

# BUDDHA PURNIMA: THE BRIGHT MOON OF LORD BUDDHA

*Jawhar Sircar*

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(English Version)

Ever since Joseph Nye described ‘Soft Power’, as a cultural contribution of one country that strongly influences other countries and people, Indians have been demanding that India uses its for this, without actually specifying how. This is when we need to remember that the most powerful cultural export from India in the history of mankind was the Buddhist ideology of peace and non-violence. And in this unique feat, the date that stands out prominently is Vesak, the name by which Buddha Purnima is celebrated by millions in many nations in East and South-East Asia. Several Indian religious celebrations, both Hindu and Buddhist, have been adopted overseas but most people in these countries can barely remember their ancient Indian roots, as these are now their own local or national celebrations.

Where Vesak is concerned, however, Gautam Buddha’s towering legacy ensures that the day of the full moon in the Indian month of Vaisakh becomes the most important day in the religious and social life of such a large part of the world. Buddhists recall it as the day on which the Master was born, which was the same date on which he achieved Mahaparinirvana and left the world 80 years later. All of humanity remembers Buddha’s basic philosophy that the cause of all suffering lies in our desire and also that way out lies in detachment from wanting more. His sacred teaching is that all things change and that salvation lies in being aware of this and in wisely not holding on to what is changeable. Needless to say, his message of meditation, reflection, compassion and peace was far ahead of his time, when human existence was more brutal.

Buddhism was established in India some five centuries before Christianity and was soon known throughout Asia. The striking similarities between the teachings of the Buddha and those of Christ have been noted by many Western scholars of religion, like Barbara Walker who said that “the legends and sayings derived from Buddhism appear in the Gospels, disguised as ‘typically Christian’ precepts”. Mark Tatz and Jody Kent further elaborated on this and felt that “Buddhist sages provided prototypes of Christian miracles. They were said to walk on water, to speak in tongues and to ascend to heaven in the flesh.” Herbert Muller has even declared that Saint Josaphat who is described by John of Damascus in his life story written in the 8th century A.D. “is actually a corruption of Bodhisatt”. As the world’s first really well-organised open religion, Buddhism contributed much to Christianity and even Hinduism and Chris Williams mentions some of these as “celibacy, fasting, use of lamps and flowers on the altar, incense, holy water, rosaries (japamalas), priestly garments, worship of relics, canonization of saints, use of an ancient language for the liturgy and ceremonials generally”.

It is no wonder, therefore, that Buddha is worshipped with so much reverence during his Purnima in so many countries. India does so as well, but it is not among the major festivities of India, except for our Buddhists, both traditional and new. It is strange that Buddhism was not given its rightful place in the land of its origin and even though he is often regarded as an Avatar of Vishnu, not a single Hindu temple is dedicated only to him. In fact, had it not been for the Neo-Buddhists of India, this religion would not be receiving so much attention as it does now.

India’s ancient celebrations are fixed mainly according to the Solar calendar so as to coincide with agricultural seasons, but as a Lunar calendar event, Buddha Purnima has widely varying dates in different years and is not really linked to crop-based rituals. Like in Islam, that also follows Lunar measurements, this day is thus observed for its own intrinsic value. Though the

First Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhist held in Colombo in May 1950 fixed this celebration with the full moon in May, different Buddhist communities celebrate Vesak on different dates, as the Lunar Calendar can be interpreted in different ways. Sometimes month of Vesak has two moons which complicates matters, and Thailand, for instance, is celebrating Vesak on the 1st of June, while we celebrate it on the 4th of May.

The Sinhalese celebrate it as Vesak, the Nepalis as Swaanyaa Punhi, the Burmese as Kason, the Tibetans as Saga Dawa, the Indonesians as Hari Raya Waisak, the Malaysians as Hari Wesak, the Khmer as Visak Puja, the Thai as Wisakha Bucha, the Vietnamese as Phat Dan and the Laotians as Vixakha Bouxa. The Chinese call it by several names and two of them are Fo Daan and Yu Fojie, while the Japanese call it Hana-matsuri. In his book of 'Rationalizing Religion', Chee Kiong Tong explains how the Chinese have 'internalised' the Buddha and his festivals into their ritual practices and how both the Communist and Capitalist economies of different Chinese communities all over the world are busy in "retaining and simplifying religion". Japanese traditions believe that a dragon appeared in the sky and offered Soma-rasa to the Buddha and it is celebrated as early as the 8th of April, according to their Solar Calendar. Let us not forget that more than 40 per cent of the Japanese believe strongly in Buddhism, even now.

There is a carnival like atmosphere in decorated temples, in Buddhist countries, on Vesak day, as devout Buddhist and followers assemble at various temples from dawn. Festivities begin with the ceremonial hoisting of the Buddhist Flag and the singing of hymns in honour of the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Strict vegetarianism is observed in these countries, that are quite strongly non-vegetarian and liquor shops are shut down mandatorily for 2 to 3 days. Thousands of birds, animals and insects are released from captivity by devotees, in honour of the Buddha.

Before we end, I must mention about the strangest celebration of Buddha Purnima that I have come across. It is in a village called Jamalpur in Purbasthali police station of Barddhaman, where thousands of goat and sheep are slaughtered before Dharmaraj, the presiding deity. Devotees used to gather from several adjoining regions and played with swords, guns and other weapons, until the Police stopped this ritual recently.

Each community in the world has its own reasons, but such aberrations cannot detract us from the fact that if the world ever gets together to pray for peace and for the end of violence, it is on this day of Buddha Purnima!