

Significant Times and Dates

Festivals

There are many special or holy days celebrated throughout the year by the Buddhist communities. Some holy days are specific to a particular Buddhist tradition or ethnic group. There are two aspects to take into consideration regarding Buddhist festivals: most Buddhists (with the exception of the Japanese) use the Lunar Calendar, and the dates of Buddhist festivals vary between Buddhist traditions.

- All full moons and new moons are significant days for Buddhists and special ceremonies are held in the temples on these days. Full moon and new moon days are also especially significant for the ordained *Sangha* who gather together on these days to recite the *Vinaya* texts.
- **Buddhist New Year** while not a particularly spiritual holiday, is celebrated in all Buddhist countries, though at very different times. The New Year is celebrated from the first full moon in January in many Mahayana countries and from the first full moon in April for three days in Theravadin countries (Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, and Thailand). Tibetan Buddhists generally celebrate it in March.

Regardless of the date of the New Year, it is a time when people visit their local temples and monasteries to offer gifts to monks, to pay homage to The Buddha and, for some, to rededicate them to deeper Buddhist practice. In Japan, the New Year is celebrated by ringing bells 108 times in order to rid all beings of the 108 troublesome desires, according to their beliefs.

- **Vesak, Wesak, or “Buddha Day”** is the most important festival and spiritual celebration in Buddhism. In Japan it’s called *Hanamatsuri*. It is usually celebrated on the first full moon in May. The term *Vesak* derives from the Indian month of that name in which the festival is held. The festival commemorates the birth of The Buddha to be, Siddhartha Gautama, and his life. Siddhartha Gautama attained his Enlightenment at the age of 35 when he became The Buddha and his final “passing” into *nirvana* occurred at the age of 80. In some countries, *Vesak* covers all the major milestones of Buddha’s life: his birth, enlightenment, and death.

While there are some variations in how the day is celebrated, generally devout Buddhists will try to visit their local temple for at least part of the day, if not for the full day and night of the full moon. Celebrants will attend to the practices of giving, virtue, and cultivation. They will observe giving by bringing and giving food as an offering and to share, as well as offer supplies for the temple and other symbolic offerings for the shrine. They will observe virtue by reaffirming their commitment to the moral precepts. Cultivation may include meditating, chanting, and attending sermons.

- **Bodhi Day** is mostly observed in Mahayana countries. The day celebrates the awakening or enlightenment (*Bodhi*) of the historical Buddha at the age

of 29. It is a time for reflection. Theravada and Tibetan Buddhists celebrate this event together with Buddha's birth and death on Wesak Day. Customs vary but may include special meditation, chanting *sutras* (Buddhist texts) and doing acts of kindness.

- **Dharma Day** (also known as Asalha Puja Day) in some Buddhist communities commemorates the "turning of the wheel of the *Dharma*"—the Buddha's first sermon delivered at the Sarnath Deer Park to a group of former fellow spiritual seekers after he attained enlightenment. It was, in a sense, the beginning of his teaching career and thus marks the beginning of Buddhism, the religion. It is usually celebrated on the first full moon in July.
- **Magha Puja Day** (also called Sangha Day and Four Fold Assembly Day) is the second most important Buddhist festival. It is a major uposatha or holy day. The festival is celebrated by most Theravada Buddhists on the first full moon day of the third lunar month. This usually falls some time in February or March. Sangha Day commemorates The Buddha's visit to Veruvana Monastery in the city of Rajagaha, when 1,250 *arhats* are said to have spontaneously returned from their wanderings to pay their respects to him. It is believed, that it was at this gathering that The Buddha first revealed the rules and regulations for the monastic order.

The day is dedicated to celebrating the *Sangha*, or the Buddhist community. It is a traditional time for exchange of gifts among Buddhists and it has become an especially important festival in Buddhist communities in the West, but less significant in the East. As well, it has come to be an opportunity for the entire community to meet and offer gifts to monks, pay homage to The Buddha, and perform a variety of meritorious deeds. Celebrations vary, but generally include chanting, meditating, lighting oil lamps, and reaffirming one's commitment to Buddhist practice.

- **Uposatha** (Observance Day) are the four monthly holy days which continue to be observed in Theravadin countries—the new moon, full moon, and quarter moon days, known in Sri Lanka as Poya Day.
- **Parinirvana or Nirvana Day** is a Mahayana festival that commemorates the death (*Parinirvana*) of the Buddha. The death of The Buddha is celebrated because Buddhists believe that he attained Enlightenment and he achieved freedom from physical existence and its sufferings. The Buddha died in a state of meditation, attained *nirvana*, and was released from the cycle of death and rebirth. Parinirvana Day is celebrated by meditating or by going to Buddhist temples or monasteries. As Buddhist festivals in general, celebrations vary with different schools, cultures, and nations. Parinirvana Day is a festive and social occasion in monasteries.
- **Anapanasati Day** is celebrated by Theravada Buddhists at the end of the one rains retreat Vassa. It is traditionally celebrated on the full moon of the tenth month in the lunar calendar and it follows almost immediately after the final holiday celebrations of Pavarana. This special day derives from the story that dates back to Buddhas' time. It is recounted that, at the end of the rainy season, The Buddha was so pleased with the achievements of his students that he was inspired to extend their retreat for another month. When the

end of the extra month of the rains retreat ended, the night of the full moon, The Buddha gave his famous teaching about meditation and the regulation of breathing, which may be found in *Anapanasati Sutta*. *Anapanasati* means “mindfulness of breathing” and is a form of Buddhist meditation now common to Tibetan, Zen, Tiantai, and Theravada Buddhism as well as Western-based mindfulness programs. The day is celebrated in monasteries by reading excerpts from the scriptures, which tell about the life of Buddha. Many adherents at this time move to a monastery for a day, where they sleep and eat a meal.

- **Pavarana Day** is the day that marks the end of the three lunar months of *Vassa* (or lent). The day is mostly celebrated in Asian countries where Theravada Buddhism is practiced. Generally, Mahayana Buddhists do not observe *Vassa*, with some exceptions such as Son/Thien monks in Korea. Traditionally, it is on this day where each monk (*bhikkhu*) is expected to present themselves before the monastic community (*Sangha*) and atone for any offense he may have committed during the *Vassa*.
- **Kathina Ceremony** (robe offering ceremony) is held on any convenient date within one month of the conclusion of the *Vassa* Retreat, which is the three-month rains retreat season (*Vassa*) for the monastic order. It is the time of the year when the laity may offer new robes and other necessities to the monks and nuns.
- **Padmasambhava Day** (commonly known as Guru Rinpoche) is celebrated by Tibetan Buddhists. Padmasambhava, who is sometimes called the Second Buddha, is a historical and also mythical figure of Tibetan Buddhism. While Buddhist scriptures were known in Southern Tibet from about 173 CE onwards, they had little impact on the region. Six hundred years later, it was Padmasambhava who was able to merge tantric Buddhism with the local Tibetan religion to form what we now recognize as Tibetan Buddhism.
- **Abhidharma Day** is a Burmese tradition. It is a day that celebrates the time when The Buddha is said to have gone to the Tushita Heaven to teach his mother the Abhidharma. It is held on the full moon of the seventh month of the Burmese lunar year starting in April, which corresponds to the full moon day in October.
- **Ulambana** (Oban in Japan; Ancestor Day), although typically a Mahayana celebration of the dead, has spread to Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand, which are Theravadin countries. In Mahayana tradition, it is believed that the gates of hell are opened on the first day of the eighth lunar month and ghosts may visit the world for 15 days. Families offer food to the ghosts during this time to relieve their suffering. On the fifteenth day, Ulambana or Ancestor Day, people visit cemeteries to make offerings to the departed ancestors.

The Japanese Buddhist festival known as Obon, begins on the thirteenth of July and lasts for three days. It celebrates the reunion of a family’s ancestors with the living.
- Avalokitesvara’s (Kuan Yin) birthday is a festival which celebrates the *Bodhisattva* ideal represented by Avalokitesvara, who represents the perfection of compassion. (Pew Research Center)

Buddhist Calendar

Calendar of Buddhist Holy Days

There are many special or holy days throughout the year in the various Buddhist communities. The specific dates of Buddhist events and celebrations differ across schools and traditions but almost all traditions follow a lunar calendar. The most significant celebration happens every spring around May on the night of the full moon, when Buddhists all over the world celebrate the birth, enlightenment, and death of The Buddha. This holy day is commonly known as Buddha Day. The calendar that follows below provides information regarding some important Buddhist holy days.

Buddhist Holy Days				
Holiday	2021	2022	2023	2024
Mahayana New Year***	January 28	January 18	January 7	January 25
Nirvana Day (Parinirvana)	February 8 or 15 depending on the school	February 8 or 15 depending on the school	February 8 or 15 depending on the school	February 8 or 15 depending on the school
Magha Puja (Sangha) Day **	February 26	February 16	February 5	February 24
Theravada New Year (3 Days)	April 27	April 16 (3 days)	April 6	April 24
Dhamma (Dharma, Asalha Puja) Day	July 24	July 13	July 3	July 21
Visakha (Vesakha) Puja* (Buddha Day)	May 26	May 16	May 19	May 22
Bodhi Day (Japan)	December 8	December 8	December 8	December 8

*** The Mahayana New Year falls on a different day depending on culture and nation. For example, China, Korea, and Vietnam hold their celebrations in accord with the lunar calendar, in either late January or early February, but Tibetans traditionally celebrate one month later.

** Māgha Puja is celebrated on the full moon day of the third lunar month in Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Sri Lanka and on the full moon day of Tabauing in Myanmar.

*The exact date of Vesak varies according to the various lunar calendars used in different traditions and countries. In Theravada countries following the Buddhist calendar, it falls on a full moon, Uposatha day, typically in the fifth or sixth lunar month. In South-East Asia, most countries celebrate Vesak on the same date as in Thailand, or one day later. In China, dates are about a week earlier.