

What is *Vesak*?

Venerable Mahathera Madawela Punjabi

Vesak is a religious monument of great significance to the devotees. Most monuments are located in the dimension of space and on the earth. Pilgrims visit them in large numbers, even from distant lands, because they inspire them, elevate their spirits, and remind them of the teachings of their religion.

Vesak is such a monument, but it is located in the time dimension. Pilgrims do not go to it. It comes to them seasonally, like summer, winter, or the rain. *Vesak* visits them during the month of May, with the waxing of the moon, and inspires, elevates, and enlightens them about the facts of life.

Vesak is comparable to the Christmas of the Christians; yet it is not exactly analogous to it. For the Buddhists, it is not a season for merriment, such as eating, drinking, singing, and dancing. It is, for the Buddhists, a season for serious religious observances, pilgrimages, and meditation retreats.

Vesak is a time when all Buddhists become rejuvenated by reflecting on the Buddha, his wisdom, and his immense love for all beings. Throughout the month of May, and especially on the full moon day of May, they begin to express the glory of the Buddha and his enlightening message to the world through vivid visual displays and solemn devotional ceremonies that mesmerize, captivate, and fascinate everyone. All those who come to witness this ostentatious display begin to see the picturesque scenery created by the exquisite *Vesak* decorations, and they hear the sonorous sounds of songs, sermons, and rhythmic chants constantly reaching their ears from

loudspeakers, carols, pageants, and pandols. They also enjoy the sweet-smelling perfumes of fragrant flowers and incense that enter their faithfully receptive noses. They even begin to taste *Vesak* from the free food fares (*dansal*) that are given out of charity to all comers in friendly fellowship, and they also touch the beautiful resplendent creations of *Vesak* with their own hands. Everyone absorbs and experiences the magnificent grandeur and majesty of the Buddha and his teachings through all their senses. Thus *Vesak* is a magnificent ceremonial experience for all visitors and participants because it tantalizes them through the splendor of *Vesak* by catering to all the six senses.

A Different Reality

During *Vesak*, Buddhists are reminded of the reality revealed by the Buddha, the reality to which, when one awakens, transforms one's personality from a self-centered, evil, unhappy, and unwise state into a selfless, good, happy, and wise one. This is the Buddhist conversion, which is not a mere enlistment achieved through coercion, compulsion, persuasion, or bribery; nor is it a ceremonial religious endowment; but an inner psychological transformation achieved through "awakening from the 'dream of existence,' which begins with an intellectual enlightenment or paradigm shift, and ends in a spiritual Awakening," which transforms the individual's character entirely.

Vesak is the Sinhalese equivalent of the Pali term *Vesakha*, its Sanskrit form being *Vaisakha*. It is the name for the month of May. The full moon day of May is a thrice blessed day for the Buddhists because they believe that three important events in the life of the Buddha occurred on the full moon day of May:

(1) the birth of the *Bodhisatta*, the human being destined to become a Super Human Buddha. (2) The Spiritual Awakening of the *Bodhisatta* transformed the human *Bodhisatta* into a Superhuman Buddha. (3) The demise of the mortal body of the *Bodhisatta* that was known to the public as the Buddha, but, in fact, was not the body of the Buddha because a Buddha does not have a body, mind, or soul. Nor can he be born, grow old, fall sick, or die, because he has awakened from the dream of existence. Once awake, he does not exist anymore.

The preceding statements are somewhat confusing to most readers. Therefore, they need further clarification. Let us begin by explaining the meaning of (1) the birth of a *Bodhisatta*, (2) the Awakening of a *Bodhisatta* to become a Buddha, and (3) the passing away of the mortal body of the *Bodhisatta* that appeared to be a Buddha.

Birth of the *Bodhisatta*

The *Bodhisatta* (the Buddha to be), Prince Siddhatta Gotama, was born on the full moon day of May. This is the reason for the celebration of *Vesak*. The question that arose in the minds of Indian people during the time of the Buddha was not the question: “How can we thank the Creator for the nice and comfortable world He created for us;” but: “Where is the Creator of this unpleasant world full of suffering?” Their question was humanistic as well as realistic rather than optimistic but unilateral. Their thinking ran thus: “Whoever created the world has created only suffering, for **to be born is to grow old, fall sick and die**; and to meet the unpleasant, and part from the pleasant, and even be always **unable to get what we want**, how we want, and when we want. **Pleasures** are all **transient** and **not easily obtained**. So how can we helpless

humans find freedom from this **insecurity** and suffering of life?” This is the problem of life that all humans are attempting to solve, in one way or another, all the time.

This fact is clearly expressed in the statement that is supposed to be of the Buddha immediately after the Awakening:

**“Many a life in this tour of lives
I ran in search of the Creator unknown
Never did I ever meet him though
So painful is repeated birth and death.”**

Why he searched for the Creator is quite clear. To put an end to suffering, of course, not only for him but for all beings that die. The birth of the *Bodhisatta* was not an ordinary birth. It was the final birth of a being who has been struggling in “*samsāra*” for an infinite number of lives, strenuously qualifying himself for the task of becoming a Buddha. This is beautifully expressed in the story of the birth of Prince Siddhatta.

After a long preparation lasting four hundred thousand infinite eons, the *Bodhisatta* was waiting in the Tusita Heaven, as Santhusita, the Ruler of the Heaven of Contentment, the Heir to the Glorious Status of Buddhahood, awaiting the final birth in the human world, to become the Buddha, for the benefit of beings suffering in *samsāra*, to free them by discovering the way to freedom through his own effort. A stupendous task that no being in heaven or earth could perform, other than a *Bodhisatta*, who has specially prepared himself for this task through an incalculable number of lives in *samsāra*, by perfecting the Ten Qualifications (*pāramita*), including

innumerable sacrifices such as the sacrifice of eyes, head, flesh, blood and even lives.

The *Bodhisatta* descended from the Tusita heaven into the mother's womb when the mother was observing the "Divine discipline" *brahmachariya*, including sexual abstinence. No impure thoughts were present in the mother's mind at the time of descending. It was an "immaculate conception" for this reason. (It is important to note here that rebirth does not take place at the moment of sexual intercourse but very much later).

Many wonderful happenings have been recorded about the birth of the *Bodhisatta*. They all represent the greatness of the extraordinary individual who was born. They are the impressive wrappings of an extraordinary product. The proper consideration is not whether such descriptions are true or false but what meaning they attempt to convey to the reader. It is important to note that some wrappings address emotions rather than the intellect. Only the ignorance, or the intellectual snobbery, of some skeptical critics, refuse to recognize the importance and usefulness of metaphor and allegory.

The sacred scriptures say that the mother could see the developing fetus inside the womb as if through a glass case. The fetus was said to remain in the womb for the full term of gestation. The delivery was painless, and it occurred while the mother was standing. The Holy infant was first received in the hands of celestial beings before humans touched it. Two jets of water poured from the sky, one warm and one cold, to bathe the Holy infant. Then the Holy infant walked seven steps on the earth, while seven lotuses sprang up from the earth to receive the tender feet. At the seventh step, the infant

Bodhisatta spoke, introducing himself to the world. He sang in beautiful verse:

**"Highest in the world am I
Oldest in the world am I
Greatest in the world am I
This is my final birth
Never will I come into being again"**

A critique might comment: "There go the words of a conceited ego." An "ego" He certainly was, but not one conceited. This was a statement of fact, according to the Buddhist faith. These words point to an important Buddhist concept – the concept of "*Bodhisatta*." It is only the self-introduction of a *Bodhisatta*, who is still an "ego" but destined to eradicate the "ego" in this very life. It reveals the distinctive character of this extraordinary being through His own words, by the only one who knows.

Meaning of the Self-Introduction

A *Bodhisatta* who is about to become a Buddha in this very life is said to be the **Highest in the world** because He had reached the topmost level in human evolution where the process of evolution is about to terminate. He was at the threshold of the evolutionary struggle for existence, about to wake up from the dream of "existence." In other words, though biological evolution took place due to a struggle for existence, psychological evolution takes place by stopping this struggle for a valid reason.

It was the Buddha who saw the futility, vanity, and painfulness of this struggle for existence that kept evolution going and decided to stop it and bring this unnecessary

painful struggle to an end. Biologically speaking, “life” is nothing but this struggle for existence, which defeats its own purpose – “existence.” The survival of the fittest is the survival of the species and not the individual. Therefore this struggle is not only futile, it is also painful and destructive. This was why the evolution of the human being occurs only when he has developed the ability to think and has found an “error” in this struggle for existence, which is the natural process of “life,” that continues the evolutionary process. It was the enlightened mind of the *Bodhisatta* that decided to stop this futile and painful struggle for existence (*bhava tanhā*) and so become a Buddha.

The ***Bodhisatta* is the oldest** because he is, therefore the most mature in the world, both mentally and emotionally, though physically, he was an infant. It is important to note here that the teaching of the Buddha is a technique for growth and maturity, rather than a set of rules to be obeyed in fear of punishment in hell, or out of greed for reward in Heaven. He is the **Greatest in the world** because He solved the problem of existence and won the victory over death. This He did, not just for Himself, but for all beings, terrestrial and celestial. The Buddha pointed out that all gods or celestial beings are mortal. Therefore, there is no one greater than an Awake-one, a Buddha, in heaven or on earth.

Because the *Bodhisatta* has not stopped personalization He still thinks “I am” and “mine.” When he wakes up to reality from the “dream of being” and stops personalization, he ceases to “be” forever. This is what is meant by the words, “**This is my final birth. Never will I come into being again.**”

The Meaning of Awakening

To awaken is to awaken from “the dream of existence.” This means we are normally dreaming and not fully awake. We are dreaming that we exist and the world exists. However, we have only become conscious of a “world” and a “self,” though we don’t even know how we became conscious. We simply rose from a state of unconsciousness to a state of consciousness.

We are only organisms like all other organisms, plant or animal. Any organism works like a machine based on the same natural laws, especially determinism. Determinism means that all natural occurrences in the world are determined by the presence of the necessary conditions. This principle is what the Buddha called *paṭicca samuppāda*. “Conditions being present, they come into being; conditions being absent, they cease to be.”

We are all natural organisms having five senses. These senses are stimulated by the environment to which the organism reacts. This is what we call perception. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling the touch are perceptions (*viññāna*). The data perceived is carried to the brain through nerves like telephone wires. It is the brain that puts everything together and gives meaning to what is perceived by forming concepts. This is how we become conscious of a world. The Buddha knew this, and modern scientists know this.

Becoming conscious is a natural process that goes on deterministically but unconsciously. This is why we do not know how we became conscious, even though we know that we are conscious. This “not knowing how” is what the Buddha called *avijjā*. It is not mere ignorance but unconsciousness.

Ignorance means not knowing something we can normally perceive. Unconsciousness means not knowing how we perceive, what we normally perceive, even after we have been told how.

How can we become conscious of how we perceive? This is an important question. Perception can be seen from an objective point of view or a subjective point of view. Our former description was from an objective point of view. To see from a subjective point of view, we need to have what is called *satipaṭṭhāna*, which means “introspection” (*sati* = attention + *upaṭṭhāna* = place within), though commonly translated as “mindfulness.”

This introspection results in *upekkhā*, which means “apperception” (*upa* = within + *ikkhati* = see), commonly mistranslated as “indifference.” “Apperception” is an important word used in Western philosophy, which means awareness of the mental process of perception. In other words, apperception is subjectively seeing how one perceives rather than objectively seeing what one perceives, which is perception. Through this process of “apperception,” therefore, one can observe the process of perception as an “impersonal process” going on deterministically rather than as an “action” of a “self” within. The act of perception is seen “deterministically” rather than in terms of “free will.” This means one has “depersonalized” the process of perception. One does not think, “I perceive,” instead, one thinks, “perception is taking place.” This is how one “Awakens” from the “dream of existence” through a “paradigm shift” from the “notion of personal existence” to an “awareness of impersonal experience.” This Awakening or paradigm shift results in freedom (*vimutti*) from birth, aging, and death. Through the Awakening, we “cease to exist” as a

“self” in a “world.” When we have ceased to exist, how can we die, be born, or age? Our problem has been this “delusion of self” created by emotion and not by reason. Now the reason is re-examining this delusion.

Freedom from Birth, Aging, and Death

All living beings, both plant and animal, have a body that lives. It is only the human animal who, in addition to the body, is conscious of a “self.” This is why a word cannot attack an animal, but a human being can. The word does not attack the body, but it attacks the “ego” or “self.”

The birth of a “body” is biological, while the birth of a “self” is psychological. Therefore it is important to distinguish between the birth of a body and the birth of a “self.” The birth of a body is the birth of an impersonal body, while the birth of a self is the birth of a personal body. Birth of a personal body is the result of the personalization of the body. If the body is not personalized, it is not a personal body. It is the birth of a “self” that results in suffering, not the birth of a body.

This consciousness of a “self” is not the result of reasoning. It is the result of emotions. This is why it is a delusion. It must be challenged by reason to get rid of it. Yet, unfortunately, it cannot be challenged in the presence of emotion because emotion is more powerful than reason. When emotion and reason are in conflict, emotion always wins. It must be challenged in the absence of emotion. Therefore we must learn to stop emotion at least temporarily. This temporary stopping comes in the form of “*samatha* meditation,” and the challenge comes in the form of “*vipassanā* meditation.”

The body becomes a “self” only when it has been personalized (*upādāna*). It is personalized when it is regarded as “mine.”

The body, originally “not mine,” becomes “mine” after personalization. What has become “mine” then becomes a part of “me” because what has been personalized becomes “my person.” “I” am only the sum of all that is “mine.” All that is “mine” therefore becomes “me.” What is “me” then becomes “myself.” “I” am not an entity separate from what is “mine.” “I” am what is “mine.” “I” come into being through personalization of what is not “mine.” When “I” have come into being, my “self” has come into being. The birth of a “self” through the personalization of what is not “self” is called “being” (*bhava*). From “personalization” comes “my existence” or “my being” (*upādāna paccayā bhavo*).

Once the body has become a part of me through personalization, the birth of the body becomes “my birth.” If the body has not been personalized, the birth of the body is not “my birth.” If nothing has been personalized, I do not exist. When I have stopped personalizing, I have stopped “existing.” This is the “cessation of being” (*bhava nirodha*) through the “cessation of personalization” (*upādāna nirodha*). This cessation of being is called *Nibbāna* (*bhava nirodho nibbanam*). When “being” has ceased, death has ceased. This is why *Nibbāna* is called “immortality” (*amata*). Yet, this “immortality” is not “eternal life.” It is only the absence of death due to the absence of the “delusion of existence.”

The birth of the “body,” which has already been identified as “myself” is regarded as “my birth” (*jāti*). This means I came into being before I was born. Therefore, “my being” (*bhava*) comes before “my birth” (*jāti*). And my aging (*jarā*) and my death (*marana*) follow “my birth” (*jāti*). But the aging and death of the body are not the aging and death of the “self” if the body has not been personalized. Without personalization”

(*upādāna*) there is no “being” (*bhava*) of a “self.” If there is no “being” of a “self,” there is no birth of a “self,” or aging and death of a “self.” This is the “immortality” (*amata*) which is called *Nibbāna*.

The Awakening of the *Bodhisatta*

Bodhisatta’s “spiritual awakening” took place at the age of thirty-five, on the full moon day of May. That means the *Bodhisatta* “Awoke” from the “dream of existence” and was transformed into a “perfectly selfless” Superhuman Buddha (Awake-one). Such a Buddha has no body, mind, or soul. He is free from birth, aging, and death “here and now,” not after death.

The *Bodhisatta* awoke spiritually when He stopped being carried away by emotions, and so stopped personalizing and gave up the “delusion of personal being,” or existence as a “self.” This means He gave up attachment to everything that He thought was His. It was not easy to do, but He had prepared Himself for this task during the numerous lives in *samsāra*, practicing the numerous *pāramitas* of self-sacrifice. Some writers depict the *Bodhisatta* as a very lascivious person. If he was so passionate, like other men, He could never have been able to wake up from the “dream of being.” It was because He had practiced relinquishment and renunciation through numerous lives that He was able to renounce everything that He thought was His and wake up from the dream of “personal existence” or “being.” In Awakening, the *Bodhisatta* stopped identifying Himself with the body, feelings, sensations, mental constructs, perceptions, cognitions, emotions, actions, and everything experienced. He stopped personalizing all elements of experience. Therefore,

He ceased to experience a “personal existence.” An Awake-one’s or a Buddha’s identity is only a social convention. Only others identify “Him” as an individual person. “His” identity is a mistake of the ignorant public. When a *Bodhisatta* awakens from the “dream of being,” He ceases to be a person and ceases to have an identity.

The *Bodhisatta* ceased to exist as a person when He awoke from the dream of existence and entered the reality of impersonality. Through this process of waking up, He was transformed into a “Buddha,” an Awake-one who does not exist as a “person.” This transformation was not a physical change such as metamorphosis. It was a psychological change as metempsychosis. **Buddha is not a physical entity that is visible and identifiable physically.** “He” can be seen only through someone’s own experience and understanding of the Dhamma. One who sees the Dhamma sees the Buddha, but not as a person in concrete form, but in the abstract.

During the time of the Buddha, there was a disciple who was very fond of looking at the Buddha. When the Buddha was preaching, he always sat in a place where he could easily see the figure of the Buddha. So the Buddha said to him: “Why do you keep looking at this filthy body? He who sees me sees the Dhamma. He who sees the Dhamma sees me.”

Even after the death of the depersonalized body, the Buddha still lives in the Dhamma. Even when the Dhamma is lost to the world, the Buddha still lives in the Dhamma, until someone rediscovers the Dhamma and so sees the Buddha. Yet this is not an “existence” of the Buddha in concrete form but His existence in formless abstract.

A Buddha “does not exist” because, in becoming a Buddha, he awoke from the dream of existence and ceased to be a “self” or person. *Nibbāna*, by definition, is the “cessation of being” (*bhava nirodho nibbānam*). This “cessation of being” is not the annihilation of an “existing entity” but the disappearance of the “delusion of being.” All other beings are said to be “existing” only because they carry the “delusion of being.”

Not Mystical but Logical

This apparently mystical change is not mystical at all because it is perfectly logical. This psychological change has occurred through a paradigm shift. This difference in paradigm is a difference in the way one perceives the world and oneself. This paradigm shift occurs when passing through a series of observations of experience in a logical sequence. This logical sequence of thought in Awakening from the dream of existence is as follows:

- Everything depends on conditions
- What is dependent on conditions is unstable (*anicca*)
- What is unstable is painful (*dukkha*) because we desire stability (*nicca*).
- What is painful is not under my power to change (*vasavatti*)
- What is not under my power is not “mine” (*netam mama*)
- What is not mine cannot be “me” or “I” (*neso hamasmi*)
- What is not “me” or “I” cannot be my “self” (*neso me attāti*)
- What is not “mine” or my “self” is impersonal (*anatta*), and cannot be personalized (*upādāna*).

All evil behavior, such as crime, war, suicide, and all unhappiness experienced within, is a result of the futile effort to personalize what cannot be personalized. When this is fully comprehended as a fact rationally, a paradigm shift from selfishness to selflessness can occur.

Yet it can be achieved only in the absence of emotional obstacles. It means the individual has to purify and tranquilize the mind before the paradigm shift can occur. This makes it necessary to practice two kinds of meditation: to make the mind tranquil – *samatha* meditation, and to achieve the paradigm shift – *vipassanā* meditation.

Tathāgata the Transcendent

A Transcendent One (*Tathāgata*) is one who has undergone this paradigm shift, and He never dies. “He” cannot die because “He” does not exist as a “Person;” “He” does not exist as a person because “He” does not “personalize;” “He” does not personalize because “He” does not experience the urge for sensual pleasure (*kāma tanhā*), the urge to be (*bhava tanhā*) or the urge not to be (*vibhava tanhā*); “He” does not experience the urge (*tanhā*) because “He” does not react to stimulation; “He” does not react to stimulation because “He” is introspective (*satipaṭṭhāna*); Because He is introspective, “He” is apperceptive (*upekkhā*). Because He is apperceptive, He experiences only “experience” (*phassa*); “He” does not experience “being” (*bhava*) or the existence of a “self” (*atta*); In “His” experience, there is no “experiencer” or the “experienced”; There is only “experience” (*ditthe dittha mattam bhavissati*), which is dependent on conditions. This experience is not a relationship between a “self” and an “other.” In this experience, there is no object seen

(*anidassana*). It has no limits (*anantan*). It is all clear (*sabbato paban*).

The *Bodhisatta* woke up from the “dream of being” because He did not give in to the “urge to be” (*bhava tanhā*) through personalization. The stopping of personalization (*upādāna nirodha*) leads to the stopping of “being” (*bhava nirodha*). The stopping of being resulted in the stopping of birth (*jāti nirodha*), aging (*jarā*), and death (*marana*). This way, He conquered death (*māra parājaya*) and became immortal (*amata*). This immortality was not, however, the eternal (*sassata*) life of a soul. It was immortality through the cessation of personalization (*anupāda nibbāna*), thus not coming into existence (*bhava*), and so escaping birth, aging, and death.

**“Many a life in this tour of lives
I ran in search of the Creator unknown
But never did I meet him though
So painful is birth again and again**

**Oh! Creator, now I see you
Never will you create again
Your pillars are all destroyed
Your structure fully demolished
The mind has stopped creating
The urge has stopped forever.”**

Therefore, the *Bodhisatta*, through the process of Awakening, conquered death, became immortal, and opened the door to immortality for all beings with ears to hear, having Awakened from the “dream of being” in a “world” threatened by death.

He began His mission to free the world from the jaws of death by Awakening them from their slumber by beating the drum of deathlessness, with the words:

**“Open is the door to immortality
Those who have ears hear and be free.”**

CONQUEST OF DEATH

The Buddha preached the **Gospel of Immortality** to the world for forty years. The mortal body, which was depersonalized by the *Bodhisatta* in the process of waking up to Buddhahood, was visible to the public as the body of the Buddha and the public identified the Buddha with it. Though this body was not Buddha strictly, the Buddha appeared to the world through this body and preached the Gospel. When this mortal body died, however, no one could identify the Buddha as before. The Buddha seemed to disappear from the world when this so-called body of the Buddha died, even though the Buddha was still visible to one who saw the Dhamma.

This apparent disappearance of the Buddha is called, *Parinirvāna*, meaning “Complete Nirvana,” by Theravada Buddhists today. This term, however, is misleading because it implies that the “Nirvana” that the *Bodhisatta* achieved at the time of “waking” was incomplete. A more meaningful term is “*Anupādisesa Nirvana*,” which means Nirvana without the depersonalized remains. In contrast, the Nirvana at the time of “waking” is called “*Sopādisesa Nirvana*,” which means Nirvana with the depersonalized remains. This usage of terms is preferable to the use of the term *Parinirvāna* as “Complete Nirvana.”

Even this usage of terms *Sopādisesa* and *Anupādisesa* is strictly speaking incorrect because in the Itivuttaka the Buddha points out that these terms mean something else. According to this Sutta the *Sopādisesa* and *Anupādisesa* are experiences to be realized here and now, instead of one being something to be experienced in this life and the other to be experienced after death. *Sopādisesa* is the experience of the *Arahant* in the normal life, for example, when going on *pindapāta* or when communicating with others. *Anupādisesa* is the experience of the *Arahant* when experiencing *Nirodha Samāpatti*.

The *Bodhisatta* “ceased to be” in becoming a Buddha, but once a Buddha, He is really “absent.” We use the higher “H” to indicate that He has transcended the “self-centered existence,” and He does not exist as a “self” any more. This is because the Buddha is not an entity, or body, or even a mind or a soul and He has no identity, no personality; “He” never “is,” nor “was,” nor “will be.” If so, how could “He die?” Therefore, *Parinirvāna* is not a glorified term for “death.” It is the complete cessation of “being,” which occurred when the *Bodhisatta* became a Buddha.

A Pertinent Question

Sometimes the question is posed whether the Buddha lives after death or whether He does not live after death. To answer either way is wrong because Buddha does not exist, either to live after death or to not live after death.

The *Bodhisatta* conquered death by gaining freedom from the “delusion of being” by waking up from the dream of “being in the world.” “His” greatness lies, according to Buddhist

thinking, in His realization that “He did not exist” in the first place, either to live forever or to die forever.

This explains the fallibility of the infallible Pope when he said: **“The Christians have the hope of ‘eternal life in Heaven,’ after death, while the Buddhists are beyond hope because they want ‘eternal death in Nirvana’ after death.”**

Reference: Paul, Pope John II. 1994. *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Edited by: Messori, Vittorio. New York: Alfred Knopf.

This, to the Buddhist, is not only a fallacy, it is also a blasphemy. A Buddhist might, in return, compassionately state that the hope of the Pope, when seen from a Buddhist point of view appears to be only an escape from the reality of “death and suffering,” into a fantasy of “eternal life and eternal happiness in Heaven,” which certainly cannot be proved until death.

The *Bodhisatta* became a Buddha by Awakening to the reality of “impersonality” (*anatta*). He conquered death, not by dying, to be never reborn, as the Pope mistakenly thinks, but by “ceasing to be” here and now. He conquered death, not by eliminating rebirth, but by eliminating “being” or existence. The elimination of “being” is not the cessation of life, which is “death.” It is the cessation of the “delusion of existence.” He eliminated “being” not through death but through the process of “depersonalization” of what had been personalized. He did so with the thoughts: “this is not mine,” “this is not me,” “this is not myself.” This conquest of death is very beautifully expressed in the last words of the Buddha:

**“My final word to you, my disciples:
All that is constructed is subject to destruction.
Tread the path in sanity.”**

These last words of the Buddha sum up His message to the world. The death of the body itself should remind us that the delusion of “self” one creates is subject to destruction. The futility of constructing a “self in the world” has been clearly expressed. Clinging to this evanescent construct is insanity. To walk out of this delusion is sanity. Our task, therefore, is to stop being insane. It should also remind us that stopping the construction must be accomplished without delay before death can interrupt the task. This urgency is what Buddhists should recall on this *Vesak* day, “struggle on as if your head is on fire.”

This message of the Buddha is the message of freedom from the delusion of “being,” which results in freedom from death or immortality. The Buddha achieved this immortality and taught this as the way of salvation to the world. The world, for the most part, preferred to ignore this message in favor of the “delusion of being” and the pseudo-immortality of the fantastic dream world.

Complete Quietus (*Parinirvāna*)

The demise of the mortal body, which appeared to the world as the Buddha, is called the “Complete Quietus” (*Parinirvāna*). At the age of eighty, the “mortal body” that was already “depersonalized” by the *Bodhisatta* on the day of Awakening expired on a full moon day in May.

This death of the mortal body is called *Pari-Nirvāna* today, which term does not mean death, though it is often mistaken to mean the death of the Buddha. A “Buddha,” who has Awakened from the “dream of existence,” is immortal because he has ceased to exist as a body, mind, or soul, even though the body, which is mistaken to mean the Buddha is living. One has to exist in some form before one can die. If one does not exist, how can one die? Therefore, it is an inaccuracy to state that the Buddha ever died. This is the reason why it is extremely important for a Buddhist to understand the meaning of this “Awakening” of the Buddha.

Once, when I was abroad, I met a Christian lady. She asked me who I was. When I explained to her that I was a Buddhist monk, she said to me, “Buddha died; Christ did not die.” I answered, “Well, I do not want to start an argument with you, my lady; I can only say you are sadly mistaken. If you want to understand further, please come to my temple.” I gave her my address card, but she never came. She was not interested in listening to my answer. I didn’t get the chance to make her understand that, strictly speaking, a Buddha cannot die because “He” did not “exist” as a “person.” *Bodhisatta*, the ascetic, awoke from the “dream” of “being a “self” in a “world” that exists. This way, he was transformed into a fully Awake “non-existent” Buddha. He did so by depersonalizing his personality, including the body, with which people identify him.

According to Christian belief, Christ did die and was resurrected. But, according to Buddhist thinking, the Buddha never died because “He” never “existed.” The greatness of Christ, according to the Christians, lies in his “rising from the dead.” According to Buddhist thinking, everyone rises from the dead. Whereas the greatness of the Buddha lies, according to

the Buddhists, in “His” not dying at all. This contrast reveals a very important fundamental difference between the Buddhist and Christian ways of thought.

Buddhist Christian Distinction

The Christian “God,” by definition, is “one who exists.” His immortality is through “being eternal.” On the other hand, a Buddha is, by definition, “one who does not exist” even though the body is living; “His” immortality is through a paradigm shift, which is a change in perspective from existence to “non-existence.” Christians believe that God is the Creator of the world. Buddhists believe that God is a human potential, which, when actualized by human effort, man becomes God (*Brahma bhuto*). Such a person who has actualized the human potential is called a Buddha (the Awake one), which means one who has Awakened from the dream of existence and entered the reality of impersonal experience – Tathāgata (Tathā = reality + gata = gone to, or arrived at).

The foregoing statements are somewhat confusing to most readers. Therefore, they need further clarification. Let us begin by explaining the meaning of (1) the birth of a *Bodhisatta*, (2) the Awakening of a Buddha, and (3) the passing away of the mortal body that appeared to be a Buddha.

- (1) Buddha never existed.
- (2) Greatness of the Buddha was that He did not rise from the dead.
- (3) The immortality of the Buddha is through non existence.

(1) Let us first define the word existence. To exist is to occupy space and time. What occupies space and time is the body. When we are born, what is really born is the body. When some people see me and call my name, it is the body that they see and name. When the government gives me an identity card, it is my body that they photograph. Even my passport or driver's license considers my body to be me. What is objectively experienced by others as me is my body. What is objectively experienced by me as myself is my body. What are subjectively experienced by me as myself are my sensations, emotions, and my thoughts, which I call my mind.

The Buddha was a person who depersonalized all that He experienced as Himself. Thus He lost his identity as a person and so became a "non-person" from His point of view, from His subjective experience of personality or "self." Once He had done this, He ceased to exist as a "self." He also lost his self-centered behavior and all selfishness. He could be existing, from other people's points of view, but as far as he was concerned, He did not exist as a "self." That is why we said the Buddha never existed.

(2) Buddhists believe that every person who dies is reborn. That is rising from the dead. The aim of Buddhism is to stop rising from the dead. The Buddha is one who achieved this. Therefore, He did not rise from the dead.

(3) The Buddha discovered the way to immortality. This immortality is not eternal life. It is the freedom from the delusion of existence. Thus the immortality of the Buddha is due to non-existence through enlightenment.

When a *Bodhisatta* is born, the body continues to be personalized. But this body is soon to be depersonalized when the *Bodhisatta* becomes a Buddha. This is why it is correct to say that a *Bodhisatta* is born as a person. This birth is seen as the birth of an individual personality identified as the *Bodhisatta*. Yet this is not the birth of a Buddha. A Buddha can never be born because he has ceased to exist by depersonalizing the body.

CONCLUSION

It becomes clear from the foregoing discussion that **the Buddha was never born, and "He" never died because He never existed.** Yet the body of the *Bodhisatta* who became a Buddha remains to be seen by all as the Buddha. The Buddha, however, can truly be seen only by someone who sees the Dhamma. The Buddha has "become Dhamma" (*Dhamma Bhuto*) through a paradigm shift. He has moved from the ken of "apparent existence" to the ken of "the reality of impersonal experience" where no "self" or "world" is visible or known. This is what the Mahayanists call *suññatā*. This is why the Buddha is called "The Transcendent One" (*Tathāgata*). He has transcended the human and ordinary state of "existence."

Therefore we celebrate the *Bodhisatta* Gotama's conquest of death by Awakening from the dream of "being-in-the-world," and entering the reality of "impersonality" (*anatta*), by becoming the Buddha, the "Awake-one."

We celebrate Siddhatta Gotama's **discovery of the way to immortality, or opening the door to deathlessness, for the benefit of all beings.** This achievement is a historic and truly scientific breakthrough, which is of great significance to all

humanity. It was not only a great step for the *Bodhisatta* but also **a tremendous step for all humankind.**

Therefore, on this *Vesak* day, we do not really celebrate the birth, existence, or death of the Buddha because He was never born, nor did “He” exist, nor did He die. However, we celebrate the final birth of the *Bodhisatta* who suffered in *samsāra* and practiced the *Pāramitas* through innumerable aeons for the sake of all beings.

We celebrate the *Bodhisatta* Gotama’s conquest of death through freedom from “being” by Awakening from the dream of “being-in-the-world,” and entering the reality of “impersonality” (*anatta*), by becoming a Buddha, an “Awake-one.”

We also feel, as unenlightened beings, our extreme condolences about the disappearance of the figure of the Buddha, when the body of the *Bodhisatta* that was depersonalized in attaining Buddhahood, and was visible to us as the Buddha, attained quietus.

These glorious ***Vesak* celebrations of Buddhists remind** not only Buddhists but **all humankind**, about:

- (1) **The ultimate realities of life**
- (2) **The basic problem of life** that everyone suffers from without exception
- (3) **The victory of man over the ever threatening Challenger – Death (*MĀRA*), by the Awakening of the Buddha from the dream of existence.**

This fact, if understood fully by all humankind, All the fires of lust, hate, sorrow, and fear will be extinguished forever, and Global Unity, Peace and Happiness, will prevail in the world.

So,

Let’s beat

The drum of deathlessness for the benefit of all humanity:

**“Open for you is the door to immortality
Those who have ears do listen and be free”**

– Buddha