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A threefold-celebration and festival of light

Vesak Poya signifies the Birth, Enlightenment and *Parinibbana* (the Passing away) of the Buddha. It is the most important festival of the Buddhists in Sri Lanka. Prince Siddhartha (the Buddha's lay name) was born on this day and attained Enlightenment at the age of 35 on Vesak Full Moon Poya day. At the age of 80 Buddha attained *Nirvana* (the passing away and attaining the State of Supreme Bliss where there is no re-birth).

Vesak Poya falls on the first full moon day in May. Buddhists the world over celebrate Vesak with much pomp and pageantry while giving the foremost place to religious observances and acts of charity. Pandals, processions and decorative lanterns are a part of the Vesak celebrations. Thousands throng the temples to observe *Sil*, listen to the Dhamma and conduct *Bodhi* pujas.

BIRTH



King Suddhodana and Queen Mahamaya Devi of the Kingdom of Kapilavasthu in Northern India were the parents of Prince Siddhartha, who later became the Gautama Buddha. The Queen gave birth to Prince Siddhartha at a beautiful *Sal Uyana* (Sal park) of Lumbini, the birthplace of Prince Siddhartha who was born on a Vesak Poya day in 623 B.C. It is said that the Prince took seven steps at his birth itself and that seven lotus flowers sprang from the Earth to receive each step.

FESTIVAL OF LIGHT

With the gathering of dusk, after a day of religious observance, every Buddhist home announces to the world the light of the Buddha's teachings with a display of little clay oil lamps, small paper lanterns lit by candles and large octagonal lanterns of paper are the popular Vesak lanterns unique to Sri Lanka. The pandals are a special attraction. They are giant structures, more than 80 feet high, made up of huge hand-painted panels.

ENLIGHTENMENT

For 29 years of his life Prince Siddhartha lived in the lap of luxury. He married Princess Yasodhara. While touring the city the Prince saw an old man, a sick man, a dead body and an ascetic. The first three made him disillusioned with lay life while the ascetic made him realise that the life of an ascetic is better. Prince Siddhartha decided to leave the Royal Palace and become an ascetic and search for the truth. He left the same night his son Rahula was born. Prince Siddhartha became the ascetic Gautama to find the truth. For six years he performed difficult tasks, but failed to find the truth he was seeking. Finally, he came to *Gaya* on an evening before Vesak Poya and sat under a Pipal tree (*Ficus Religiosa*) and vowed not to leave it until he found the truth. (The Pipal tree is known as the *Bodhi* or *Bo* tree as it was here that the Buddha attained Enlightenment). That whole evening and night the ascetic Gautama concentrated and meditated and with the dawn of the Vesak Poya he attained Enlightenment.



PARINIRVANA - PASSING AWAY



For forty-five years after attaining Buddhahood, The Buddha preached the Dhamma and helped many to reach the sublime states of *Sovaa*, *Sakrudhagami*, *Anagami* and *Arahath*. At eighty years of age the Buddha attained *Parinirvana* (passed away). He told Ananda Maha Thera that three months hence he would attain *Parinirvana*. On a Vesak Poya in the garden of Upavartana, on a makeshift seat between two sal trees made by Ananda Maha Thera, The Gautama Buddha attained *Parinirvana*.