

News and Musings

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Next week, here and in some Buddhist countries on Wednesday, and in others on Thursday, most of the Buddhist world will be celebrating an occasion known variously as Vesak, Visakha Puja, Buddha Jayanti, Buddha Purnima, Kason, Saka dawa, and Buddha Day. It's a massive celebration, a contemplation and outpouring of love and devotion for the Buddha and it focusses in particular on his Birth, his Enlightenment and his Parinibbana or final Passing.

This week I shall focus on the birth.

Although it's common to speak of the birth of the Buddha he didn't become the Buddha until he was thirty-five when he achieved his Full and Perfect Enlightenment. Prior to that we refer to him as the Bodhisatta, that is a 'wisdom being' intent on becoming a Buddha. A Bodhisatta over successive births, develops and matures certain qualities known as the Parami or Perfections. So, although, by the time of his birth he had established a firm foundation from which to make that final bid for Enlightenment, nevertheless, he was born a human being, just like us, with a man's normal desires and delusions.

He was born in the foothills of the Himalayas, into the ruling family of a minor state that straddled the modern borderlands of India and Nepal. The Queen, his mother, had in fact been on her way to give birth in her family home and had stopped to rest in the Lumbini garden when the child was born. Later, at the palace, an aged ascetic of high spiritual attainment named Asita came to see the child. On being presented to him the old man first smiled and then wept. When the King demanded to know what this meant, Asita said that he'd smiled when he recognised that this child would be a Buddha but then wept when he realised that he, Asita, would not live to see it. At the young prince's traditional naming ceremony he was called Siddhattha, which means 'wish fulfilled'. Then eight learned brahmins were asked to predict his future. Seven of them said that should he take to the religious life he would become a Buddha but if he remained in the world then he would become a powerful monarch. The eighth and youngest confidently predicted he would achieve Enlightenment and be a Buddha.

The prospect of his son becoming a universal monarch fanned the flames of ambition in the King's heart and so he determined to do all in his power to keep the boy's mind well away from religion and spiritual matters. He was given all he desired and when he was sixteen married to a ravishingly beautiful princess.

The exact year of his birth is uncertain, although like the Enlightenment and his Passing, his Birth is supposed to have occurred on a Full Moon of the ancient Indian lunar month of Visakha, a month that usually corresponds roughly to our month of May. Which is why this festival always falls at about this time of the year. Traditionally, the year of his birth is believed to have been 623 BCE. Of course, a few modern scholars have disputed that but

whenever it was, it was certainly a very long time ago.

Following the invasions that put paid to Buddhism in India, the location of the birthplace, with practically all of India's Buddhist past was gradually lost and forgotten beneath the dust of centuries. But then throughout the nineteenth century, thanks to a few, mostly British, amateur archaeologists India's Buddhist past was gradually rediscovered. Their researches were aided by the inscribed and polished stone pillars that Ashoka, India's greatest Emperor and a Buddhist, had raised to mark the more prominent places of the Buddha's life and ministry; and they were helped too by the written records of two Chinese pilgrims, one in the 5th Century and another in the 7th that gave detailed descriptions of their visits to the holy places. In 1896, just across the border and a few miles inside Nepal the broken pillar that marked the birthplace was finally unearthed. In 1997 Lumbini was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Then in 2013 the remains of a shrine which had apparently surrounded a tree was unearthed at the Buddha's birthplace and carbon dated from the 6th Century BCE. Now Queen Maha Maya, the Buddha's mother had given birth standing beneath, and grasping the branch of, a sal tree. We can only speculate but it seems likely that it was that tree around which this ancient and newly discovered shrine had been built.

Nowadays, there is a nearby town boasting well-appointed western style hotels and around the birthplace itself are many temples representing various Buddhist countries and styles of Buddhism; and daily come hundreds, if not thousands, of pilgrims to pay their respects at the foot of that ancient pillar.

It was so different when I first went there in 1971, I remember for the last twenty miles or so of my journey sitting in the back of a cycle rickshaw and crossing into Nepal at a border post that was marked by little more than a huge bamboo levelled across the road and raised when my passport had been duly inspected and stamped. When I arrived at the then only temple at Lumbini it was almost dark and I remember the resident monk saying that that evening he was going to light the lamp in the top of the temple because the Home Minister of Nepal would shortly be arriving – by elephant! Sure enough, as the evening drew in we could hear and feel the thud of those mighty footsteps as they approached.

Now what should you do on Buddha Day? Well, your options are limited but it's still a very special day so dedicate the day and begin by sitting in front of your shrine with its image or picture of the Buddha. Never mind if you have no incense to offer or it remains unlit. Go over the precepts and see how you might work better with them in future. Read some relevant passages of scripture and remember to be especially kind and tolerant and in your meditation to recollect the Buddha and cultivate Loving-Kindness.

May you all be well and happy and at peace.