

Buddha's Birthday

Summary: Buddhists often consider the Buddha's birthday an occasion for celebration, and Chinese, Thai, and Japanese temples in America all celebrate differently.

On a Sunday in May, in the great hall of the Hsi Lai Temple in California, over 400 people gather beneath the three enormous golden Buddhas—Shakyamuni, Amitabha, and Bhaishajya-guru. A woman's voice announces over the loudspeaker that 2,535 years ago, the Buddha was born in the Lumbini Garden in present day Nepal: "The Buddha is like a lamp in this world of suffering, shining the way for us," she says. "We have a special ceremony in which we symbolically bathe the image of the baby Buddha. It is, in a sense, to clean the Buddha. But it is more to purify our own defilements within ourselves. As our clothing gets dirty and needs to be changed, so our minds—our selves—need change and renewal. The pure nature of the Buddha is innate in us all. It is covered up with these defilements. We need to clean off the dirt so that we can shine. So when we bathe the Buddha, keep in mind that what we want to purify is our own defilements, so that our pure nature can shine. If you would like to transfer the merit you gain from this act to others, do so."

Reverently, the crowd moves out of the temple hall to participate in bathing the baby Buddha, each taking a long handled bamboo ladle to pour a cup of sweetened tea over the small image, standing in a basin of flowers at the temple door. Since this is an important day for the tradition, there is a "Refuge Ceremony" for those who wish to become Buddhists by taking refuge in the Buddha, the *Dharma*, and the *Sangha*.

In the Chinese Buddhist tradition, the birthday of the Buddha is observed in the spring. In the Theravada traditions, this day is called Visakha or Vesak, the full moon of the month of Visakha, which usually falls in May. It celebrates three significant events—the birth, the enlightenment, and the death of the Buddha. At Wat Dhammaram in Chicago, as at temples throughout Thailand, the laity circumambulate the temple in procession, bearing lighted candles, incense, and flowers.

In the Japanese tradition of the Buddhist Churches of America, the Buddha's birthday is observed on April 8, a day called Hanmatsuri. On Hanmatsuri, the traditional story of the Buddha's birth is told. Queen Maya dreamed that a white elephant entered her body and the Prince Siddhartha was born. He was born standing

up and took seven steps. He is said to have raised his right hand and declared, “Above heaven and below heaven, I alone am the World Honored One.” In the sanctuary, the altar bearing the image of the baby Buddha rests on the back of a white elephant. Pouring ladles of sweetened tea on the baby Buddha, they say, recalls the rain of flowers that fell in the Lumbini Garden when the Buddha was born. Meanwhile, in the Dharma School, children draw pictures of the Buddha’s birth and tell the story.