

BUDDHISM - Information on Festivals

As is the case with most spiritual traditions in the world, Buddhism has particular days in the calendar when that which is held to be most value is celebrated.

To the Buddhist what are of most value are The Three Jewels. As jewels are seen to be the most precious material things, so The Three Jewels are seen to be the spiritually most precious things.

The Three Jewels are:

1. The Buddha, who is the human, historical teacher who gained Enlightenment
2. The Dharma, which is the path that the Buddha taught leading to Enlightenment
3. The Sangha, which is the community of all those people who practice the Dharma in an effort to gain Enlightenment themselves

The Three Jewels are celebrated on three separate days in the year. There is one other major festival celebrated, which is called Parinirvana Day during which Buddhists commemorate the Parinirvana, or death, of the Buddha.

The Buddha

The Man we now know as The Buddha was born about 2500 years ago in North-eastern India. He began life with the name Siddhartha Gautama. He was called the Buddha, meaning the awakened one, after his Enlightenment.

Siddhartha was born into the family of a very high ranking politician who was the leader of his clan. It was predicted shortly after the Buddha's birth that he would either become a very great warrior and ruler or else he would give it all up and become a great spiritual master. Naturally Siddhartha's father was eager for his son to follow in his footsteps and become a great ruler, and was aghast at the thought that he might give up his worldly responsibilities and become a homeless holy man.

In order to prevent his son from seeing the harsh realities of life, and thereby becoming dissatisfied, Siddhartha's father made sure that he would experience only the finest that life had to offer in the way of sensual pleasures and comforts, that he should want for nothing and receive the best possible training for the great task of ruling a group of people that lay ahead. He also insisted that his son be shielded from all the unsavoury aspects of life, from death, ugliness, disease and so on.

However Siddhartha was not satisfied with the life he led in the palace with all its luxury and comfort. He had a sense that he was living an unreal life and longed to see more of the world in which he lived. One day he asked his charioteer to take him on an excursion outside the palace gates. On this and subsequent trips Siddhartha saw, for the first time, an old man, a sick man and a dead man.

He was shocked by what he saw, but even more shocked when his companion informed him that he too would undergo all this, as would all who he loved. These three sights distressed him deeply and his life in the palace grew more and more meaningless in the face of what he had seen. The fourth sight that Siddhartha saw was that of a yellow-robed, wandering holy man. There was a tradition at that time in India of people leaving home and family, having no fixed dwelling place, begging for food and wandering from place to place so that they could devote their whole lives to searching after the Truth. It was a man such as this that he saw.

Siddhartha realised that he too could leave home, search for Truth and Meaning in life and find an answer to the riddle of old-age, sickness and death. And this is exactly what he did. For the next six years he travelled from place to place learning what he could about meditation, spiritual practice and philosophy from the many different teachers living at that time in North-eastern India.

In each case he would learn all that the teacher had to teach him and attain the same level of concentration and insight that the teacher had attained. He would then leave convinced that there was another deeper Truth beyond that which had been communicated to him. He tried many, if not all, of the spiritual methods current at that time including very extreme forms of self-torture.

He lived with five others who practised together in this way. Eventually he abandoned self-torture too as this did not lead to the release from suffering that he was looking for. His companions abandoned him, as he was no longer interested in living life the way they thought it should be lived.

He was now alone. He resolved that he would sit in meditation and not rise from his seat until he had found the answer to the riddle of existence that he had been searching for. On the night of the full moon in May, absorbed in deep meditation beneath a great tree, he found a solution to the problem that had awakened within him with the Four Sights. Full illumination arose within him and he was Enlightened. He was now 'The Buddha', 'The Awakened One'.

It is difficult to say what the state of Enlightenment is like. However we can say that it is a state of a pure, clear, radiant awareness of things as they really are together with an experience of an overflowing of profound love and compassion for all that lives. It is also described as complete freedom, supreme bliss and a state of unlimited energy and creativity.

Buddha Day

It is the Buddha's achievement of Enlightenment that Buddhists celebrate on Buddha day throughout the world. It is the most important Buddhist festival because the Enlightened person is revered as the best person in the world.

Buddhists celebrate not only his accomplishment but also the fact that the Buddha taught a way to Enlightenment so that any man or woman who makes the effort can gain

Enlightenment as well and thereby put an end to suffering. Buddhists worship and celebrate the Buddha not as a god but as an Enlightened human being. They also celebrate him as an embodiment of their own potential to develop spiritual understanding and ultimately Enlightenment.

Buddha Day is celebrated on the full moon day in the month of May, which is the same day that the Buddha gained Enlightenment. Over the course of its 2,500 year history Buddhism has spread though many countries of the world. Up until fairly recently all these countries were in Asia. Buddhism is now being practised by Westerners too.

Each of these nations has its own particular traditions and they each celebrate the Buddha on Buddha Day in different ways. There will however be features common to all traditions. The emphasis tends to be placed on remembering the Buddha's life and achievements, particularly the period leading up to his Enlightenment. These and other episodes in his life are recounted in stories and plays and each individual is encouraged by The Buddha's example to make an effort to steer his or her life in the direction of enlightenment.

There may also be meditations where the different spiritual qualities of the Buddha are appreciated and reflected on and more experienced members of the Buddhist community (Sangha) will give lectures explaining the significance of these qualities and how they can be cultivated in everyday life.

There will usually be a collective ritual where the Sangha will come together to chant verses of praise to the Buddha. Passages from the Buddhist scriptures are recited as part of these rituals, and offerings to the Buddha are made. The three most common offerings are candles, symbolising the Light of the Buddha's wisdom which Buddhists can learn from; flowers, which are a reminder of the fundamental teaching of universal impermanence; and incense, the burning of which releases a pleasant smell and is a reminder that a well-lived life is like that inasmuch as it spreads outwards creating a positive influence in society.

[Back to top](#)

The Dharma

The word 'Dharma' has many meanings, but in this context it has two specific uses.

Firstly, it means the unmediated truth of how things are, as experienced by the Enlightened mind. It is a direct seeing of this truth for yourself.

In the second sense the Dharma is the teaching that was born when the Buddha first put his realisation into words and communicated it to others at Sarnath in Northern India. The occasion is traditionally referred to as 'the first turning of the wheel of the Dharma'.

In this sense, the Dharma includes all those methods, techniques and teaching of the Buddha and other Enlightened teachers down through the ages.

Also included in this meaning of the Dharmas is the entire corpus of scriptures which are regarded as constituting the Buddhist canon. These include records of the Buddha's life

(known as the Pali Canon), scriptures from a later date, and the written teachings of those people who have attained Enlightenment over the centuries.

The whole canon is many hundred times as long as the Bible and it represents a literature of unparalleled riches. It includes works such as The Dhammapada, The Diamond Sutra, and The Tibetan Book of the Dead.

At it's core, the Dharma is about seeing life as a process of constant change, and its practices aim to take advantage of this fact. It means that one can change for the better. The decisive factor in changing oneself is the mind, and Buddhism has developed many methods for working on the mind. Most importantly, Buddhists practise [meditation](#), which is a way of developing more positive states of mind that are characterised by calm, concentration, awareness, and emotions such as friendliness. Using the awareness developed in meditation it is possible to have a fuller understanding of oneself, other people, and of life itself.

Buddhists do not seek to 'evangelise' or coerce other people to adopt their religion, but they do seek to make its teachings available to whoever is interested, and people are free to take as much or as little as they feel ready for.

Dharma Day

The Buddha's teaching is known as the Dharma and it is this that is celebrated on Dharma day. The Dharma is the second of the Three Jewels and without it there would be no path to Enlightenment, so it is very precious to Buddhists.

The Buddha gave teachings to men and woman from all walks of life as he travelled the roads and pathways of India. He never wrote his teachings down so they all had to be remembered. They were not written down until several hundred years after the Buddha's death. Now there is a great wealth of Buddhist teachings that have been recorded in many different Asian languages and preserved in books. Many of these books have been translated and can now be read and recited in English, German, French and other European languages.

Dharma Day is celebrated on the full moon day in the month of July. It commemorates, in particular, what is known as 'The First Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma' when the Buddha first proclaimed his teaching to his five former companions in self-torture.

When the Dharma is celebrated it is celebrated as the Path to Enlightenment. It is important to remember that the Buddha taught so that other men and woman could find their way to the same freedom and bliss that he found. He was not interested in knowledge for the sake of knowledge, but in knowledge that, when put into practice, would lead to states imbued with love and wisdom. It was the Buddha's wish that his teaching's would not just be recited, copied down and remembered but that they would be understood and put into practice for the benefit of all.

The festivities on Dharma Day will be similar to those on Buddha Day with the particular emphasis being placed on appreciation of the different formulations of the Dharma. The

teachings will be recited, sometimes in the ancient Asian languages, and talks and discussions arranged so that the members of the Sangha can learn more about the teachings and how they can positively influence their lives. There will be an opportunity for collective ritual to celebrate the Dharma in a more ceremonial fashion.

[Back to top](#)

The Sangha

Wherever the Buddha went the people that he met were very often deeply impressed by his wisdom, energy and boundless creativity. They were attracted to these and other qualities and wished to cultivate them themselves by following the Buddha's example and practising the Dharma.

These people made up the Sangha, or Buddhists Spiritual Community. They came from all walks of life. Some were rich, some poor, some were Kings and had very high status in society, some had very low status. There were women and men, people with family responsibilities and those who were homeless wanderers like the Buddha, some of the members of the Sangha were ex-criminals and one famous disciple was a mass-murderer before his meeting with the Buddha.

The Buddha would accept anyone into his community who was prepared to put into practice his path of ethics, meditation and wisdom regardless of the type of life he or she had come from.

The Sangha has continued to flourish down through the centuries as people have been inspired to come together to practice the Dharma. The Sangha is characterised by friendliness and goodwill. Bonds of friendship are what binds the community together as well as the shared practice of meditation and other Buddhist practices.

Members of the Sangha provide each other with support and encouragement in their practice of the Dharma with the more experienced members taking responsibility for the training and guidance of the less experienced members.

Sangha Day

On this Buddhist festival the Sangha Jewel is celebrated. The emphasis is placed on rejoicing in the existence of the Spiritual Community that inspires and guides anyone who wishes to take part in it.

As with the other festivals there will be led meditations, accounts of the lives of members of the Sangha from the history of Buddhism and explorations of how Sangha can be created and maintained. There will also be a collective ritual where the entire Sangha comes together to celebrate its own diversity and richness.

Sangha Day is celebrated on the full moon day in the month of November.

[Back to top](#)

The Death of the Buddha

The Buddha lived for another 45 years after his awakening and taught the Dharma tirelessly until the end of his life at the age of 80. When he was nearing the end of his life he made what was to be his last teaching tour.

He travelled to where his followers were living and made sure that any doubts that they had about his teaching were clarified as he was aware that this would be the last chance they would have to speak to their teacher. During this tour he emphasised the three fundamental aspects of the Buddhist path, which are ethics, meditation and wisdom.

The Buddha's last hours were spent lying beneath two trees. His followers gathered around him to pay their last respects to the man who had been such a tremendous influence in their lives. The Buddha asked if there was anyone present had any doubts about his teaching. All remained silent and the Buddha uttered his final words: 'All things are impermanent, with Mindfulness strive on'.

The Buddha then died or, as Buddhists would say, passed into Parinirvana, which means the 'Final Release'.

Parinirvana Day

The Buddha's passing away is what is commemorated on Parinirvana Day. It is a somewhat more sober and solemn occasion than the other festivals.

On this day Buddhists bring to mind not only the Buddha's death but also the deaths of friends and family who have died in the past year. They are brought to mind and remembered in meditation and their names may be read out in the context of a collective ritual.

The Buddha's teaching on the impermanence of all things is particularly born in mind on this day as Buddhists reflect on the fact that all that is put together must eventually fall apart. This reflection is both a sobering one and a liberating one. Because all things are impermanent everything must change and with a life lived well things can change for the better.

Parinirvana Day is held each year on the 15th February.