite the examples of the University of Bologna, founded in the 11th century, and the University of Paris, founded in the 12th century. They cite these two universities as the first two universities. The University of Nalanda, however, was established in the 4th century, so it is obvious that Nalanda was the first university. To be more specific one can say that the Universities of Bologna and Paris were the first two universities in Europe and northern Europe, respectively.

Question: Can we conclude that mass education began when the Buddha began to teach?

Answer: Yes we can conclude so. Long ago Brahmanism reserved education for only people in the high castes, especially the brahmans. The low

castes were neither allowed to study nor to listen to the sacred texts. The Laws of Manu or “Manava Dharma Shastra,” which Thais have used as a standard for jurisprudence, is a Hindu text which contains rules pertaining to different castes. It is clear from this text that education was reserved for privileged people.

There is a rule in this text stating that a member of the laborers caste (sudras) is not allowed to listen to a recitation of the sacred texts (Vedas). If he disobeys he must be punished by filling his ears with molten lead. If a Sudra happens to recite the Vedas, his tongue must be cut off. And if he studies the Vedas his body must be split in two. In other words, education was limited to the privileged few.



The caste system prevented the lower classes in India from getting a chance to study. When Buddhism was driven out and disappeared from India the caste system resumed its place again. The brahmins had to strictly apply the caste system in order to prevent Buddhism from coming back. As a result, the caste system was more strictly enforced than before. As a consequence, the education system in India declined and the lower castes were once again prevented from formal learning.

Even today, people who have lived in India say the labor class is forced to live like animals. This gives a good indication of Buddhism's essential role in improving civilization and shows the difference between a society in which Buddhism is present and one in which it is absent.

Question: After King Asoka became a Buddhist, did he change his way of governing from a search for personal power, fame, and wealth to a use of his power to assist the people?

Answer: We have to understand that in the reign of King Asoka, the ruling system was an absolute monarchy. However, he had ways of

thinking and governing that were different from the traditional ways. His goal was to make his people live happily.

When he set this goal for the welfare of his citizens, he had to act to achieve this goal, even though the style of government remained the same. His goal of helping the people limited his actions and his methods for achieving this goal. He used the existing system, which enabled him to use his power to complete his goal and make his civilians live happily.





What Should We Get from Vesak Day?

Question: There is another important day, the “Atthami Puja”, that is linked to the Vesak Day. Would you please explain?

Answer: Atthami Puja Day is connected to the Vesak Day. On the Vesak Day we honor the Buddha’s extraordinary qualities and the fact that his birth, enlightenment, and passing away occurred on the same day. Therefore the Vesak Day is a celebration of the Buddha’s entire life.

There is a story in the Tripitaka that after the Buddha had passed away, there was a cremation ceremony that happened seven days after his death. So people celebrate this day (the eighth day after the full moon of May) as a reminiscence of the Buddha’s cremation.

In Thailand, Thai people in the past also gave importance to this day, to recollect the significant event of the Buddha’s funeral. However, the importance of the Atthami Puja Day has lessened. Nowadays, it is hard for the present generation to observe even the important religious

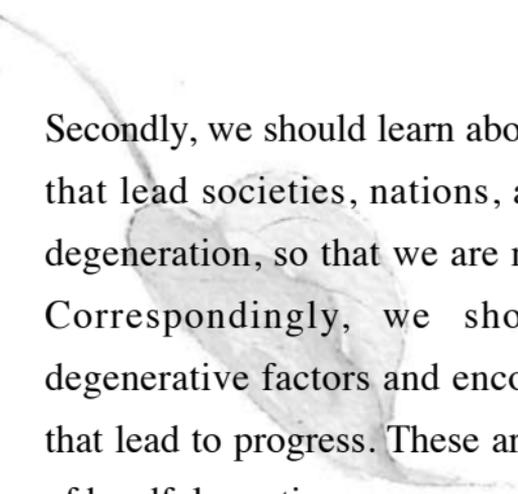
days. So they tend to choose the most significant days. The Atthami Puja is less important and has therefore become obscure.

When Buddhism became more popular, people felt that observing the Vesak Day was not enough and therefore added the Atthami Puja Day; it became an extension of Vesak Day. Later, only the Vesak, Magha Puja, and Asalha Puja ceremonies were observed.

Question: Before the Buddha attained the final passing away (parinibbana), did he give any special teachings to humankind?

Answer: The Buddha's last words before he died stated that all conditioned things, including human life, society, and civilization, are of the nature to decay and fade away. When there is change, there will inevitably be disintegration. The responsibility for human beings is to not be negligent. These were his last words.

When we are careful, we are able to benefit from the principle of impermanence or change. When things are breaking down or changing, firstly, we should not be complacent; rather we should be enthusiastic to improve ourselves.



Secondly, we should learn about the causal factors that lead societies, nations, and civilizations to degeneration, so that we are more careful in life. Correspondingly, we should avoid those degenerative factors and encourage those factors that lead to progress. These are the two principles of heedful practice.

When the Buddha taught about the impermanence or instability of things, he combined this teaching with the teaching on heedfulness. In this way, human beings receive the greatest advantage from the universal truths of instability and deterioration. Connected to the principles of impermanence and heedfulness, however, is the Buddhist teaching that all things change according to causes and conditions. For human beings to live well and happily, they must be careful. People can practice heedfulness in the following ways: first, they should study about the law of causality; and second, they should apply this knowledge so that they can avoid the factors that lead to deterioration and support the factors that lead to prosperity.

In Thai society nowadays, people should

have a look at themselves and examine if their lives and Thai society are in a state of carelessness, or to see if there is a degree of decadence. We should examine to see if we are contributing to the factors of degeneration.

In respect to progress, we have to question ourselves whether we are truly progressing, and whether we are doing anything constructive to allow prosperity to bloom. Or are we simply adopting an image of prosperity from elsewhere without generating this prosperity ourselves. In other words, are we simply taking advantage of prosperity from other countries?

If we are not doing anything to promote progress, then it will be difficult for Thai society to thrive. What we receive from others is merely something we borrow as a tool to fool ourselves, so this form of progress is certainly not sustainable. This is an important thing for us to consider.

According to the teachings, Buddhist society must be based on wisdom. When faith in the teachings exists, it must be combined with and protected by wisdom in the following ways: first,

is our faith in Buddhism a correct or true form of faith? Second, proper faith must be combined with wisdom. Do we have such wisdom? Last, are we developing these qualities of faith and wisdom or not?

We must ask ourselves whether we properly analyze all situations and whether we truly apply wisdom. Are we creating a way of life based on wisdom, so that we foster a culture of wisdom, for example, do we have a fondness for study and a love of learning, which leads to a betterment of ourselves? Such wisdom promotes an understanding of life and the world. We gain insight into whether the prosperity we see in the modern world is true prosperity. How far has human society progressed? Is this progress tied up with degeneration? What aspects of prosperity should we adopt, what aspects should we improve, and what direction should we take in regards to social and personal development?

Buddhists must apply wisdom to examine and improve situations. They should not get overly excited by superficial things that pander to desires. There are many Buddhist principles that

are accessible; however, their effectiveness depends on our ability to consider and apply wisdom.

The anniversary of Vesak is a reminder and a special occasion for us, so that we can recollect the teaching of the Buddha, study it, and apply it for our own benefit. If Buddhists do this, then our civilization will move forward and progress. Otherwise, we simply reap the benefits from the past and do not know how to create anything new; and even though we receive these benefits, we may not be able to choose what is good, because we lack critical faculties. To make matters worse, a person sometimes gathers detrimental things onto himself.

Thus, when Vesak Day arrives, we all at least should benefit from what the Buddha taught in regards to heedfulness, by wisely discerning the law of cause and effect. Also, we should make effort to improve situations and take a creative role. This way, we will truly achieve prosperity.

In order for the Vesak Day to gain global importance, recognizing this importance must begin with each individual and each community. If



we are able to give meaning and importance to Buddhism in Thailand, then the rest of the world will also realize this importance. However, to reach this global importance, Thai people must first know how to apply Buddhist principles to develop our country; later Thai people can attend to the problems of the world.

This is indeed the genuine role that Buddhism can take: to attend to the problems of the world and assist in improving the world.

We all realize how the world today is beset by countless difficulties and problems. However, we tend to bury the problems and cover them with

a veneer of extravagance. These problems are familiar to all developed, developing, and underdeveloped countries alike. Moreover, the world is threatened by natural disasters and pollution.

In well-developed countries such as the United States, people face all sorts of problems: stress, depression, high suicide rates, high murder rates, violence, drug abuse, broken families, and teen pregnancy. The high rates of divorce mean that children don't have proper parenting and they in turn add to the trouble in society. In addition there has been racial discrimination for centuries.

This year, on March 14th, 2000, was Mother's Day in the United States. One million mothers across America rallied to pressure Congress to enact a law that strictly controls the use of guns, since the statistics are that on average twelve children are killed by guns in the U.S. every day.

Instead of being a happy day with joyful celebrations for families, Mother's Day was a day when mothers expressed their grief on account of their children. Mothers came out to rally and

reflect the sickness in society, which has spread even to the young children.

This is a lesson for developing countries like Thailand, to consider carefully whether we wish to follow the example of such so-called developed countries.

A close inspection of affairs reveals that countries are fighting for natural resources. Powerful countries exert their economic influence, exploiting other countries and searching for material resources. This competition pits them against other wealthy countries. Poorer countries fear they will be dominated or taken advantage of by wealthy countries. Many systems and organizations that have been founded to protect free trade are doubted and people wonder if they were established with sincere purposes. If one is deeply interested and open-minded then one will pay attention to these problems.

One common problem is rampant consumerism: people tend to get excited by alluring material objects without considering where these things came from.

Wise people should not simply be content

with the superficial, external world; they need to analyze and pay close attention to things. If we want to solve the world's problems and to improve global civilization, we can take this opportunity of Vesak Day to examine, review, and analyze the situation, and to apply Buddhist principles for solving problems and improving conditions.

Question: May I sincerely thank you, Venerable Sir, for enlightening us with this knowledge and understanding of the Vesak Day, together with integrating the Buddhist principles that can enhance our culture and help humankind.

Answer: Of course, you're welcome.

