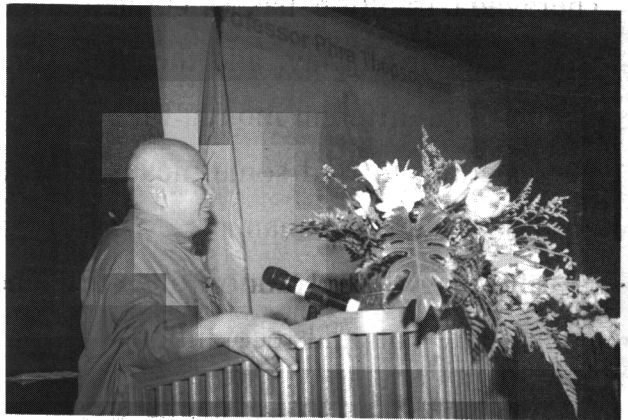


International Recognition of the Day of Vesak¹

Prof. Dr. Phra Thepsophon

We have come here to celebrate the Day of Vesak at the United Nations in New York, not merely to venerate the Buddha, but also to remind the world, through the medium of this prestigious international body of the United Nations, that the message of the Buddha is still very relevant to the world today.

In the year 2000, I had an opportunity to participate in the Millennium World Peace Summit of Religious and Spiritual Leaders in the General Assembly Hall of the UN. We were told that UN Headquarters had received



about 1,000 Religious Leaders from around the world to bless the UN and we hoped that the UN, and its work, would be all the better as a result of that blessing.

¹ Keynote Address delivered at the United Nations Headquarters, New York, U.S.A. on June 1, 2004.

We keep looking at the role since played by the UN. I would say that the tragic events on September 11 in New York, just one year later, did not portend much hope for a better world. That is why we should do something together as Buddhists to try to bring peace to the world. Our gesture in coming here is to state that we feel seriously that the message of the Buddha is still relevant in this regard. For the world to understand our position, one should recognize that the first thing that all Buddhists should do is to work together in unison to celebrate Vesak Day in the same manner that we have done here for the last five years. However, I should mention, right from the outset, that there are certain difficulties for those from both the Theravada and Mahayana traditions to celebrate Vesak Day together, since historically the Theravada tradition has celebrated the festival on the full moon day of the month of May, and the Mahayana tradition on a quite different day and in a different month. I therefore hope that it may be able, during this meeting, to find some means of resolving how we might celebrate Vesak in a unified manner, especially given the opportunity provided us following the resolution of 54th General Assembly that Vesak Day receive international recognition.

Different Terms with the Same Meaning

What are we to do about this ? And how should we take advantage of the resolution adopted by the General Assembly on the 15th of December, 1999 that Vesak Day be celebrated at the United Nations Headquarters and other UN offices around the world.

In Thailand, we call the day Visakha; in Sri Lanka it is known as Vesak. Both terms are derived from the Pali terms Vesakha or Visakha.

Our Mahayana friends, however, refer to it by way of its Sanskrit name of Vaisakha, although our friends from Bangladesh also speak of it as Vaisak, whilst some in India, especially when referring to the birthday of the Lord Buddha, speak instead of Buddhajayanti, rather than Vesakha. This is not a problem for the Theravada, since it celebrates the Buddha's Birthday, Enlightenment and Parinibbana on one and the same day, the full moon day in the sixth lunar month, which usually falls in May, but since this year is a leap year, it is being celebrated, instead, on June 2nd. So for the Theravada, Vesak signifies the life of the Buddha as a whole: his birth, his enlightenment and his passing away.

The term 'Vesak' is first mentioned in the Mahavamsa, a very old chronicle of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, where it is said that King Dutthagamani of Sri Lanka held the Vesak festival some 2,100 years ago. In that work, we read: *Mahavesakhapuja ca catuvisati karayi*, meaning that he held twenty-four great Vesak festivals. So Sri Lanka is honored in being the first country to celebrate Vesak day, and that is why the United Nations have adopted the Sinhalese version of the term, viz. 'Vesak', in its resolution.

As far as Thailand is concerned, Vesak Day was first celebrated in the Sukhothai period about 700 years ago. So we cannot compare with Sri Lanka. Indeed, we adopted our form of Buddhism from Sri Lanka and in this we pay honor to our Sri Lankan friends, and it is in this spirit of unity that we have come together to celebrate the Vesak Day at the United Nations.

However, we still have a problem with our friends from the Mahayana tradition, since according to this tradition, the Buddha

Shakyamuni was born on the 8th of April and passed away on the 15th of February. What are we to do about this ? How can we find some unity in our celebration of Vesak Day ? In fact, there is little difference between us; and if we also remember that it is stated in the UN resolution that Vesak Day is to be celebrated in the month of May, it should be possible for both traditions to join together in celebrating the festival of Vesak as the Buddha's Day at the same time as it is celebrated at the UN Headquarters here and at the branches of the UN around the world, and still reserve the right to celebrate the Buddha's Day in our respective countries, be this on the full moon day in the month of May or April, or whatever.

If we all agree that Vesak Day be celebrated in the month of May in accordance with the resolution of the General Assembly of the United Nations, then I will also propose that all Buddhists unite to celebrate Vesak Day next year at the UN Headquarters and its various branches around the world. For example, in Thailand we have the UN ESCAP Headquarters which, though situated in Bangkok, serves the whole of the Asia-Pacific countries. It should therefore be possible to initiate the celebration of Vesak Day in the month of May there for Buddhists from around the whole region. I would propose you ponder upon this; it does not mean we cannot re-congregate here in future years.

Two Kinds of Puja

What do Buddhists do when Vesak Day arrives? They perform a Puja. 'Puja' in Pali means "worship". In our tradition, there are two kinds of Puja:

1. Amisa Puja: worship with material things; and
2. Patipatti Puja: worship with practice.

In the first form of Puja, we offer the light of a candle to the Buddha. This is one kind of Amisa Puja, worship with material things. In Thailand, we conduct a candle procession as we move around a statue of the Buddha, holding a lighted candle in our hands. This is Amisa Puja, worship with material things. In Patipatti Puja, we generally worship the Buddha by observing the five precepts and practicing meditation. Where do we perform such worship? We go to temples or we perform worship before some statue, or image, of the Buddha elsewhere. Before the Buddha passed away, he mentioned that there were four places that would form places of future pilgrimage for all Buddhists around the world. And I would say that India and Nepal these-- two countries-- have the privilege of being the foremost places of pilgrimage; and I would suggest that we pledge our support for the development of Lumbini, the birth place of the Lord Buddha, since this is the most important place for all Buddhists throughout the world.

In addition to Lumbini, we should also do something to help develop the three other places sacred to all Buddhists: the place of the Buddha's Enlightenment at Bodh Gaya in India; the place of the Buddha's first sermon delivered at Sarnath; and Kusinara, the place where the Buddha passed away into Parinibbana. These four places are sacred for all Buddhists they are our "Mecca", and should be visited and paid respect by all Buddhists.

The Four Objects of Worship

Not only that, but we also have to do something together to preserve other places of Buddhist heritage, in addition to these four places of

pilgrimage. We read, in the Pali literature, of the Cetiya, which also forms an object of worship. The four objects of worship in Buddhism are:

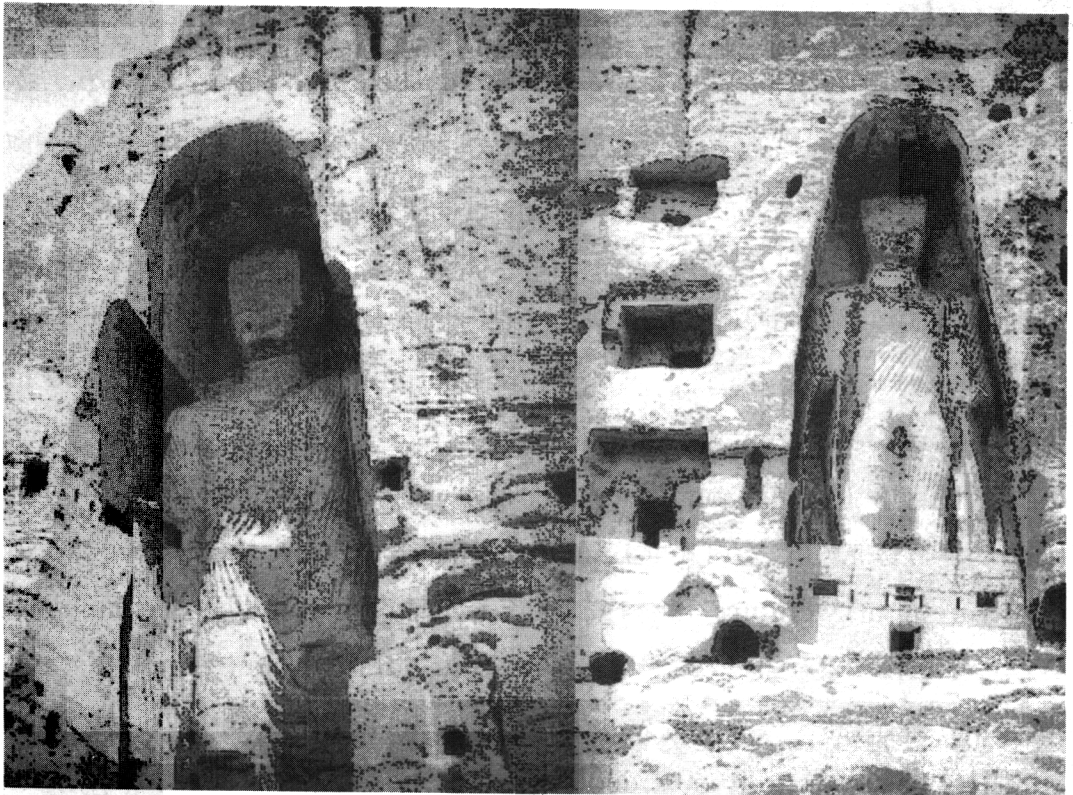
The Dhatu Cetiya, or a place containing the Buddha's relics, such as a pagoda. People go to such places to worship the Buddha's relics. For instance, the people in Sri Lanka are especially fortunate in having the Buddha's tooth relic. There are only two tooth relics of the Buddha in the world. The first is in Kandy, Sri Lanka and the second in Beijing, the People's Republic of China. There are many other relics in other parts of the world but none are as important as these two.

The second type of Cetiya is the Paribhoga Cetiya, which houses possessions or objects used by the Buddha, such as his black bowl, and yellow robes. Right now, we have only the Bodhi Tree. The original one was at Bodh Gaya in India, but I would say that the present tree is the fourth generation of the original Bodhi tree. A sapling of the original was taken to Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka during the reign of King Asoka, two thousand and three hundred years ago.

The third type of Cetiya is the Dhamma Cetiya, the collection of the Buddha's teachings, in the form of the Tipitaka. We have here the oldest version of the Tipitaka in palm leaves in the world, now kept in the personal collection of a millionaire in Europe. I see from the Internet that he brought it from Pakistan and that it is now on sale for one million US dollars. It would be wonderful were someone to buy it, so that it could be housed in a Buddhist museum where Buddhists from all over the world could go and worship it.

The fourth type of Cetiya is the Uddesika Cetiya, objects dedicated to the Buddha, such as Buddha statues, Buddha images, and paintings.

Buddha statues are objects of homage for all Buddhists around the world and form a link in our minds with the Buddha. Such Buddha statues are also in need of our protection. The two Buddha statues in Bamiyan, although defaced by Ghengis Khan, stood in the world for two thousand years before being destroyed by a non-Buddhist government in Afganistan. And not without protest by UNESCO but still their destruction went on piece by piece before these two sacred Buddha statues had been destroyed, whilst Buddhists around the world stood by as passive witnesses. What are we to do? Think about further threats to Cetiyyas around the world in the future. I think we have to voice our concerns; and I call upon my fellow Buddhists to show unity and seek protection of our Buddhist heritages.



The Three-legged Chair

Remember the three-legged chair that stands in front of the United Nations Office in Geneva. I find it relevant to our unity. The three-legged chair cannot withstand any threat. It is not strong enough to support any thing by itself.



Buddhists around the world should come together to take the opportunity of celebrating Vesak Day to bring about our common goals, initiate common actions to do something for the promotion of Buddhism. Why? Because it is mentioned in the United Nations resolution that *Buddhism, one of the oldest religions in the world, has made, for over twenty-five centuries, and continues to make, a*

contribution to the spirituality of humanity. I think we should take good note of this: *continues to make.* Is it possible for Buddhism to be a strong spiritual force so that it can continue to make a contribution to the world? That is our main concern. Buddhism has certainly played a great role in the spiritual development of the world. If H.G. Wells had still been alive today, he would have totally agreed with the United Nations resolution because H.G. Wells said that Buddhism had done more to advance world civilization and culture than any other in the chronicle of mankind. World civilization was under threat due to political conflict throughout the previous century, whilst at the dawn of this new century we still have conflicts based on religious ideologies. We need a neutral ideology that

can bring all religious ideologies together. It is neutral in the sense of a middle path, a middle way that does not side with conflicting parties. Buddhism is the answer to the present troubles, because the Buddha would say that there is no such things as a holy war, since there is no justified war in the name of religion. The Buddha once said:

Na hi verena verani sammantiidha kudaacanam
Averena ca sammanti esa dhammo sanantano

Hatred never ceases as a result of hatred, it ceases as a result of loving-kindness. This is eternal law.

Buddhism and World Peace

So we Buddhists should tell the world that there should be no more war in the name of religion. When our religious leaders met here at the UN Headquarters in 2000, they said that we should not allow the world to wage war in the name of religion. There is no justified war. If you want to wage war, do it, but do not try to justify it in the name of religion. What does this mean? It means that war or conflict is not supported by religion, be it Buddhism or any other religion. Buddhists would say that they want peace and the Buddha's message is very relevant to this. We want the world to listen to his message

The starting point in Buddhism as regards world peace is that we should cultivate inner peace (*ajjhattika santi*) in the mind of men. *Ajjhattika santi* is peace of mind. The Buddha said: *Natthi santiparam sukham: there is no higher bliss than peace*. So peace of mind, or inner peace, is a prerequisite for outer peace in our interpersonal relations. Religious practice can bring peace to our minds. In the UNESCO

preamble, we read *since war begins in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the defences of peace must be constructed*. What does this mean in the Buddhist context ? If you visit Buddhist temples in Thailand, you will find in most of them this painting on the wall of the Uposatha, or the Buddha's, Hall.

A Thai Painting Depicting the Triumph of Good over Evil

It depicts the story of the triumph of good over evil on the day of the Buddha's Enlightenment. You will remember this: the Buddha statue. It is similar to this one, the right hand of the Buddha in this painting points down to the earth. And this picture or painting depicts events that took place on Vesak Day, the day on which the Buddha was to attain Enlightenment. He created a seat at the foot of the Bodhi tree. Then the Buddha resolves in his mind that this is going to be his last



seat, that he will sit here until he attains Enlightenment, and will never get up without having attained Enlightenment. So Mara, the Evil One, knowing that resolution of his, comes with a huge army. He comes to disturb the Buddha's meditative trance with a huge army on the day of his Enlightenment. He challenges the Buddha. First he tries to chase the Buddha away with his stockpile of weapons. This painting is found in a temple in London. Here Mara possesses modern forms of weapons. As the canon shoots the Buddha, it turns out that the Buddha is bulletproof, and just sits there in a meditative position, without any disturbance from Mara. So Mara runs out of weapons. What does he do? He challenges the Buddha. "Monk, get up because this seat belongs to me", he says. "It is not yours; as a monk, you should not steal the property of others; you should get out of the forest". Mara's followers act as witness for their leader, telling the Buddha to leave because this seat belongs to their leader, and that the Buddha has no testimony, no other witness, since he is alone.



So, at that moment, the Buddha, who has been continuing to meditate with his right hand on his left hand, next seeks a witness, by pointing his right hand to the earth, asking the mother earth to act as his witness. She agrees, stating that this seat belongs to Siddhattha Gotama. At this moment, there is a great earthquake proving that the mother earth had become the Buddha's witness. Mara then departed, leaving the Buddha to sit and meditate the whole night and attain Enlightenment on the day of Vesak.

What does this story tell us ? It shows that there is in our mind an ongoing conflict between good and evil all of the time. So the great victory of the Buddha is the victory of the best side of the mind. As the Buddha said, "The one who conquers many thousands of men in battles is not the great victor; the greatest victor is the one who conquers himself".

A Lotus Unpolluted by Water

The greatest victor in all wars is one who has conquest of self by practising meditation. So the Buddha gives the simile of a lotus. When you see a Buddha statue or a painting of the Buddha, you will find him always sitting or standing on a lotus because there is a saying in the Tipitaka that the Buddha is like a lotus.

"Just as a lotus is born in the water, grows up in the water, rises to the surface, and stands unpolluted by the water, so does the Buddha come to be born in the world, grow up in the world, and yet pass beyond the world without being polluted by the world."



This signifies that we live in the world, are deeply rooted in the environment, and should not run away from a society. We should have concern for the suffering of people there, try to feel pity, to have mercy or compassion for them, and help them to liberate themselves from suffering. That is the meaning of the simile. I think that the Mahayana suggestion that the Theravada tradition encourages people, such as monks, to renounce the world, to leave the society without caring for the people, is not an entirely correct understanding of the Buddha's words here. Monks do live in the world, in the city temple, in the society, and they may do so without much disturbance from the society, since they cultivate their minds so as to become unpolluted by that society, yet at the same time they remain deep-rooted in that society and try to rescue others, and help them overcome their suffering.

Meditation

This is Theravada practice: to be like a lotus deeply rooted in the water, yet unpolluted by that water. To do so, we practise Vipassana meditation. How did the Buddha attain Enlightenment? And by what method? The Buddha attained Enlightenment by Vipassana meditation, not by Samatha or tranquility meditation. This is because tranquility or Samatha meditation is to be found in the Hindu tradition.

The Buddha had already attained the absorptions, the highest stage of tranquility, by following the teachings of Alara and Uddaka. After that, he found that to attain Enlightenment also required Vipassana meditation. The most important sutta on Vipassana meditation is the Mahasatipatthanasutta, which contains details of anapanasati meditation associated with in- and out-breathing. It was in always practising Vipassana meditation in the form of anapanasati as described in the Mahasatipatthanasutta that the Buddha spent most of his time. He practised anapanasati as part of his Vipassana meditation prior to his Enlightenment and later said, following his Enlightenment, that he generally spent his time during the rainy season practising that concentration associated with in- and out-breathing. In-breathing and out-breathing: this is Vipassana meditation, a means of living happily in this world in the present day.

I would say that Vipassana meditation is unique to Buddhism and would like to draw your attention to the fact that the proper Puja for today is Patipatti Puja, worship by way of the practice of meditation, which will lead to a state of a man living unperturbed, undisturbed, and unpolluted by the world around him. Purify your mind just like a lotus rising above the water, unpolluted by the water. This is an example taken from the Buddha's way of life.

Concluding Remarks

The United Nations resolved that Vesak be celebrated at both the UN Headquarters in New York, and at other UN offices around the world. Please take a note of "other United Nations offices". What does this mean? It means that although Vesak has already been celebrated at UN Headquarters in New York, it has not, over the last five years, been celebrated at the UN ESCAP Headquarters in Bangkok. If we can agree that Vesak Day be celebrated in the month of May in accordance with the resolution of the UN General Assembly, and perhaps agree to refer to it also as "the Buddha's Day", then I would also propose that all Buddhists unite and agree to celebrate Vesak Day next year at the various branches of the UN around the world. In particular, I would also invite members of the Buddhist community in the Asia-Pacific region to consider holding a joint celebration of Vesak at the UN ESCAP Headquarters in Bangkok.

At this point, I will bring my talk to a conclusion, by stating that Vesak Day is the most sacred day for all Buddhists in the world. We worship the Buddha, not only with material things, but also by observing the five precepts, listening to Dhamma-talks, and practicing Vipassana meditation.

As followers of the Buddha, we wish to worship him in this manner and thereby spread his message throughout the world, so that, with peace of mind, with peace from our meditation practice, we can extend to others our loving-kindness and compassion, in the hope that they can benefit from the blessing of the triple gems.

May all beings in the world live in peace and prosperity.