

# An Introduction to Buddhist festivals

Bristol Buddhist Centre

## Why do we have Buddhist festivals?

The most important reason for Buddhist festivals is to mark a particular event in the calendar, for example, remembering the time when the Buddha gained enlightenment or his death (or “paranirvana” as it is more commonly known). There are a number of reasons why Buddhists around the world gather together for festivals. Here are a few from my own experience, from the tradition in which I practice:

**Worship.** A chance to pay tribute to the Buddha and his teachings and to remember the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama. This also provides the chance to create a beautiful shrine (more about that later!) and a pleasant atmosphere in which to practice and celebrate with friends.

**Collective practice.** The Buddha placed much emphasis on the importance of ‘gathering together in large numbers’. Traditionally, it is said that the followers of the Buddha (during and after his life) gathered together at each full moon, to practice the dharma, meditate and meet with one another. This is still a really important practice. Sometimes collective practice goes on through the night, with continuous meditation. You’ll notice that each of the festivals is on or close to a full moon, which relates back to the times when people marked time and seasons by the phases of the moon and nature’s cycles.

**Sangha building.** Closely linked to the last point, gathering together in large numbers helps to develop the strength and harmony of the sangha, the community of those who tread the Buddhist path together. This is important in Buddhism, as sangha is one of the three precious jewels (Buddha, Dharma and Sangha). Often people give each other cards or small presents on festival days to celebrate their connections and their faith.

**Personal reflection.** Festivals provide the opportunity to take stock and reflect on one’s own Buddhist practice, linked to the particular theme of the festival. It gives the chance to review one’s personal practice and one’s ‘next step’ in spiritual terms.

## When are the main festivals Buddhists celebrate?

### Paranirvana – full moon in February

The point of paranirvana day is to recollect the Buddha’s life and death. Buddhists think about their lives and where they are in relationship to the state of enlightenment or nirvana. Nirvana is believed to be the end of rebirth and is the ultimate aim of Buddhism, when all craving and suffering is overcome.



We celebrate Paranirvana by meditating and practicing together at the Buddhist Centre. Celebrations vary. In our sangha, we may have readings from the Parinibbana Sutta which describes the last days of Buddha, and reflect on those who have recently died.

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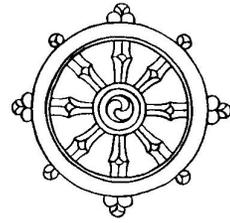
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## **Wesak or Buddha day – full moon in May**

Wesak or Vesak, is also known as Buddha Day and celebrates the Buddha's enlightenment. It is said to be the most important day in the Buddhist calendar in many cultures. During Wesak, we celebrate the life of the Buddha, his enlightenment and his teachings. It can be a very joyous occasion. We remember the night of the Buddha's enlightenment and his insights into his previous lives, as well as his revelations about the nature of death, karma and rebirth, suffering and desire. This recollection occurs through meditation, puja and chanting.

## **Dharma Day - Full moon in July**

Dharma day marks the beginning of the time when the Buddha started to teach and share the truth of enlightenment. The word 'Dharma' can be translated as truth, path or teaching. It is the term used for the path to enlightenment, or the Buddhist teaching. Soon after his Enlightenment the Buddha went to find his former disciples and share his experience of enlightenment with them. This event was seen as the start of the Buddhist faith in India. The first teaching the Buddha gave to his original five disciples is known as 'The First Turning of the Wheel of the Dharma (Dharmachakra).'



In early Buddhism, the time around what has now become Dharma Day (the eighth lunar month in the traditional Indian calendar) marked the beginning of the rainy season in Northern India. At this point, the Buddha and his monks and nuns would suspend their nomadic lifestyle for three months. They would shelter together until the monsoon season was over, and use this time as a period of further meditation and reflection. At the end of this time, they would resume their travelling, passing on the Buddha's teachings to those who were interested.

When we celebrate Dharma day we express our gratitude to the Buddha, and other enlightened teachers, who have shared their knowledge with others. Dharma day is usually celebrated with readings from the Buddhist scriptures, studying particular Buddhist texts and is an opportunity to reflect deeply on their content.

## **Sangha Festival - Full moon in November**

Sangha Day is another important Buddhist festival, celebrating the Sangha, or the Buddhist community, those who practice together near a Buddhist Centre or temple. It is a chance for people to reaffirm their commitment to Buddhist practices and traditions (in our movement, this means renewing 'mitra' vows and recollecting one's motivation and vision for joining the order. A mitra is someone who has become a 'friend' in their local sangha situation).



On Sangha Day Buddhists celebrate both the ideal of creating a spiritual community, and also the actual spiritual community of friendship and connections which they are creating. The Sangha is precious in Buddhism as without those in the community to learn from and share aspirations with, the spiritual life would be very challenging, pretty dull and lonely. Sangha Day is a traditional time for exchange of gifts; it has become a prominent festival among Western Buddhists even though it is less well known in the East. Celebrations vary, but are likely to include chanting, meditation, puja and the reaffirmation of people's commitment to Buddhist practice. We also tend to have a 'cultural event' to share the artist/cultural/musical talents of different members of the sangha!

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## What characterises a Buddhist festival?

As we've seen so far, Buddhist festivals have a slightly different 'flavour' to each of them. Buddhists in varying cultures across the world will celebrate additional festivals, so these are just the ones we would celebrate here in Bristol and in other UK FWBO Buddhist Centres. So what would characterise a festival in general?

1. A festival **shrine**. What's on the shrine?

**Rupa** – A Buddha figure to remind us of the Buddha's enlightenment. The backdrop to the rupa may be a 'thangka' a beautiful painting of a Buddha or bodhisattva figure.

**Candle** – light, hope of the Dharma

**Flowers** – Beauty and impermanence

**Incense** – the fragrance of a well lived, skilful life

7 **traditional offerings** (in little bowls):

- Water for washing
- Water to drinking
- Food hard and soft
- Clean clothes (piece of cloth)
- Flowers
- Candle
- Incense

2. The reading of the **dharma**, particularly sutras.

3. Chanting of **mantras**.

4. Practising **meditation**, both walking and sitting.

5. **Puja** (worship) with special readings.

6. **Bowing** and making **offerings** to the shrine.

7. **Exchanging gifts** with others and rejoicing in the merit of friends.

8. **Sharing food** together, normally a vegetarian shared supper.

9. Spending time with **Buddhist friends**.

10. Thinking about and reflecting on one's **own Buddhist practice**.



A temporary shrine created during a school visit in Bristol.

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## Ideas for Classroom Activities:

### Festivals

- Do the students practice festivals as part of their own faith? If so, what do they do to celebrate these festivals, in terms of practice, ceremonies, dress, food, social occasions etc. Consider comparing the similarities and differences between these festivals and Buddhist festivals, in as interactive a way as possible! (e.g. shrines/decorations/card-making/food sharing/dance/chanting/music etc.
- To those students of no faith, what do they make of the idea of festivals? What celebrations do they have in their lives which may be similar to festivals?

### Shrines and creating a shrine.

- What are the students' responses to the shrine?
- Does the shrine remind them of places and things they've seen here or abroad? If so, perhaps bring in photos and share stories of these times.
- Can students see the point of having a shrine as a focal point for practice? If not, what might they see as a special, sacred or quiet place? What might be the benefit of such a place to Buddhist practitioners?
- What would students each want to put on the shrine, which connects them with their own core values [and what are those values?]
- Consider collectively creating a shrine in the classroom and use it as focal point during stilling exercises.

### Useful websites:

<http://fwbo.org/festivals.html>

<http://www.buddhanet.net/festival.htm>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/religion/> This website shows the relevant date of each of the festivals in the current year, so it's useful to curriculum planning.

### Picture credits:

With grateful thanks for use of the following photos (listed in order of appearance):

- Reclining Paranirvana Buddha: <http://www.evcal.org/LuangPrabang2005.html>
- Dharma wheel from <http://www.buddhanet.net/lineart/symbols/pages/wheel-tib.htm>
- Symbol from kesa, showing the 3 jewels, Kamalamani's own photo.
- School shrine, Kamalamani's own photo.