

Vesakh Message 2014
An Interview by His Eminence Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran
President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue

What is the significance of the Vesakh?

It is the holiest of Buddhist holy days, commemorating Gautama Buddha's birth, at Lumbini in present-day Nepal (c. 563 B.C.E) enlightenment at Bodh Gaya in the state of Bihar (c. 528 B.C.E), and passing away or Parinirvana at Kushinagar (483 B.C.E) both in India. According to tradition, Gautama Buddha was born, achieved enlightenment, and died during the full moon of the month of May, known as *Vaisakha* in the Indian lunar calendar. While the above three historic events of the Buddha are observed in all Buddhist countries, they are not always celebrated on the same day. In Theravada Buddhist countries, the key moments in the Buddha's life are marked on the full moon of May. In Japan, the three anniversaries are usually observed on separate days—his birth (*hanamatsuri*), on April 8, his enlightenment on December 8, and his death on February 15. This year in most East Asia countries, Buddha's birthday is celebrated on Friday, 6 May whereas in Theravada countries (Sri Lanka, Thailand, Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia, India) it falls on 13 or 14 May.

Why is Siddhartha Gautama called “Buddha”?

Buddha is a word in the very old Indian languages Pāli and Sanskrit that means "Enlightened one". Buddha actually means “one who is awake”. For this reason Vesakh is known as the festival of lights. According to Buddhism, there were countless Buddha's before Gautama Buddha and there will be many Buddhas after him.

How do the Buddhists celebrate Vesakh?

This celebration differs from country to country, but generally activities are centred on the local temples, where Buddhists, in some countries dressed in white, gather to listen to sermons by monks, to observe religious ceremonies and to conduct the '**Buddha Pooja**' – offerings to the Buddha. In the evening, there are candlelit processions around the temples. The festival is celebrated with much colour and gaiety. Homes, streets and temples are decorated with paper lanterns and oil lamps. Some countries erect Vesakh pandals illuminated with large numbers of bulbs, relating a Jataka story or an event of Buddha's life. It's traditional on this day in some countries to free caged birds,

setting up booths along streets to offer a treat to passers-by as a meritorious act. Also popular are 'Bakthi Gee' (devotional songs) that celebrate Buddha's teaching and are sung by choirs.

How does the Vesakh message contribute to enhance Buddhist-Christian dialogue?

The Pontifical Council of Interreligious Dialogue (PCID) is the central office of the Catholic Church for the promotion of interreligious dialogue in accordance with the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, in particular the declaration *"Nostra Aetate"*. It is generally agreed that the number of Buddhists in the world is estimated at around 350 million (6% of the world's population) and 90% live in Asia. The Holy Father, Pope Francis appealed to all of us to “intensify dialogue among various religions” and “to build bridges connecting all people, in such a way that everyone can see in the other not an enemy, not a rival, but a brother or sister to be welcomed and embraced!” (*Audience with the Diplomatic Corps Accredited to the Holy See*, 22 March 2013). I think that the Vesakh message sent from this Dicastery since 1995 has been contributing to foster the dialogue of friendship among Buddhists and Christians. With the Vesakh message, the PCID is able to greet the Buddhist friends on their greatest religious feast. Such gestures of goodwill offer both Buddhists and Christians an occasion to renew the existing friendship, to overcome prejudices, to start new relationships and to collaborate closely for the betterment of the human family. Besides, since the message is translated into different local languages, through the Local Churches, it reaches out to a wider audience.

The theme of the Vesakh Message 2014 is entitled, “Christians and Buddhists: Together Fostering Fraternity”. Is there any particular motive for choosing this theme?

Pope Francis' Message for the World Day of Peace in 2014 entitled “*Fraternity, the Foundation and Pathway to Peace*” notes that “Fraternity is an essential human quality, for we are relational beings. A lively awareness of our relatedness helps us to look upon and to treat each person as a true sister or brother; without fraternity it is impossible to build a just society and a solid and lasting peace [...]” ((n. 1)

Buddhist and Christian ethical teaching on fraternity is based on loving kindness and compassion. Buddhists teach that friendly speech, friendly thought, sharing of gains, moral harmony and harmony of views lead people to think of each other with loving kindness which subsequently generates authentic bonds of fraternity. Christians believe that human person is made for reciprocity, for communion and self-giving. Both religious traditions teach that human acts of selfishness, which are at the root of so much hate and evil in the world, prevent us from seeing the *Other* as brothers and sisters. The dialogue between

Buddhists and Christians is necessary more than ever today because of new threats to fraternity. The logic of dominion, egoism, tribalism, ethnic rivalry, violence and religious fundamentalism etc., belittle the sanctity of fraternity and poison peace in human family. The followers of both religions, therefore have a special duty to address the threats to fraternity and to search together for common solutions to build a culture of fraternity that would render the modern world more just, more humane, more respectful and more peaceful.

What common action does the Vesakh Message in 2014 propose to promote fraternity?

It invites both Buddhists and Christians to join hands to fulfil a triple mission:

- i) To be *outspoken* in denouncing all social ills which injure fraternity.
- ii) To be *healers* in transforming self-centred wounded persons into selfless ones
- iii) To be *reconcilers* by breaking down the walls of separation between the “us” and “them” and fostering true brotherhood among people.

In spite of the noble teachings on fraternity, how do you account for the recent emergence of violent conflicts in some countries where Buddhism is the majority religion?

New hotbeds of tension, terrorism and various forms of fundamentalism and fanaticism all threaten the integrity of the human family and the peaceful coexistence of individuals, communities and nations. Yet, if you dig into the root causes of apparently religious conflicts, you will often find deep-seated socio-economic, cultural and political grievances beneath the inter-ethnic and inter-religious rivalries. This tragic situation invites all people to commit to peace, rooted in a profound religious experience. Both Buddhists and Christians yearn for a “beyond” that, even though perceived in a different way, transcends contingency and visible reality. It is this longing that can, and must, unite us in the commitment to build a world of justice and peace, in fidelity to the original aspiration of our respective religious traditions.

