

Vesak and Magha Puja in Thai Buddhist Culture

If you were to look at Thailand from the outside in, you would see one factor that is an essential part of what the country is today, from many of the traditions to the daily lives of much of the population, and that is Buddhism. It is a foundational pillar of society and is heavily influential in many aspects of life and culture in the country.

Festivals connected with Buddhism are important for Thai people to make merit and show reverence and respect for Buddha and his teachings. Out of these festivals, it is Vesak and Magha Puja that stand out as the most sacred, not only to Buddhists in Thailand but around much of the world. They are joyous, peaceful, and spiritual days.

Buddhism's Journey To Thailand

Approximately 2500 years ago, a man named Siddhartha Gautama, who would later become known as Buddha ("Awakened one"), reached enlightenment (nirvana) in Bodhi Gaya underneath a bodhi tree (Chodron, 2001) and saw the true nature of life. He became a great teacher of this wisdom and his teachings were of the "middle way." They were not only for society's elites but also laypeople, making his wisdom accessible for all to learn and understand.

His teachings spread across much of India, especially during the rule of Emperor Ashoka (3rd century BCE), who embraced Buddhism with vigour. Some places, like the ancient city of Taxila, which was already a renowned centre of learning in the ancient world with many monasteries and scholars teaching various subjects, thrived as a prominent Buddhist learning centre under Emperor Ashoka.

With all this interest in India for Buddhism it was only a matter of time before it spread to other parts of Asia, and Emperor Ashoka in his wisdom and devotion to Buddhism, sent missionary monks to different regions along ancient trade routes, one of them being what today is known as Thailand (Kusalasaya, 1983). After its arrival, numerous kingdoms and states made Buddhism the main religion and helped expand it in the region.

The Sukhothai Kingdom is considered the cradle of Thai civilisation as we know it today ("Sukhothai Timeline - World History Encyclopedia") and was one of the most influential in integrating Buddhism into Thai society and culture. It played a large role in making Theravada the main Buddhist tradition in the region which follows some of the oldest written texts of the teachings of the Buddha. Many stunning temples were built in this period, such as Wat Mahathat, which can still be seen, albeit in a somewhat ruined state.

From the 14th-18th Century CE the Ayutthaya Kingdom further integrated Buddhism into society and the monastic community played an important role in the kingdom. From the 18th century onwards the Chakri dynasty, which is the dynasty still in Thailand today, built more temples, one of the most famous being Wat Phra Kaew in Bangkok.

Buddhism in Thailand Today

Today approximately 94% of Thai people identify as Buddhist (BOI: The Board of Investment of Thailand). The king of Thailand must also be Buddhist.

There are approximately 43,000 Buddhist temples (“Thailand: Number of Buddhist Temples | Statista”), from simple shrines to large architectural wonders, although not all are actively used. All over Thailand, you will see Buddhist statues and images of Buddha. Thailand is statistically the second-largest country in the world regarding the number of Buddhists after China.

It is customary for many young men to become Buddhist monks at some point in their lives (“Buat Nak: Rituals before Monkhood – Thailand Foundation”) and live the monastic life, even if it is just for several months. It is seen as a rite of passage and a way to make merit.

Buddhist festivals are important to the fabric of Thailand today, culturally and spiritually, and Vesak and Magha Puja are two of the most significant. They are both public holidays in Thailand.

The festivals are held on a full moon, as the events being celebrated occurred on a full moon in the past. The full moon is also part of Buddhist traditions from ancient times (Green, 2023) when many teachings and spiritual practices were carried out under a full moon.

Vesak

Vesak, also known as Visakha Bucha Day (in Thailand), Buddha Day, Buddha Purnima, Wesak, and Buddha Jayanti, commemorates three of the main events in Buddha's life that are believed to have all occurred on the same date: his birth, enlightenment, and passing away (parinirvana) (“Vesak - Buddhism for Beginners | Tricycle: The Buddhist Review”).

Vesak falls on the full moon day of the sixth lunar month, typically in May. It is considered the most sacred day for Buddhists in Thailand and other parts of the world and is one of the most spectacular festivals in the country.

Magha Puja

Magha Puja, also known as Makha Bucha, Sangha Day, or Fourfold Assembly Day, is celebrated on the full moon day of the third lunar month, which falls in February or March. On this day, Buddhists celebrate the spontaneous gathering of 1,250 enlightened disciples of Buddha (O'Brien, 2008) who came to pay their respects to him nine months after he had attained enlightenment.

This was an important moment in the early Buddhist community (Sangha) as Buddha gave a teaching that day called the "Ovada Patimokkha", which summarises three of the main principles of Buddhism: "To avoid all evil, to cultivate good, and to cleanse one's mind." (The Dhammapada, 2010).

These go to the true essence of Buddha's teachings and serve as a moral code for Buddhists. Magha Puja honours Buddha and his teachings.

It was in the mid-19th century that King Mongkut, also known as King Rama IV, of Thailand, began the tradition of Magha Puja in the country. Initially, the elites in society, such as the royal

family, were the ones who celebrated it. However, by the early 20th century, it had become accessible to all Thais and was made a public holiday (“Makha Bucha Day 2024 - Thailand NOW”).

It has become a popular festival that Thai people love to celebrate.

What happens on Vesak and Magha Puja

Various activities and actions occur on Vesak and Magha Puja, especially in and around temples or shrines. Some people, especially the more devout Buddhists, wear white clothes these days, symbolising purity.

These festivals are a time for Thai Buddhists to reflect on and celebrate Buddha's teachings and life. They are very joyous but also deeply spiritual occasions.

Making Merit

Making merit, known as "tham bun" in Thai, is a concept of accumulating positive karma (where a person's actions in the present will affect their future) with good deeds and thoughts. Making 'good merit' is very important for Buddhists (Songkhaeo, 2024), and on these special festival days, it is believed that your good deeds will be multiplied many times over. Generosity, or giving, known as "dana," is one of the main things Thai people do during Vesak and Magha Puja.

There are numerous ways to earn good merit and positive karma.

One of the main ones is to go to temples and give alms to monks, such as food, medicines, and other necessities they need in their daily lives. This is seen as a way for the monks to continue their spiritual practice without the distractions of having to make money for food, etc, and in return, the monks can help the community with their spiritual needs (“The Practice of Almsgiving in Buddhism”, 2023). Many Thais give alms throughout their lives regularly when there are no festivals to continue gaining merit.

Charity. This can be done in various ways, like giving to the poor and donating to charities that help others less fortunate in society. Volunteering in the community to help with good causes, donating to blood banks and helping those in medical need are also seen as making good merit.

Be vegetarian. If you usually eat meat, you should be vegetarian for the day, as not harming other living things is important to Buddhism's teachings. Naturally, some people who identify as Buddhists do eat meat, but on these special days, they should refrain from doing so. Many places serve delicious vegetarian food at these festivals.

Visiting Temples

Many people visit temples on Vesak and Magha Puja, which also brings them good merit. The most devoted Buddhists arrive at temples before dawn when the Buddhist flag, seen as the symbol of Buddhism worldwide, may be raised (“Yale University Press London Blog.”)

Offerings of candles, flowers, and incense are given to the temple and monks. Three incense sticks are normally given at a temple, representing the Buddha, Dhamma (teachings), and the Sangha (monastic Buddhist community).

Monks at temples may give sermons on Dhamma (Buddha's teachings) and may emphasise the significance of the particular festival happening on that day. Monks also chant from Buddhist scriptures, and people recite verses and meditate at the temple. This is a very peaceful and spiritual experience.

Meditating

Meditation is one of the main practices of Buddhism. Buddhists and non-Buddhists can practice different forms of meditation, the most common being mindfulness and insight (Vipassana) and concentration (Samatha). Mindfulness can also be done in simple daily tasks, not just when sitting and meditating, so even if you don't meditate in a temple or at home, you can practice mindfulness in normal routines during the festivals (Hanh, 2016).

Group meditations in temples can have the effect of a powerful collective energy and are a great way to experience peace and contemplation during these festivals. You can also meditate on spreading compassion and love to all living beings through Buddha's teachings.

Bathing The Buddha

"Bathing the Buddha" is more specifically for Vesak, where people pour clean or fragrant water over the shoulders of a Buddha statue (normally a small one) to purify the mind and body. It is a way to cleanse yourself spiritually ("The Spirit of Practice During the Buddha's Birthday Celebration (Vesak) – Deer Park Monastery").

Many places in Thailand, not just temple areas, have statues of Buddha for this ritual, such as malls and supermarkets, which makes the ritual accessible for those who don't or can't go to a temple during Vesak.

Observing The Five Buddhist Precepts

Although most laypeople try to observe the five Buddhist precepts in their lives, many may also want to renew their commitment to observing them. These precepts are a core part of Buddhism's ethics and include refraining from harming living beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, false speech, and abstaining from intoxication, such as alcohol (Landaw et al, 2019).

The five precepts are especially relevant to Magha Puja when reflecting on the ethics and moral code that Buddha taught that day.

Candlelight Procession (Wian Tian)

The candlelight procession is the most visually stunning part of Vesak and Maga Puja and is the last major event of the day. At temples, a large candlelight procession known as Wian Tian is held in the evening, normally between six and eight pm.

Many people circumambulate (walk around) the main temple or another consecrated building within the temple area three times, carrying candles, incense, and flowers in a clockwise direction. Walking three times around the temple symbolises the "Three Jewels" or "Three Treasures": the Buddha, the Dhamma (teachings), and the Sangha (Buddhist monastic community) (Landaw et al., Buddhism For Dummies, 2019).

Candlelight represents bringing light into the world and getting rid of darkness through the light and radiance of Buddha's teachings, sending the light of peace and compassion to all living beings.

Incense is used to purify the environment around you with its fragrant smell. Flowers represent the transient nature, or impermanence, of life: that all things will eventually fade away, and can also represent purity through their beauty.

Monks usually chant Buddhist scriptures before the procession begins, and this chanting usually continues while people walk around. It is like a walking meditation, honouring and respecting Buddha and his teachings and becoming one with the Buddhist community around you.

The Dhammakaya Temple (Wat Phra Dhammakaya), located in Pathum Thani province near Bangkok, is particularly stunning. Thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of Buddhists gather there to experience it and thousands of lanterns may be lit ("The Light up of 100,000 Lanterns Blessing Ceremony Completed with Perfection – Dhammakaya Foundation"). The historic Wat Pho temple in Bangkok is also a good place to experience these festivals.

Vesak and Magha Puja

Vesak and Magha Puja are full of joy and peace and are among Thailand's best cultural experiences. They show how important Buddhism is to the country. Thai people observe Buddha's teachings of compassion and mindfulness, which may help explain why Thailand is known as "The Land of Smiles."

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