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***Wesak* and the Re-Creation of Buddhist Tradition**

Faculty of Religious Studies
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degree of Master of Arts.

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Abstract

This paper examines the Buddhist ritual *Wesak* -- commemoration of the birth, enlightenment, and death (or *parinibbāna*) of the Buddha -- and its social function in creating Buddhist identity. A socio-historical survey of early *Wesak* rituals and case studies of Sri Lanka and North America provide examples of the development of *Wesak* as a ritual. This socio-political interpretation of *Wesak* reflects the consolidating nature of ritual through its interactions with other political and religious systems, and offers a glimpse into the emerging ecumenical form of Buddhism in North America.

Résumé

Dans cette thèse, nous examinons le rituel bouddhiste du Wesak – commémoration de la naissance, de l'édification et de la mort (ou *parinibbāna*) du Bouddha – et son rôle social dans la création de l'identité bouddhiste. Une analyse socio-historique des premiers rituels du Wesak et des études de cas du Sri Lanka et de l'Amérique du Nord fournissent des exemples de l'évolution du Wesak en tant que rituel. Cette interprétation socio-politique du Wesak révèle la nature consolidante des interactions que le rituel permet d'entretenir avec d'autres systèmes politiques et religieux et donne un aperçu de la forme oecuménique du bouddhisme en Amérique du Nord.

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Introduction

The ritual celebration, *Wesak* (sometimes also rendered *Vesak*, or *Visakha*), commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and death (or *parinibbāna*) of the Buddha.¹ This lunar ritual, whose name is derived from the second month in the Indian calendar, *Vaiśākha*, is celebrated on the full moon of the fifth lunar month (usually May according to the Gregorian calendar). Although *Wesak* is technically defined as a *Theravāda* ritual, in this paper it will become evident that *Wesak* also denotes a wider variety of ritual expressions within Buddhism.

This thesis examines the role of *Wesak* in the creation of Buddhist identity in Southeast Asia and North America. More specifically, I will identify the impact of western political ideals on *Wesak* rituals in Sri Lanka, a traditionally Buddhist country, and in North America. The effect of western secularism and pluralism on shaping a sense of collective Buddhist identity has resulted in a more ecumenical form of the Buddhist tradition. Concomitantly, since in the case of both Sri Lanka and North America, Buddhism is a minority religion, the *Wesak* ritual acquires socio-political power, not only for the individual Buddhist communities who host the event, but also for the larger Buddhist cultural and ethnic communities, within which these groups reside. Thus, this portrait of *Wesak* will reflect how politics, religious belief, and ethnic culture interact within a ritual such that group cohesiveness and social order, within the Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka and North America, are consolidated.

In the introductory chapter, I will define the topic and explain the meaning of term *Wesak*, the nature of the ritual, and describe its various manifestations in Southeast Asia, North America and around the world. Chapter One focuses on the methodology

used throughout the thesis. I define the term “identity”, explicate the functionalist framework used, and review the literature pertaining to this research. Chapter Two emphasizes the different characteristics of the variety of *Wesak* rituals found around the world. Chapter Three, using examples culled from traditionally Buddhist Southeast Asian countries, highlights the syncretic nature of *Wesak*’s development as a ritual. After this, Chapter Four offers a more specific case study of Sri Lanka where encounters between Sinhalese Buddhists and western culture have significantly affected the nature of Sinhalese Buddhist identity.

In Chapter Five, the focus shifts from Southeast Asia to the history and dynamics of *Wesak* in North America. *Wesak* has been an important part of the Buddhist struggle to be recognized as a legitimate presence in many cities across North America. Chapter Six deals with the various North American adaptations that have occurred in the ritual content of *Wesak* itself and within the larger framework of the Buddhist tradition as well. It is shown that through adaptation and incorporation of western values a collective Buddhist identity has started to emerge.

Wesak also functions as a catalyst for the creation of pan-Buddhist² groups as a means of consolidating Buddhist identity in the face of minority status. The Buddhist Council of the Midwest, situated in Chicago, and the Buddhist Communities of Greater Toronto, are examples of such groups. A brief historical survey will preface my evaluation of the concurrent appearance of the *Wesak* festival and pan-Buddhist groups within North America.

By tracing the development of *Wesak* as a historical construct, the social function of this ritual to create and affirm identity will be ascertained. In the cases of Sri Lanka and North America, *Wesak* has provided a sense of continuity through its annual celebration. *Wesak* has also provided a means of transformation within the Buddhist

tradition, by consolidating a distinctly Buddhist identity through its imitation of the “Western Other” and its ideals such as secularism and pluralism. It is through this process of imitating the Other that an ecumenical form of Buddhism has emerged in North America.

Chapter One

Methodology: Identity and Functionalism

1.1.1 Identity

It is through the process of identifying things that we come to understand the world we live in. Derived from the Latin root, *idem*, the word “identity”, meaning “the same”, actually has two meanings. The first, as the Latin root indicates, refers to the idea of “absolute sameness”. The second definition, cited in Peter Jenkin’s book, *Social Identity*, “is a concept of distinctiveness which presumes consistency or continuity over time” (Jenkins 3), which immediately establishes the dynamic of “insider” and “outsider”, or “us” and “other”. While a collective identity consists of similarities, it also requires the exclusion of others. Discussion about identity can be meaningful only if there exists an “Other”.

The practical significance of men for one another... is determined by both similarities and differences among them. Similarity as fact or tendency is no less important than difference. In the most varied forms, both are the great principles of all internal and external development. In fact the cultural history of mankind can be conceived as the history of the struggles and conciliatory attempts between the two. (Simmel 1950:30, cited in Jenkins 5)

Thus, it is only through difference that group identity is consolidated or reaffirmed.

This us-other dynamic has affected, and is reflected in, the changing form and content of *Wesak* rituals. Ironically, the development of *Wesak* celebrations in both Sri Lanka and North America would indicate that the cardinal mode of identity creation for Buddhists is imitation and incorporation of the Other’s ritual traditions. For Buddhists in Sri Lanka the Other is historically represented by the Christian colonialists and for those in North America, the Other is embodied in western socializing forces such as

individualism and secularism. In both cases, the respective Buddhist communities have had to adapt to potential threats to their collective identities. Buddhist identity becomes an issue precisely because of this cultural contact, or confrontation, involving divergent languages, cultures, religions, festivals, etc. Thus *Wesak* becomes a central ritual medium through which communication takes place between Buddhists and the Other.

In this paper, I am not concerned with defining personal Buddhist identity, since such endeavors are highly subjective, and seem to be derived from a collectively shared sense of identity in the first place. Defining Buddhist identity in general is already problematic given that there are a large number of sub-classifications involving Buddhists who define themselves in relation to other kinds of Buddhists, e.g., “ethnic” vs. “occidental”, or “*Theravāda*” vs. “*Mahāyāna*”, etc. Therefore, throughout this paper identity is assumed to be synonymous with social identity.

It should also be emphasized that identity is a dynamic; as Jenkins points out, “identity can in fact only be understood as process; as ‘being’ or ‘becoming’” (Jenkins 4). Identity is often referred to as something that “just is” -- a social phenomenon that is final or static. Jenkins cautions against this approach, and emphasizes understanding personal and collective identity in terms of a working process that revolves around social interaction. This inevitably involves “doing things, i.e. social activity, process and practice, together in inter-related and institutionalized ways” (Jenkins 139). The adaptations to the *Wesak* ritual that have occurred in Sri Lanka and North America reflect this kind of social activity. The inclusion of Christian elements in the Sinhalese *Wesak* celebrations, and the creation of pan-Buddhist groups that exist to organize *Wesak* celebrations in North America, are examples of the dynamic interplay between constantly changing political forces and the meaning derived from ritual.

Annual *Wesak* celebrations provide Buddhists with an opportunity to assemble and to identify not only with each other but also with the entire Buddhist tradition. Continuity is maintained through commemoration of the figure and message of the Buddha, and yet transformation occurs due to the convergence of different cultures, languages, belief systems, etc. Tracing the historical development of *Wesak* in Southeast Asia and its more recent introduction to North America identifies certain elements that provide a sense of continuity for the Buddhist tradition, and those elements transform it.

This perennial tension between tradition and interpretation illustrates Jenkins' point that the continual consolidation of identity is always a dynamic. Studying the impact of western ideals on *Wesak's* ritual content and on identity politics reveals the process that is Buddhist identity.

1.1.2 Functionalism

In this paper, the primary approach to the *Wesak* ritual will be a functionalist one, an approach that explains social institutions "primarily in terms of the function they perform" (Jary and Jary 183). I have chosen a functionalist approach to study *Wesak* since this form of explanation, describes *Wesak* in terms of its "continuing contribution to the working and persistence of the society in question" (Jary and Jary 516). In this context, the society in question is the Buddhist tradition. In order to determine *Wesak's* continuing role as a consolidator of Buddhist identity, it is necessary to adopt a sociological approach that takes into account the origin and continuation of religion in terms of its contribution to the maintenance of social solidarity. Alternative approaches, such as *symbolic interactionism* and *conflict theory*, while popular methods of social analysis, do not specifically address the positive effects that a ritual like *Wesak* might have on a society such as the Buddhist tradition. Therefore, this functionalist approach to

Wesak celebrations highlights *Wesak's* role in consolidating a sense of Buddhist identity, while acknowledging the two-way relationship between ritual and identity. More precisely, emphasis will be placed upon the consolidation of a distinctly Buddhist identity against the Other through imitation of that Other.

The sociological dimensions of this paper are rooted in the works of one of the most influential functional theorists, French sociologist Émile Durkheim. In his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim argues that religion is primarily a way of socially organizing groups of individuals. Religion promotes social stability by presenting a set of ideas and practices that makes sacred, or sacralizes, the communal bonds that already exist within a particular community (Durkheim 36-42).

From a functionalist perspective, ritual is essential in fostering social solidarity. Durkheim views the efficacy of ritual “as the means by which individuals are brought together as a collective group” (Bell 25). More importantly, ritual occasions, such as *Wesak* function to “strengthen the bonds attaching the individual to the society of which he is a member” (Durkheim 36). The annual commemoration of the Buddha, as manifested through various forms of *Wesak* rituals around the world, provides Buddhists with a way to express their social interdependence and provides a ritual locus of group identity. Essentially, the function of *Wesak* celebrations is to provide a sense of continuity for Buddhists, not only through veneration of the Buddha, his teachings, and the community of disciples, but also through the historical tradition of celebrating *Wesak* itself. It is through the annual celebration of *Wesak*, that “the rhythm of collective activities” is maintained; “its function is to assure their regularity” (Durkheim 11).

1.2 Ethnographic Research

Functionalist social theories (which include theories of religion) emerged through scholarly emphasis on the importance of “ethnographic research, the pragmatic social uses of religion, and the structural links between religion and various forms of political and social organization” (Bell 23). All of these elements are integral to my examination of *Wesak* rituals. The data for the Western component of this comparative study is a synthesis of current literature on North American Buddhism and evidence gathered from my own field-work. The bulk of my research data for the North American section was derived from personal interviews, temple visits, and personal communication conducted with lay people and monks involved in the various Buddhist communities. To study the variations between *Wesak* rituals more carefully, I also filmed and took part in five North American *Wesak* celebrations that occurred during the *Wesak* season, May-June 2000. The events and festival sites were: a Buddha’s Birthday celebration hosted by a Taiwanese Buddhist group (IBPS) based in Montreal; a pan-Buddhist event (termed “mini-*Wesak*”) held at Montreal; a Tibetan *Wesak* (*Saga Dawa*), also held at Montreal; a Burmese celebration taped at a temple at Vancouver, B.C.; and the *Wesak* festival at Chicago, Illinois, held at a Thai temple (*Wat Dhammaram*) and sponsored by the Buddhist Council of the Midwest.³

1.3 *Wesak*: A Political Ritual

My portrait of *Wesak* as a source of identity consolidation agrees with David Kertzer’s proposition that “rites create political reality” (Kertzer 1). Catherine Bell defines political ritual as “those ceremonial practices that specifically construct, display and promote the power of political institutions (such as king, state, the village elders) or the political interests of distinct constituencies and subgroups” (Bell 128). Some

examples of political rites are the coronation of a monarch, the American pledge of Allegiance, the Nazi “*Heil Hitler*” salute, the public execution of a convict, and the cross-burnings of the Klu Klux Klan.... (Bell 129). In all of these symbolic enactments the ritual action does not simply reinforce a group’s power, but actually generates power through the collective meaning such public displays are given.

1.4.1 Literature Review

Literature pertaining to the Buddhist ritual celebration *Wesak* is very limited in scope. The few available primary sources about early *Wesak* celebrations as a specifically Buddhist ritual are found in historical texts concerned with prominent Buddhist figures, such as Emperor Aśoka (304-232 BCE). Aśoka’s Rock Edict IV provides what may be the first possible reference to a *Wesak* celebration. Ancient Sinhalese Chronicles such as the *Mahāvamsa* (the Great Chronicle) and autobiographical travel sources such as the pilgrimage account of Fa-Hsien, also mention early *Wesak* rituals.⁴

Wesak celebrations also figure within more general modern socio-anthropological studies of Buddhist communities in Southeast Asia. This secondary scholarly literature, which relies upon data gathered from ethnographic research, reveals the associations between *Wesak* and agricultural rites found in Southeast Asia and India, and thus the syncretic nature of ritual development. It also suggests that pre-Buddhist forms of the *Wesak* ritual existed.⁵

1.4.2 Socio-Political Studies of Buddhism in Sri Lanka

Descriptive information concerning the Sinhalese *Wesak* celebrations was obtained from two articles written by Sinhalese scholars. First, the *Vesak Fullmoon Festival* written by J. B. Disanayaka (published as part of a series called *Introducing Sri*

Lankan Culture) is useful in that it conveys a sense of the festival atmosphere of contemporary *Wesak* festivities in Sri Lanka. Disanayaka also documents various innovations in the *Wesak* ritual such as Buddhist dancing, painting, and dramatic reenactments. This work, however is biased given that it is an attempt to promote *Wesak* and Sinhalese Buddhism in a positive light to those not familiar with the Buddhist tradition and its ritual celebrations. The result is a highly nationalistic portrayal of *Wesak* which does not concern itself with the importance of the *Wesak* celebrations as a source of continuity and transformation within Sinhalese Buddhist identity.

The article entitled “Christian Impact on the *Wesak* Celebrations in Sri Lanka” by G. P. V. Somaratna is more directly relevant to the aim of this paper. Somaratna’s article highlights the Buddhist appropriation of colonial missionizing techniques, i.e. Christian missionary education and festive rituals such as Christmas, as a means of initiating a Buddhist resurgence in Sri Lanka. In response to Christian missionary activities, *Wesak* served as a Buddhist alternative to the growing popularity of Christian ritual celebrations among the local Sinhalese population. The incorporation of Christian festive elements into the Sinhalese tradition of celebrating *Wesak* resulted in a shift from a closed monastically oriented ritual to a more public celebration characterized by increased lay participation. Somaratna’s article, through its emphasis on the socio-political dynamics surrounding modern Sinhalese *Wesak* celebrations, provides valuable insight into the consolidation of Buddhist identity.

1.4.3 North America

Although still relatively new, scholarly study of Buddhism in North America has produced a large quantity of material examining the establishment of Buddhism in North America. One such work, *The Faces of Buddhism in America* (1998), contains a variety

of articles exploring the transformation of Buddhist schools through their encounter with North American society. Of particular interest are Paul Numrich's article, "*Theravada* Buddhism in America: Prospects for the *Sangha*"; Jan Nattier's "Who Is a Buddhist? Charting the Landscape of Buddhist America"; Rick Field's "Divided *Dharma*: White Buddhists, Ethnic Buddhists, and Racism"; and Kenneth Tanaka's "Epilogue: The Colors and Contours of American Buddhism". All of these articles elucidate the variety of issues that continue to shape the emerging form of American Buddhism.

The works of the scholars Paul Numrich and Janet McLellan have provided useful ground-level socio-religious information about immigrant Buddhist communities. Numrich provides a detailed account of the Americanization⁶ of two *Theravāda* Buddhist communities in his book *Old Wisdom New World* (1996). Also, his article entitled "Local Buddhist Associations in North America" is indispensable as a resource for researching the expansion of pan-Buddhist organizations in North America and around the world. Janet McLellan's study of five Asian Buddhist communities in Toronto, *Many Petals of the Lotus* (1999), is useful for charting the cultural assimilation of these traditionally Buddhist communities in the North American context. McLellan demonstrates the challenges endemic to this process and emphasizes the transformative impact of such a transplant in terms of the recreation and consolidation of Buddhist identity. While both of these scholars chronicle the study of immigrant Asian communities that have relocated to North America from traditionally Buddhist countries, they mention *Wesak* only in a rather cursory fashion. The present study of *Wesak's* function as a source of identity consolidation for Buddhists furthers one aspect of Numrich's and McLellan's work.

1.5 Research Problems

The problems I experienced in collecting data for this study mainly pertain to the method of data retrieval (video documentation), and the difficulties that arose in communicating with the variety of ethnic communities I encountered. Miscommunication in one form or another became quite a common occurrence in contacting various ethnic communities that celebrate *Wesak*.⁷ Since I had no acquaintances at the temples, nor spoke the language of the communities, I was an outsider, a definitive other. As such, my first undertaking was to find a contact person who spoke English well enough to communicate effectively with me. Despite my best efforts, however, obtaining information as basic as the time and date of the *Wesak* celebration and directions to the ritual site was no easy task. I am still not certain whether this lack of effective communication was simply an issue of language or if it had more to do with my status as an outsider.

Beside the linguistic and cultural barriers, using a video recorder to document the ritual proceedings can be very limiting in capturing the real events as they might normally take place. First, the fact that I, an outsider, was present at all (and usually very close in order to get the best camera angle) invariably affected the ritual proceedings. I noticed how uncomfortable I made some participants feel during a sacred event. Second, when I tried to talk to people before or after the service, some were quite wary of me asking all sorts of questions about their temple and its activities, and my recording their answers either in a notebook or on film.⁸

1.6 Conclusion

This socio-political interpretation of the *Wesak* ritual addresses the issue of Buddhist identity as an active process. As Jenkins points out, this process most often

involves the interaction between one or more groups. In the context of this paper, identity is determined through the interaction between the Buddhist tradition and western ideals.

The celebration of *Wesak* functions as a medium of communication, providing the balance between traditional and interpretative notions of Buddhist identity. Kertzer's political analysis of ritual complements a functionalist approach to Buddhist identity through his proposition that "rites actually create a political reality" (Kertzer 1), since social identity is derived primarily through ritual actions such as *Wesak*.

Chapter Two

The Variety of *Wesak* Celebrations

Introduction

To emphasize the use of ritual as a dynamic source of identity creation, not only in North America but also in Southeast Asia, it is helpful to provide some background information in the form of some examples of *Wesak* celebrations which reveal the syncretic nature of ritual. While ritual may intrinsically resonate with a conservative bias, it has been associated historically with syncretic blending and symbolic expropriation; both socio-cultural processes, which reflect a variety of different practices, are involved in creating a collective Buddhist identity. The following examples of different *Wesak* celebrations also reveal the idiosyncratic features of identity consolidation through ritual. For example, in many areas of Southeast Asia, *Wesak* festivities are combined with local agricultural rites such as the rocket festival (*Boun Bang Fai*) in Northeastern Thailand. In North America many Buddhist groups collaborate to organize multi-denominational *Wesak* celebrations, blending previously divergent cultural and ritual traditions. Now, many Buddhist groups co-existing in one region collaborate to celebrate *Wesak*. Chicago and Montreal are two cities that are home to a diverse Buddhist population and that organized a pan-Buddhist *Wesak* in 2000. The result is a Buddhist ritual that is increasingly defined by its ecumenical nature.

2.1 *Wesak* in Asia: Public and Closed

There is a trend throughout the variety of *Wesak* celebrations around the world towards more public celebrations, as opposed to the more closed monastically oriented

rituals. Traditionally, *Wesak* celebrations in *Theravāda* countries in Southeast Asia, namely, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and some parts of Vietnam and Malaysia, tended to revolve around the local temple or monastery (Swearer 1987, 548); significantly the latter served as the center of religious and cultural activity within Buddhist communities. In Southeast Asia *Wesak* tended to be a closed ritual event for ordained Buddhists, observed primarily by monks who performed a simple ritual service in commemoration of the Buddha. Lay participation was limited to a visit to the temple or monastery, in order to reaffirm their commitment to the Buddhist tradition through the observance of the Five Precepts,⁹ and taking refuge in the Triple Gem (*Buddha-Dhamma-Sangha*).¹⁰ Lay devotees might also have participated in some form of meditation, or listened to a *dharmā* talk. These monastically based activities indicate the closed nature of early *Wesak* rituals.

But in Sri Lanka, in 1885, *Wesak* was declared an official holiday and today public celebrations, mimicking traditional Christian practices during the Christmas season, now include putting up *Wesak* decorations, roadside dramas re-enacting the Buddha's life story, and sending *Wesak* cards to friends and family. Sri Lanka is a good example of this shift from earlier closed rituals to the more public contemporary *Wesak* celebrations. Now contemporary *Wesak* rituals in Southeast Asia are public celebrations, characterized by increased lay participation.

2.2 *Wesak* in North America

Since Buddhism's introduction to North American culture, *Wesak* celebrations are now held in practically every major center across Canada and the United States. Toronto, a city with more than sixty Buddhist groups (McLellan ix) has been hosting annual *Wesak* celebrations since 1981. The event has usually included both formal and informal

components,¹¹ and, in its first year, a parade through Nathan Philip's Square in front of City Hall (See Appendix 1). In Chicago, the Buddhist Council of the Midwest has approximately ninety-nine group members and has been organizing a *Wesak* celebration every year for seventeen years. These *Wesak* festivities, which often last two days, similarly consist of a religious ceremony, a dramatic event, meditation instruction, and sometimes a forum for academic discussion. While traditionally held at local Buddhist temples, *Wesak* celebrations in North America are often held at school auditoriums, or even church halls due to the large number of lay people who attend these events.

2.3 Characteristics of *Wesak*

Most *Wesak* rituals include both a “formal” and an “informal” aspect. The formal element is generally quite highly structured and follows standardized sequences. In this sense, the formal component of *Wesak* might be designated a *pūja*, which refers to a sacred ritual event. In a *Wesak* ritual this usually includes a procession of monks, the making of offerings, chanting *sūtras*, and perhaps a *dhamma* talk (a sermon in Christian parlance). The bathing of the Buddha, a ritual act traditionally associated with *Mahāyāna* sects, is becoming a common practice within the formal component of North American pan-Buddhist *Wesak* celebrations.

The informal component of a *Wesak* ritual can include a variety of elements, such as serving of food and drink, cultural performances, promotional booths, and a forum for academic discussion. This aspect of *Wesak* occurs sometime after the completion of the formal section, but usually on the same day. Venues like Montreal's June 2000 celebration was relatively small in size and number of participants, thus, the informal component was limited to free food and beverages after the formal service was finished, while participants and members of the congregation casually interacted with one another.

Larger *Wesak* celebrations, such as the one sponsored by the Buddhist Council of the Midwest (BCM) in Chicago, usually last for two days and include a cultural component consisting of a variety of different traditional ethnic performances representative of the groups that participate in the organization of the event.

2.4 *Wesak* Around The World

Although *Wesak* is traditionally associated with *Theravāda* Buddhists, it has become an international event, and in many places around the globe practitioners from a variety of different religious traditions also participate in the festivities. In addition to the annual celebrations hosted in traditional *Theravāda* countries, *Wesak* is also celebrated by Buddhists of other sects as well as by various New Age religious groups in North America, Europe, and Australia. As Buddhism has grown in size and influence throughout the world, *Wesak* has risen to a place of prominence within the tradition, as a centerpiece for community gathering. As an ecumenical event within the North American context, it provides immigrant Buddhists with an opportunity to offer one another support in a potentially isolating environment. It encourages inter-Buddhist dialogue among various Buddhist schools that may be subject to historical divisions, as well as interaction between Buddhists and cooperation with non-Buddhists groups, primarily Christian ones. In many ways these attributes have promoted *Wesak* as the international celebration that unites all Buddhists under the same banner, as well as serving as the Buddhist ambassador for inter-faith dialogue.

Wesak, as an increasingly popular form of ritual celebration among Buddhists, is also a political tool for the propagation of Buddhist identity. Increasingly, *Wesak* is mirroring the changes taking place within the larger paradigm of the Buddhist tradition, and marks the emergence of an ecumenical Buddhist identity. Evidence of this trend can

be found in the United Nations resolution to make *Wesak* an international holiday, to be observed at United Nations headquarters and offices throughout the world. The recommendation was made at the International Buddhist Conference held in Colombo (Sri Lanka), in November 1998 (Buddhist Council of New South Wales 1), and was unanimously accepted at the 54th Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly. John De Saram, the Sri Lanka Ambassador to the United States, introduced the resolution that was sponsored by Greece, Mauritius, Norway and Turkey; co-sponsored by Lesotho, Nicaragua, and the United States; and supported by Thailand, Singapore, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Spain, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and India. However, the Australian Buddhist Council of New South Wales, affiliated with the World Fellowship of Buddhists, noted on their information website that “unfortunately, Australia was silent, however they did not vote against it” (*Ibid.*).

The resolution was intended to acknowledge “the contribution that Buddhism has made for more than two-and-a-half millennia, and continues to make to the spirituality of humanity” (United Nations Press Release, November 24, 1999). Representatives from India, Spain, Bangladesh, Thailand, Pakistan, Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Bhutan recommended the following statement to be included in the resolution:

The Buddha had exercised a profound influence on human civilization and his teachings and example had provided the ethical and moral underpinnings of many societies. His teachings were based on the law of release from suffering, leading to spiritual enlightenment, as well as abjuration of force, violence and persecution. (*Ibid.*) (See Appendix 2)

The recognition of *Wesak* as the official Buddhist holiday according to the United Nations affords Buddhism a sense of respectability. It also supports the notion that *Wesak* is probably the most accessible, or at least recognizable, Buddhist festival within the international arena. This is evidenced by Balbo Elementary School’s (Newfoundland,

Canada) use of *Wesak* as the festival chosen to represent the entire Buddhist tradition.

This information turned up during an internet search for the term “*Wesak*”. On their site about “Religious Celebrations and Festivals” (Balbo Elementary School, March 8, 2001) the description of *Wesak*, as the designated Buddhist festival, is as follows:

What is Wesak?

Wesak is a festival celebrated by people who's [sic] religion is Buddhism. The purpose of the festival is to celebrate Buddha's birthday.

How is Wesak celebrated?

One thing we can tell you is that it is done in many ways. On the street they have great parades and dancers. They also pass out food to people who pass by.

Where is it celebrated?

In the little town [sic] of Tibet or in other countries where there are Buddhists.

Are there symbols?

There's [sic] lambs, crosses, moons, stars, and lots of brightly colored things.

What do some really religious people do during Wesak?

Well some have a long fast and some stay silent for a week! Wesak is like a Christmas to people in the little town of Tibet [sic]. (*Ibid.*)

Despite the obvious attempt to draw parallels between *Wesak* and Christmas in order to educate young children about other cultural and religious festivals around the world, the fact that *Wesak* was chosen as the Buddhist representative for a Canadian school, reveals the extent of its international status.

One of the main reasons for the increased visibility of the *Wesak* ritual in the international arena is that it condenses the complex schedule of festivals, found in all Buddhist traditions, into one ritual celebration that focuses on the key events in the life of the Buddha. The life narratives of the Buddha,¹² often reenacted or recited (usually excerpts from the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, or the *Jātaka Tales*) during the course of a *Wesak* celebration, serve to locate a sense of Buddhist identity within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference. This mythical framework is an essential aspect of the

Buddhist tradition, and provides the anchor from which all forms of Buddhist identity have arisen. The *Wesak* ritual, as an important vehicle for disseminating Buddhist culture, pays homage to this mythical structure through its reenactment.

2.5 Conclusions

The variety of different manifestations of *Wesak*, in North America and in Southeast Asia, does not diminish its capacity for identity consolidation, but rather emphasizes the use of ritual as a dynamic source of identity creation. The syncretic blending and religio-cultural appropriation, employed by Buddhists and reflected in the ritual content of *Wesak* around the world, has enabled Buddhists to maintain some form of continuity within their tradition while adapting to a particular social climate. In fact, “It is because people create and alter rituals that they are such powerful tools of political action” (Kertzer 12).

Chapter Three

Wesak as an Appropriated Ritual

Introduction

This section will begin with a brief overview of references to *Wesak* in early literature culled mainly from the writings of the Chinese pilgrim, Fa-Hsien, and the Sinhalese chronicle, the *Mahāvamsa*. Next, some examples of Indian and agricultural rites will be examined to ascertain their influences upon the development of the *Wesak* ritual. This socio-historical background will illuminate the syncretic nature of ritual in general and the process whereby *Wesak* in Sri Lanka and Toronto has come to be affected by western political ideals.

Every ritual has a tradition of adaptation and modification; a ritual may change form depending on its surrounding socio-cultural context. There are many methods of, and reasons for, the modification of a ritual. In her book, *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions*, Catherine Bell indicates that Buddhists used the *Wesak* ritual as a means of appropriating other indigenous forms of ritual practice. She states that the “appropriation of calendrical festivals already deeply ingrained in the fabric of a community seems to be very common and a highly effective strategy in places where one set of religious practices encounters and tries to dominate another set” (Bell 104). The cultural customs of the victors, including religious rites such as *Wesak*, then subsume those of the vanquished. A well-known example of such an appropriation is found within the Judeo-Christian tradition. The first mention of Jesus’ birthday being observed on December 25 is in Rome in the year 336. This was the same day as the traditional pagan celebration of the “Birthday of the Unconquered Sun” (*Natalis Solis Invicti*) (Parrinder 5). The Roman

calendar adapted this day of celebration to incorporate the already existing pagan festival. Since the bible does not give a date for the birth of the Christian saviour, it was not celebrated before 336. This day is now known throughout the world as Christmas Day. Such appropriation of ritual elements made the transition from one culture to another somewhat smoother. None of the public holidays or temple sites had to be changed. It was only a matter of allowing time for the indigenous population to get used to the new symbols contained within the ritual. Buddhist rituals, such as *Wesak* are no different. This process is undoubtedly how *Wesak* evolved into its present form in Southeast Asia, and continues to transform in the North American context.

3.1 References to *Wesak* in Early Literature

The earliest forms of *Wesak* that are available in chronicled texts provide evidence of a Buddhist ritual created through syncretic blending with Other traditions that pre-date Buddhism. The few available references to *Wesak* are to be found in historical texts concerned with prominent Buddhist figures, such as Emperor Aśoka (304-232 BCE), and ancient chronicles such as the *Mahāvamsa* (the Great Chronicle). These references reveal an early form of *Wesak* that seems more akin to the spring harvest festival in Northern India, than the austere practices associated with the *Theravāda* tradition.

From the historical documents available, it is probable that *Wesak* is one of the earliest Buddhist festivals to have been celebrated in ancient India, the birthplace of Buddhism (de Silva 204). Aśoka's Rock Edict IV provides the first possible reference to a *Wesak* celebration. It mentions an organized festival that involved "processions in which were exhibited images of gods in their celestial cars with 'heavenly sights' attractive and fascinating to the masses" (Rahula 274). This description is similar to one

given by the Chinese pilgrim, Fa-Hsien, who, in the fifth century, describes a procession held in the second month of the Indian calendar (*Vaiśākha*), similar to the one attributed to Aśoka's reign:

every year, on the eighth day of the second month, they celebrate a procession of images. They make a four-wheeled car and on it erect a structure of five stories by means of bamboos tied together.... They make figures or *devās* with gold, silver and.... On the four sides are niches, with a Buddha seated in each, and a *Bodhisattva* standing in attendance on him. There may be twenty cars all grand and imposing but each one different from the other. (Fa-Hsien, 79, cited in Rahula 274)

The historical connection between this Indian festival witnessed by the pilgrim Fa-Hsien and the Buddhist celebration, *Wesak*, still remains uncertain. This uncertainty is further entrenched when examined beside Rock Edict IV which refers to Aśoka's advancement of the *Dhamma* by "showing the people displays of heavenly chariots, elephants, balls of fire, and other divine forms" (Thapar 251-252). While Fa-Hsien never mentioned the festival by name, he recorded that the event took place annually "on the eighth day of the second month" (Dutt 201). This places the celebration within the month of *Vaiśākha* in the Indian calendar, the name from which the term *Wesak* is derived. This calendrical connection is really the only evidence that suggests he was referring to an early *Wesak* festival

A connection between the Hindu "car festival" observed at Hindu shrines in Madras and Orissa and early *Wesak* celebrations suggests that *Wesak* has its roots in the cultural and religious milieu of early India. P. Thomas postulates that, the ritual event observed by the Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hsien during the time of Aśoka was a joint Hindu-Buddhist festival, blending various forms of Buddhist imagery with the Hindu tradition of celebrating the "car festival". Evidence of the mixing of Hindu and Buddhist traditions is apparent in Fa-Hsien's description:

On the above-named day [*Vaiśākha*], all the ecclesiastics and the laymen in the district assemble; they have singing and high-class music, and make offerings of flowers and incense. The Brahmins come to invite the Buddhas; and these enter the city in regular order and there pass two nights, while all night long, lamps are burning, high-class music is being played and offerings are being made. (Thomas 68-69)

The inclusion of Buddhist images in the Hindu car festival provides an example of the transformation that occurs when two different religio-cultural traditions encounter each other. This passage, and the long history of blending between Hindu and Buddhist culture, indicates that *Wesak* is most likely an earlier Indian ritual appropriated, possibly by a figure such as Aśoka, to become a Buddhist expression of worship.

William Geiger, in his book, *Culture of Ceylon in Mediaeval Times*, cites references from the *Mahāvamsa* which mention several Sinhalese kings who organized *Wesak* celebrations. The passages in the *Mahāvamsa* and the *Cūlavamsa* that Geiger provides as evidence of ancient *Wesak* celebrations are: 32:35; 34:59; 35:100; 36:40.109.130; 44:46; 51:84. According to this source, the Sinhalese king Dutu-Gemunu (101-77 BCE) was the first to embrace the tradition of *Wesak* celebrations. He is reported to have celebrated twenty-four *Wesaks* during his reign, and probably “revived a festival that had been in existence earlier and celebrated it on a grander and bigger scale than before” (de Silva 159). After king Dutu-Gemunu many kings are reported to have celebrated *Wesak* annually. Geiger’s account draws special attention to a king “Sena II, ninth century, [who] celebrated the *Vesakha* festival with the poor, giving them food and drink and clothing as they desired” (*Mahāvamsa* 51:84, cited in Geiger 199). Another example, culled from the Rock Edicts,¹³ suggests that Aśoka also incorporated this charitable aspect into his vision of the Buddhist faith. According to Rock Edict XII, Aśoka “gave alms (*dāna*) and honored (*pūjā*) both members of religious orders and the laity of all religious groups (*pārśada*)” (Hirakawa 100). And in Rock Edict VII Aśoka

states that he “wished members of all religions to live everywhere in his kingdom” (*Ibid.*, 100). Within these early references to *Wesak*, this is the only mention of *Wesak* as a festival that incorporates a dimension of social charity. It is unclear if this indicates that it was a later development or just not mentioned in Fa-Hsien’s earlier references to *Wesak* celebrations.

With such a scarcity of historical sources referring to early *Wesak* celebrations, it is almost impossible to determine the origins of such a ritual. Given the fluid nature of ritual appropriation, particularly between Hindu and Buddhist cultures, it is probable that the earliest *Wesak* celebrations arose out of a pre-existing Indian ritual tradition. There is some evidence to suggest that *Wesak*’s initial rise to prominence was due to the conversion of Aśoka to the Buddhist faith sometime during the seventh year of his reign. It was Aśoka who is said to have called the third Great Council of Buddhists, at which intensive missionary efforts to spread Buddhism abroad were made a priority. According to some Buddhist accounts, it was at Aśoka’s urging that his son, Mahinda, went to Sri Lanka where the Buddhist teachings were first written down in the *Mahāvamsa* (Singhal 8). Again, due to a lack of conclusive historical data, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not a form of *Wesak* existed in Sri Lanka before the Indian missionaries arrived. But, according to Romila Thapar, “it may be conjectured, with some justification, the Ceylon *Wesak* festival was modelled on Aśoka’s ‘shows and processions’ and also on ‘the processions of images’ seen by Fa-H[s]ien” (Thapar 274). Now, in contemporary Sri Lanka *Wesak* celebrations comprise the highlight of the religious year for Buddhists.

3.2.1 *Wesak* and Agricultural Cycles

More evidence to indicate that non-Buddhist religio-cultural influences have effected a change in the Buddhist tradition can be found in the connections between the celebration of *Wesak* and the agricultural cycles of Southeast Asia. Buddhist festivals found in Southeast Asia reflect the rhythm of the agricultural cycle as much as they punctuate important events in the Buddhist calendar. *Wesak*, primarily a lunar ritual, is closely connected to the cycle of the months and seasons. These cycles provide the basic framework for the earliest communal festivals and celebrations. The fact that *Wesak* generally falls at the beginning of the Southeast Asian rice-planting season is an example of this syncretic process.

3.2.2 *Wesak*: A Lunar Ritual

During the time of the Buddha, the lunar calendar was the primary means of organizing time. The lunar method of reckoning (pivotal to ancient Indian calculations) divides the year into thirteen sections, or lunar months. In early Buddhism, the festival calendar also followed the cycles of the moon. For instance, *Uposatha* days, occurring on the full and new moon of every month, were designated as times for the ordained community of monks and nuns (the *sangha*) to gather and confess any violations of the monastic behavioral code. Similarly, a seminal Buddhist festival such as *Wesak* is usually scheduled to coincide with the full moon of a particular month. According to the Gregorian, or solar, calendar (introduced in 1583) it is the first full moon of the fifth month, which means it is celebrated in late May or early June. Compliance with this ancient prescription varies according to tradition, but regardless, the full moon remains an orientation point for the observance of important occasions.

Buddhist festival calendars are still organized in accordance with the lunar cycles. Therefore the actual date of *Wesak* changes each year according to the lunar cycles. One of the primary reasons for the prevailing authority of the older lunar calendar (despite the advantages of solar reckoning) is that it grounds contemporary practices in the 2,500 year-old Buddhist tradition through the commemoration of an important historical event. “The very fact that *Wesak* is determined by phases of the moon shows its connection to an older time dominated by agricultural notions of time” (Hori, August 15, 2001). Thus, by aligning natural and historical phenomena in this way, Buddhist identity maintains a strong sense of continuity. Regardless of whether or not the Buddha’s birth, death, and enlightenment took place on the same day (in fact it is more than likely that they did not), the moon and its cycles retain symbolic importance for Buddhists.

3.2.3 *Wesak*: A Planting Festival

In the rural villages of Southeast Asia, the connection between Buddhist rites and the agricultural cycle is especially strong. The harvest of rice is a prime example of an important agricultural event that dictates the religious calendar in the region. *Wesak* (May) falls at the beginning of a period where villagers are concerned about getting enough rainfall to ensure a good harvest. This period ends with the advent of the rain retreat for the monks (July). S. J. Tambiah, a social anthropologist who has conducted extensive research in the rural areas of Southeast Asia, describes this period as being very strenuous for villagers. Tambiah explains that the *Wesak* ritual consists of feeding the monks in the morning and then processing around the local temple three times carrying lighted candles and incense (Tambiah 154). According to Tambiah, *Wesak* is celebrated in these areas because it has been “popularized on a national scale” and because *Wesak*

has been a long-standing Buddhist tradition (Tambiah 154). In these rural areas, religious rituals such as *Wesak* are inextricably bound to the agricultural calendar.

This phenomenon is also apparent in other rural *Wesak* celebrations in Southeast Asia. In Laos, and parts of Northeast Thailand, a rocket festival (*Boun Bang Fay*) is held in conjunction with *Wesak* celebrations. The rockets are meant to anger the rain-spirits enticing them to send a downpour of rain (Lester 143). The villagers believe that by combining the rocket festival with a ritual that honours the Buddha, they are taking every possible precaution to ensure an abundant supply of food, and thereby enhance the standard of living. As Robert Lester points out,

the great festivals of the Buddhist year are directed not only to honor and celebrate the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, but also to occasion and celebrate prosperity in worldly affairs. Through these rituals the merit-power of the Buddha and his monks is brought to bear on the spirit-forces controlling the prosperity of the individual, the village, and nation. (Lester 142)

Wesak is one of the major *Theravāda* festivals that Lester is referring to in this passage. Swearer also acknowledges this point: the “festival cycle of *Theravāda* Buddhism in Southeast Asia has two closely connected patterns, one agro-economic, the other Buddhist” (Swearer 17-18). It is impossible to determine exactly when *Wesak* began to be incorporated into the ritual liturgy of the indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia, but the current forms of expression do reveal a blending of traditions that suggests *Wesak* was a later addition superimposed onto already existing forms of worship.¹⁴

3.3 *Wesak* in New Age Movements

Further evidence of the syncretic nature of ritual and the continuing appropriation of *Wesak* into indigenous traditions is found in the various present-day New Age¹⁵ movements in North America and Europe. Searching for “Vesak”, “Visakha”,

“Vesakha”, or “Wesak” on the Internet can provide access to these groups. Some of the more interesting examples of New Age movements that include *Wesak* in their repertoire of ritualized ceremonies are: Alice A. Bailey’s Arcane School of Knowledge; Dr. Joshua Stone’s Melchizedek Synthesis Light Academy (MSLA); and Temple of the Holy Grail (THG). Alice Bailey’s school will provide the focal point for this examination of *Wesak* and New Age groups since this group has the most prolific store of knowledge about *Wesak*. All three groups adhere to the same calendrical routines and share common democratic qualities such as tendencies towards egalitarianism and “fusionist” mandates, i.e., the blending of religious traditions apparent in their philosophy and practices.

According to the New Age ritual calendar, fixed by their astrological significance, *Wesak* is the most important of three annual celebrations. As an example of their fusionist tendencies, these three festivals are considered “a part of the unified spiritual approach of humanity” (Bailey 1951b, 2). Bailey continues by predicting “that the time is coming when all Three Festivals will be kept throughout the world and by their means a great spiritual unity will be achieved...” (*Ibid.*). The first major festival is The Festival of Easter: “always determined by the date of the full moon of spring and is the great Western and Christian Festival” (*Ibid.*, 1). The second, *Wesak*, “fixed annually in relation to the full moon in May, is the great Eastern Festival” (*Ibid.*). The third festival is called the Festival of Goodwill, and is fixed annually in relation to the full moon in June. While “the remaining full moons [in the calendar year] constitute lesser festivals” *Wesak* is described as “the largest and most sacred of all the Full Moon Festivals” (*Ibid.*, 14)

Unfortunately, none of these groups provide a definitive account of their own particular forms of *Wesak* celebrations. Instead, all descriptions of a *Wesak* ritual are referred back to the legend of the “*Wesak* Valley” which is purported to exist on both a spiritual and a physical level. Legend asserts that the *Wesak* Valley exists in a remote

region of Tibet near the sacred pilgrimage site of Mt. Kailash. Alice A. Bailey describes her experience of attending this *Wesak* festival in her book *The Unfinished Biography*,

This tremendous event takes place each year in the Himalayas. It is held in a valley and is not a mythical, subconscious happening but a real, physical plane occurrence. I found myself (whilst wide awake) in this valley and forming part of a vast orderly crowd--mostly oriental but with a large sprinkling of occidental people. I knew exactly where I stood in that crowd and realized that it was my correct place and indicated my spiritual status.

The valley was large and oval shaped, rocky and with high mountains on either side. The people, crowded in the valley, faced towards the East and towards a narrow, bottle-necked passage at the end. Just before this funnel shaped passage there stood an immense rock, rising out of the floor of the valley like a great table, and on top of the rock was a crystal bowl which looked as if it was three feet across. This bowl was full of water. Standing ahead of the crowd and in front of the rock were three figures. They formed a triangle and, to my surprise, the one at the apex of the triangle seemed to me to be the Christ. The waiting crowd appeared to be in constant movement, and as they moved they formed great and familiar symbols--the Cross in its various forms, the circle with the point in the center, the five-pointed star and various interlaced triangles. It was almost like a solemn, rhythmic dance, very slow and dignified but soundless. Suddenly, the three figures before the rock stretched out Their arms towards the heavens. The crowd froze into immobility. At the far end of the bottle-neck a Figure was seen in the sky, hovering above the passage and slowly approaching the rock. I knew in some subjective and certain fashion that it was the Buddha. I had a sense of recognition. I knew at the same time that in no way was our Christ belittled. I got a glimpse of the unity and the Plan to which the Christ, the Buddha and all the masters are eternally dedicated. (Bailey 1951a, 39-40)

According to representatives of the Arcane School of Knowledge, *Wesak* is even referred to in the Book of Revelations (Rev. 7:9-17) in the Bible (Bailey 1951b, 2). Christ is the representative of the Western religious tradition, and the Buddha is the eastern representative. According to Bailey "There is no divergence or conflict in Their teaching. There is no competition between Them. They stand forth as the two greatest world teachers and saviours. One has guided the Orient and the other has guided the occident closer to God" (Bailey 1951a, 238). The calendrical representation of this syncretic fusion becomes manifest in the celebration of *Wesak* (fixed by the May full moon of

Taurus) and Easter Sunday (fixed by the April full moon of Aries). These two celebrations, represent the “illuminated Buddha and the Risen Christ” (*Ibid.*, 239).

Many of these new movements give reference to early Pagan rituals celebrated in accordance with the seasons, and astrological calculations based in the seasonal cycle i.e. the spring equinox. *Wesak*, being a lunar festival celebrated in the spring, is also associated with the seasons or the rotations of the moon. Historically, within the cultures of Southeast Asia, *Wesak* was used to appropriate local planting rites. Now *Wesak* is being re-appropriated by groups that organize their annual calendar in accordance with the cycles of the agricultural seasons. Through this appropriation of the *Wesak* festival by North American and European New Age groups, a symbolic bridge between tradition and innovation is created. In this way ritual connects past, present and future.

3.4 Conclusions

“Broadly speaking, as a cultural institution a religion will inevitably be syncretistic” (Swearer 11). Within the countries of Southeast Asia there is a long tradition of blending between other cultures and Buddhist ideas, iconography, and ritual acts. There have been attempts by various historical figures, such as Thailand’s King Mongkut (1804-68), to purge Buddhist practice of any popular influences but, generally, the existing Buddhism of Southeast Asia, is a combination of both classical Buddhism and non-Buddhist beliefs and practices. *Wesak* has survived by incorporating elements of these other religio-cultural traditions while still maintaining its identity as a Buddhist ritual. This is evident from its possible roots within the religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent through its association with the agricultural cycles of Southeast Asian society and finally with New Age groups in a Euro-American setting. The thread of continuity is provided, paradoxically, by the transformation of this ritual within each

cultural milieu that it encounters. Thus, *Wesak* functions as a marker of tradition as well as a source of “innovatory potential” (Kertzer 12). As Kertzer points out, “Paradoxically, it is the very conservatism of ritual forms that can make ritual a potent force in political change” (Kertzer 12).

Chapter Four

Wesak in Sri Lanka

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide an example of how, through a sustained period of exposure to western influences *Wesak* has functioned to consolidate Buddhist self-identity in Sri Lanka. Infiltration of Sri Lanka by the colonial Other, represented first by the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and finally the English, brought a host of western values and practices i.e., the Christian religion and strategies for education of the local population. Before the arrival of the colonialists, according to the available resources, *Wesak* was a ritual event limited to the confines of the Buddhist temple. As the colonial presence became more ingrained within the fabric of Sinhalese culture, and Christianity gained popularity even among the local Buddhist population, it became evident that the Buddhists would have to find a means of competing with this Christian influence. The Buddhist response came in the form of blatant appropriation of the more effective Christian practices. *Wesak* became the Buddhist political tool for mitigating fascination with devotional Christian festivals such as Christmas. Although *Wesak* has been celebrated in Sri Lanka for almost two millennia, it has evolved into a very different form characterized by the inclusion of western innovations. In fact, the Sinhalese *Wesak* is unique throughout the world for the Christian flavour of its festivities. Some examples of the more obviously Christian-based practices found in contemporary *Wesak* celebrations are: erecting nativity scenes; carol singing; and sending *Wesak* cards. The inclusion of these festive elements in *Wesak's* ritual content stands in stark contrast to the earlier closed rituals before the arrival of the colonialists. This examination will reveal how the

Wesak ritual functioned as a catalyst in the ensuing Buddhist revival that was prompted by the colonial Other.

4.1.1 Nationalistic Tendencies within Buddhism in Sri Lanka:

The *Dhammadīpa* Tradition

Since the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, ca. 250 BCE, Sinhalese identity has been defined through its relationship with the Buddhist tradition (*Buddhāgama*) (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 3), specifically the *Theravāda* sect. The origins of this relationship are elucidated in the *dhammadīpa* myth (island of *Dhamma*)¹⁶, a mythological account of the religion and culture of the people of Sri Lanka. Regina T. Clifford posits that this myth¹⁷ contains two main parts: “The Buddha’s purification and consecration of Lanka in order that the island realize his vision of it as the sanctuary of true *dhamma*; and, the exemplification of the means by which *dhammadīpa* is to be maintained and edified” (Clifford 36).¹⁸

Historical connections between Sri Lanka and the figure of the Buddha further reinforce the deeply rooted relationship between Sinhala identity and Buddhism. For instance, although “the Buddha, so far as is known, never visited Ceylon” (Ludowyk 12, cited in Greenwald 14), according to the mytho-history contained in the *Mahāvamsa*, he purportedly visited the island three times shortly after his enlightenment in order to make Sri Lanka “a fit dwelling place for men” (*Mahāvamsa* 1:43, cited in Greenwald 14). On one visit, the Buddha allegedly left a fossilized footprint on Adam’s Peak (Mt. *Sumanakūṭa*). By locating its Buddhist identity in the acts of the Buddha himself, this legend authenticates the Sinhalese religio-national sense of identity. In Sri Lanka, *Wesak* marks the day on which, according to legend, Prince Vijaya, the founder of the Sinhalese

race, landed on the island (Disanayaka 1). Historical connections such as these deepen the psychological connection between Buddhism and Sinhalese identity.

It is also noteworthy that this day was the full-moon day of *Vaiśākha* (*Wesak*), reference to which “recurs consistently throughout the chronicles at moments of significant occurrences” (Greenwald 15). Such mythical parallels drawn between Sinhalese history and the figure of the Buddha reveal the extent to which accounts of Sinhalese history are inextricably linked to the Buddhist tradition.

4.1.2 Political Significance of the *Dhammadīpa* Myth

In addition to the mytho-historical connections between the figure of the Buddha and the religious destiny of Sri Lanka, the *dhammadīpa* myth also offers a Buddhist portrait of a socio-political ideal. As Heinz Bechert observes:

The origination of a historical literature in Ceylon in the existing form was an intentional act of political relevance. Its object was the propagation of a concept of national identity closely connected with a religious tradition, i.e., the identity of the Sinhalese Buddhists. (Bechert 7)

This blending of the political and religious within Sinhalese tradition is reflected clearly in the term *dhammadīpa*, “where *dhamma* indicates the religious aspect and *dīpa* (“island”) the political aspect” (Clifford 45).

This reciprocal relationship is maintained and legitimated through the historical continuities outlined in the Chronicles. Possibly the most influential of these lineage holders besides the Buddha was the Indian Buddhist monarch, Aśoka. “Traditionally, the installation of Buddhism as a religion of state is traced back to Aśoka” (Rahula, 1956: 62, cited in Bechert 6). According to Kitsiri Malalgoda, “Buddhism was introduced into Ceylon during a period when the connection between Buddhism and political authority was already developed to a high degree under Asoka” (Malalgoda 12). As the

paradigmatic Buddhist ruler, Aśoka served as a role model for Sinhalese rulers and in so doing, furthered the development of a Buddhist Sinhala identity. For instance, Tissa (250-210 BCE), Aśoka's contemporary in Sri Lanka, is generally acknowledged for establishing the institution of kingship in Sri Lanka (Malalgoda 12). The Sinhalese monarch was "customarily described as a *cakravartin*--a universal monarch described in canonical Buddhist works. He was also identified as a *bodhisattva*, i.e., a Buddha-to-be, and his legitimation was bound to his function as a promoter and protector of orthodox *Theravada* Buddhism" (Bechert 8). Buddhist icons such as the tooth relic of the Buddha, his almsbowl, and a piece of the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha is said to have achieved enlightenment are all mytho-historical artifacts that have been used to legitimate the rule of a particular monarch.

4.1.3 The Closed Nature of Early *Wesak* Rituals in Sri Lanka

With a long tradition of Buddhism, and as guardian of one of the relics of the Buddha (one of the Buddha's teeth), Sri Lanka also places great emphasis on the *Wesak* festival, now the most important holiday in the *Theravāda* tradition. While the importance of *Wesak* for Sinhalese Buddhists has not dwindled since the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka, there has been a marked change in the ritual content and orientation between early closed monastic *Wesak* rituals and the more public contemporary celebrations.

Wesak was probably introduced to Sri Lanka "by the Buddhist missionary Mahinda when he came to Sri Lanka during the time of Asoka (274-237 BCE)" (Somaratna 3). Somaratna describes early *Wesak* rituals in Sri Lanka as "a religious occasion for the Buddhists to attend temples, offer religious vows, and to engage in meritorious acts" (Somaratna 4). Traditionally,

Buddhists did not have the practice of having national festivals where “this worldly” activities could be displayed.... Buddhist festivals were generally of a religious nature and they were confined to Buddhist temple. Therefore the *Wesak poya* [Sinhalese term for the full moon day in the month of *Wesak*] was a day for religious observances and not of celebration. (Somaratna 4)

Even as late as the nineteenth century, *Wesak* festivities occurred solely within the confines of Buddhist temples, such as Kelaniya, near Colombo, and were limited to “lighting lamps, offering flowers, and observing the [Buddhist] precepts” (Somaratna 4).

4.2.1 The Christian Colonization of Sri Lanka

Before the arrival of the colonialists, Buddhism in Sri Lanka was secure as the state religion under the patronage of the monarchy. In 1505 the Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka and ushered in an era characterized by hostility towards Buddhism. The Portuguese severed the mutually supportive relationship between the Buddhist *sangha* and the government by establishing Roman Catholicism as the state religion. When the Dutch replaced the Portuguese as colonial masters in 1656, the state religion changed from Roman Catholicism to Reformed Protestantism (Dutch Calvinist), but the hostility towards Buddhism endured. Soon Christian missionaries initiated a campaign which harnessed technological innovations such as the printing press to disseminate Bibles and a variety of anti-Buddhist tracts. These evangelization attempts were designed to secure Christianity a place in the Sinhalese culture regardless of state changes in policy towards religion. Sinhalese Buddhists responded to the evangelization and “civilization” of their island with a Buddhist revival, one that utilized the political strategies of the colonial Other.

The Buddhists adopted many of the more effective dissemination methods used by the Protestants in order to compete for the patronage of the populace. Somaratna refers

to the actions of Mohittiwatte Gunananda (1823-1891) who employed Christian missionary methods of organization in order to preserve Sinhalese Buddhist culture. Some of the organizations he was instrumental in forming based on the missionary methods were: “Society of Bo tree lovers” (*Budhiraja Samitiya*), “Society for the protection of *Abhagagiri Stupa*” (*Abhagagiri Caitya Araksaka Samitiya*), and “Society for the Propagation of Buddhism” (*Sarvajna Sasanabhivruddhi Dayaka Samagama*) (Somaratna 6). In an ironic twist, the Sinhalese Buddhists were reclaiming their own traditions, using Christian innovations.

The Buddhists had by the 1880’s attained a standard which could be compared well with the Christian missionaries in using modern methods of religious propaganda. The only thing they lacked in order to face the Christian challenge was a day of jubilation similar to that of Christmas and the social activities associated with it. (Somaratna 7)

There are two main reasons why *Wesak* celebrations in Sri Lanka underwent a drastic metamorphosis. First, Sri Lanka in the nineteenth century was saturated with Protestant Evangelists. “Christianity, which was associated with the colonial package received much of the criticism associated with the grievances of the emerging Sinhala Buddhist elite” (Somaratna 5).¹⁹ The Christian religion was an obvious target for anti-colonial sentiments since the popularity of their festivals, such as Christmas, were gaining favour with the Buddhist populace which had no similar vehicle through which to express its religious sentiments. This challenge to the authority of the Buddhist leadership in nineteenth-century Sri Lanka was reason enough to “counter the rising tide of Protestant evangelism in Sri Lanka” by, in a sense, re-appropriating their own festival calendar (Somaratna 4).

The second reason why *Wesak* was an effective vehicle for social change was that Buddhist leadership was changing from the monks to the lay people. This increased level

of lay involvement, due to the Protestant Christian activities in the field of education, displaced the traditional teaching roles filled by monks (Somaratna 5). The challenge to the traditional Sinhalese educational system presented by Christian missionaries required more lay involvement in order to meet the needs of a Buddhist population in danger of compromising its religious heritage. The Buddhist Defence Committee, formed by and consisting mostly of Buddhist lay leaders, is an example of this shift in traditional leadership roles. In the case of Sri Lanka, the involvement of the laity was essential in terms of countering the Protestant tide, but it also motivated the *sangha* members to become more involved. In the context of Sri Lanka, this produced a stronger sense of Buddhist identity and group cohesion. Monastic and lay Buddhists united and participated in the movement to reclaim their spiritual heritage from the Other, the Christian presence.

4.2.2 The Arrival of the Theosophists

Although Colonel Olcott²⁰ was neither the originator nor culminator of the Buddhist revivalist movement in Sri Lanka, his role as “organizer and articulator” (Prothero 174) was indispensable. He was instrumental in providing the foundations for what has come to be known as “Protestant Buddhism”.²¹ In an attempt to consolidate Buddhist teachings into an easily accessible format for use in a Buddhist education system in Sri Lanka that would rival the one introduced by the Christian missionaries, Olcott compiled *The Buddhist Catechism* in 1881. This work presented a “serious challenge to traditional *Theravāda* Buddhism”, and became a standard textbook in Buddhist schools all over the island (Prothero 10).

The arrival of the Theosophists in 1880 also marked a significant period in the revitalization of Buddhism in Sri Lanka. Under Olcott’s leadership, institutions and

practices such as the Buddhist Sunday schools, Buddhist schools, Buddhist Catechisms, collection tills, *salpil* in the Sinhalese language (taken from the Christian harvest festivals), and *sammadam* (fund raising in Sinhalese), which fell under the umbrella project called the Buddhist Education Fund were established (Somaratna 6). All of these western style traditional organizations were adopted and used by the Buddhists to bolster Buddhist support in response to Christian missionary activities. The Theosophists, being Westerners who were familiar with Christian methods of organization and evangelism, came to Sri Lanka at a fortunate time for the Sinhalese Buddhists. There was already anti-colonial sentiment among much of the population, and to have the support of the Theosophists, who appeared as anti-Christian colonialists to the local population, fueled the Buddhist revivalist movement.

The quest for a more equitable treatment of Buddhist practitioners began following a riot on March 25, 1883, between Christians and Buddhists in Kotahena, a predominantly Christian area in Colombo (Prothero 110). The riot occurred after “a Roman Catholic mob attacked a Buddhist procession which passed their cathedral on its way to Deepaduttamaramaya, the temple of the militant Buddhist leader, Mohittiwatte Gunananda Thera” (Somaratna 8). The government investigation concluded that, although no charges were pressed on either side, the root cause of such a disturbance was undoubtedly the Buddhist Revival currently happening in Sri Lanka (Prothero 111). In order to preempt any more riots, the government declared that it would be in the best interests of religious harmony if the freedom to hold processions (and even beat tom-toms) in Buddhist temples be prohibited for at least two years (Somaratna 8). As a result of this restriction on Buddhist freedom of expression, lay leaders organized to fight for the fair treatment of Buddhists by the governing powers.

The decision by the Theosophists to inaugurate the Buddhist Education Fund on the *Wesak Poya* (full moon day) of May 13, 1881 is one example of how useful the *Wesak* festival was as a tool for revitalizing Buddhism (Somaratna 6). The next step in the organizational activities of the Sinhalese Buddhists was to make the *Wesak* full moon day a public holiday in order to further the connection between the government and the majority religion, Buddhism. One of the reasons for wanting a public holiday arose from the colonial restrictions on Buddhist expression, primarily in the form of banning processions. Making *Wesak* a public holiday would officially give legal rights to Buddhists.

The Sinhalese Buddhists fully realized the advantages of having a “white Buddhist” on their side in the fight against the colonial authorities for equitable treatment concerning Buddhists in Ceylon. Olcott proposed creating a Buddhist Defence Committee, “which elected him an honorary member and charged him to travel to London as its representative” (Prothero 111). After arriving in London in May of 1884, Olcott presented the colonial authorities with a list of six demands. These were:

(1) that Catholics accused of instigating the riot be brought to trial; (2) that Buddhists be guaranteed the right to exercise their religion freely; (3) that *Wesak* be declared a public holiday; (4) that all restrictions against the use of tom-toms and other musical instruments in religious processions be removed; (5) that Buddhist registrars be appointed; (6) that the question of Buddhist temporalities (the supposedly negligent control of Buddhist properties by monks) be resolved. (Olcott, 19-20, cited in Prothero 113)

Of the six requests, only two were granted. The first was the loosening of the restrictions surrounding the use of musical instruments used in religious processions. The second request granted was the declaration of *Wesak* as an official holiday in Sri Lanka. The idea of a public holiday was foreign to the Sinhalese people. *Wesak*, the highlight of the Buddhist annual calendar, was not recognized as a public holiday even by the

Sinhalese kings who ruled before the colonialists arrived in 1505 (Somaratna 7).

However, *Wesak* was declared a public holiday on March 27, 1885 by the British governor, Sir Arthur Gordon (1883-1890). The first *Wesak* full moon day fell on April 28, 1885 (Somaratna 7).

Another western innovation attributed to Olcott and the Theosophists, was the creation of a Buddhist flag (Somaratna 10). On the morning of the first *Wesak*, Buddhists simultaneously hoisted the flag at a number of politically important centres in Colombo. After the fashion of the procession on *Wesak* day, the hoisting of the first Buddhist flag was intended to show to Christians that Sri Lanka was indeed a Buddhist nation. The unveiling of the Buddhist flag also initiated *Wesak* Day as a national holiday. The description of the flag was provided in the Sinhalese newspaper, the *Sarasavi Sandaresa*:

The colours *neela* (blue) *peeta* (yellow) *lohita* (red) *avadata* (white) *manjusta* (orange) and *prabhasvara* (a mixture of the above five) signify the rays that emanated from the body of the Buddha when he was alive, as reported in the ancient writings. Blue emanated from his hair, yellow from his robes, red from his lips, white from his teeth and orange from his skin, as the rays spread they combined to form one composite colour. (*Ceylon Historical Journal*, vol. XIX, 1969-70, p. 78, cited in Somaratna 11)

The Buddhist flag designed by Olcott can be found in many *Theravāda* Buddhist temples throughout Southeast Asia, as well as in North America.

4.3 The Reinvention of a Buddhist Tradition: *Wesak* as Christmas

The Portuguese introduced Christmas decorations into Sri Lanka in the sixteenth century (Somaratna 11-12). Part of the traditional Roman Catholic Christmas displays included the construction of nativity cribs and the recreation of the nativity itself. The Buddhists began to erect Buddhist nativity scenes. Instead of the usual host of Christian characters, the Buddhist version depicts the Buddha's birth at *Lumbinī* garden with queen

Māyā replacing Mary, and usually portrays the baby Siddhattha walking over seven lotus flowers, since he was said to have been able to walk at birth (Somaratna 12). This reconstruction is a very popular tradition on *Wesak* day in Sri Lanka, and “today many households recreate the birth scene as part of their celebrations in all parts of Sri Lanka” (Somaratna 12).

Wesak in Sri Lanka also became a festival of lights. During the celebrations, the lighting of various candles and lamps not only adds to the festival scenery but is also a metaphor for the “light” that dispelled the darkness of ignorance or illusion through the Buddha’s enlightenment. Traditionally, lamps have been fashioned out of clay or the skin of raw fruit such as papaya. A more recent introduction takes the form of *Wesak* lanterns. The Roman Catholics lit lanterns to celebrate “the days of the saints to whom the churches in the villages were dedicated” (Somaratna 12). The Sinhalese *Wesak* lanterns (*Wesak kudu*) are replicas of the Portuguese lamps, called *lampiao*.

Yet another innovation borrowed from the Christian festive tradition is carol singing. “Buddhist culture, which preferred choral chanting to choral music, did not encourage a tradition of Buddhist music among the Sinhalese Buddhists. In contemporary Sri Lankan Buddhism, however, devotional songs and music play an important part” (Disanayaka 21). Although *Theravāda* Buddhism lacks the tradition of music during worship, contemporary Sinhalese Buddhists have given a Sinhala name, *Wesak bhakti geeta*, to these devotional *Wesak* songs (Somaratna 12). Due to lack of experience in this field, the Buddhists had to recruit the services of Charles W. Leadbeater, who at this time was the headmaster of the *Pettah* Buddhist school run by the Theosophical Society. He had previously been a Christian minister, but had been living in Sri Lanka for seven years and was sympathetic to the Buddhists (Somaratna 12). According to Somaratna, an

example of these devotional songs reveals a lack of originality on the part of the Buddhists, and Leadbeater's influence in recreating the Christian carol tradition:

Oh, come let us sing
To the praise of our Lord
Our voices shall be lent
In tuneful accord.

Lord Buddha our teacher
We honour in song
Will try to get virtue
And cease from all wrong.

Compare this with the famous carol:

O come all ye faithful.
Joyful and triumphant,
Come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem.
Come and behold him born the king of Angels
O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord.
(*The Buddhist*, April 21, 1893, p. 124, cited in
Somaratna 13)

Sinhalese Buddhists continue to innovate and modernize their *Wesak* festivities. In 1992, a Buddhist "cantata" was presented during *Wesak* for the first time, and later choreographed segments were also added (Somaratna 13). In fact, popular Sinhalese dancing has also been adapted to fit the *Wesak* festivities.

Wesak decorations have now become a part of the celebrations in Sri Lanka.

Decorating the streets with colourful regalia was, again, not a common Buddhist practice but one that the Sinhalese population was familiar with from the Christmas decorations used by the Portuguese. Lamps and paper lanterns were imported from China and Japan for the celebrations (Somaratna 14).

The Portuguese Roman Catholic practice of using *Pandals*, large colorful paintings, which depicted the life of Jesus and the Christian Saints, was adapted to fit the

Buddhist *Wesak* model. Buddhist figures are substituted for their Christian counterparts, as a way of disseminating information about important figures to non-literate people (Somaratna 14). Lynn de Silva describes these *pandals* during a *Wesak* festival:

The special feature of this festival is the erection of *pandals*, gaily decorated and magnificently illuminated. On the *pandals* are to be found paintings depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha. Some of these scenes are enacted on platforms, set in the *pandals* or erected at key points in various places. Short messages are also preached to the great crowds that gather before these *pandals*. These *pandals* have an educative value and are a source of great inspiration to the Buddhist devotees. On *Wesak* day thousands go by foot, cart, bus or car from dusk to dawn witnessing these *pandals* and other decorations. (Lynn de Silva 205, cited in Somaratna 14-15)

Other additions to *Wesak* festivities from the Christian tradition include *Wesak* cards (See Appendix 3), whose “structure and purpose... are not different from the Christmas card except for the use of Buddhist symbols in them” (Somaratna 15). Also Wayside Dramas, a Roman Catholic tradition reenacting the life of Christ, were adapted to suit Buddhist needs by substituting stories from the *Jātaka* Tales for the narratives of the life of Christ. Sinhalese churches perform their dramatic interpretations of the founder of their religion in a structure built onto the side of the church. Buddhists have now appropriated this custom and perform their own version on the streets of Colombo during the *Wesak* festivities (Somaratna 15). The themes promote Buddhist values such as generosity (*dana*), discipline (*sila*), wisdom (*panna*), and patience (*khanti*). The Sinhalese Buddhists are familiar with the themes, and as Disanayaka points out, “They come to watch the *Wesak* plays not to learn something new but to confirm again and again what they are already know” (Disanayaka 26).

“Etiquette and ceremony can go to the heart of constructing relationships of political submission and dominance” (Bell 133). The incorporation of Christian symbolism into contemporary *Wesak* celebrations enable Sinhalese Buddhists to rival the

popularity of colonial rites, such as Christmas, amongst the local population who are already familiar with the symbolism of the nativity scene, carol singing etc. Among other things, Christianity was associated with a rising middle class in Sri Lanka, whereas Buddhism was often associated with life in rural areas of Sri Lanka. By imitating the celebratory techniques utilized by the colonialists, Sinhalese Buddhists were able to compete with Christianity as the religion of choice for the island's influential new middle class.

4.4 Conclusions

The transformation of the *Wesak* ritual in Sri Lanka is an interesting, and relatively recent, example of how the Christian Other has influenced Buddhist identity. Sinhalese Buddhists successfully navigated the encounter with the colonial package, i.e., Christianity and western techniques of education, through imitation of these techniques. It is ironic that anti-colonial colonialists, the White Buddhists or Theosophists such as Colonel Olcott, aided the Sinhalese Buddhists. Buddhists aligned themselves against the Christians by reinventing their own tradition through the appropriation of Christian tactics. The ritual content, involving the incorporation of Christian imagery and celebratory techniques, helped to bestow equal socio-cultural power to Sinhalese Buddhist identity. The result has been a resurgence of Sinhalese Buddhism and society, reflected through the festive and public nature of *Wesak*.

Chapter Five

Wesak in North America

Introduction

This Chapter deals specifically with *Wesak* in North America. First, by tracing the historic beginnings of Buddhism and *Wesak*, and second, by providing descriptive accounts of five different Buddhist celebrations. This mainly descriptive chapter provides data through which to examine North American adaptations of the *Wesak* ritual and of Buddhism in general in Chapter Six.

5.1 The Beginnings of Buddhism and *Wesak* in North America

In his article “Buddhism in Metropolitan Toronto: A Preliminary Overview,” Suwanda Sugunasiri identifies four phases of Buddhist immigration into Canada. Chinese workers who, attracted by the gold rush, eventually settled in California probably introduced Buddhism, as a religious tradition, into North America in the mid-1850s. They established Chinese temples that were a mixture of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism (Fields 74). From California, and then directly from Hong Kong, six or seven thousand Chinese migrants gradually made their way to British Columbia, constituting the first phase of Buddhist immigration to Canada (Sugunasiri 84). The second phase of immigration began around 1880 with the hiring of predominantly Chinese, but also some Japanese, to work on the CPR (Burnett, cited in Sugunasiri 84). The third phase began around 1908, and brought large numbers of Japanese Buddhists, adding to the influx of Chinese immigrants and their syncretic form of religion. These early Chinese and

Japanese Buddhist immigrants brought the *Mahāyāna* tradition of celebrating the Buddha's birthday, precursor to current *Wesak* celebrations. The fourth and final wave of Buddhist immigration, the period following World War II, was "more like a continuation of the three earlier ones as more and more family members continued to join their relatives in Canada" (Sugunasiri 85).²² This latest wave of Buddhist immigrants was further strengthened by the loosening of immigration laws in Canada and the United States in the 1960s, allowing for a sudden and continuous increase in immigration from traditionally Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia. These four phases of immigration resulted in the establishment of Buddhism as a strong, albeit minority, presence in Canada.

The first World Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in 1893, was a landmark event for the future of Buddhism in North America. It precipitated the establishment of some of the first Buddhist groups completely sustained by western converts to Buddhism (occidental Buddhists). In May 1897 in San Francisco Anagarika Dharmapala, a Sinhalese reformer and founder of the *Maha Bodhi* Society, was the officiant for quite possibly the first *Theravāda Wesak* celebration to be held in North America. In his narrative history of Buddhism in America, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, Rick Fields describes the service in which 37 candles symbolizing the 37 principles of wisdom burned in front of 400 people while Dharmapala chanted the *Mangala Sutta* from a palm leaf manuscript (Fields 134). One of these pioneer groups was a branch of the *Maha Bodhi* Society, which is said to have organized a Buddha's birthday celebration at one of the member's houses in May 1898 (Tweed 1992, cited in Numrich 118).

From these humble beginnings, Buddhism has now become a strong social and religious presence in North America. By the 1980s, Asian-Americans had become the third largest minority group after Blacks and Hispanics (Schaefer 1993, cited in Numrich

123). In Canada, as of 1984, Buddhism had become the fastest growing religion (McLellan 1996, cited in Numrich 123). With the increase in immigrants from traditionally Buddhist countries, the organization of pan-Buddhist groups and collaborative festivals such as *Wesak* were developed.

5.2.1 North American *Wesak* Celebrations

This section describes the proceedings and ritual content of the different celebrations I attended during the *Wesak* season (May-June 2000). These descriptive accounts of North American *Wesak* festivals, divided into pan-Buddhist groups, single tradition groups, and the Buddha's Birthday, will provide the data from which to contrast and compare the characteristics of each ritual. While all of the rituals are linked through their commemoration of the important events in the Buddha's life, the manner in which this devotion is manifest reveals the diverse nature of *Wesak* celebrations, and in turn, the Buddhist communities dwelling in North America.

5.2.2 Pan-Buddhist *Wesak* Celebrations

Buddhist Council of the Midwest (BCM) *Visakha* (*Wesak*)

Date: May 20, 2000

Location: Wat Dhammaram
7059 W. 75th Street
Chicago, Ill.
60638-5934
Tel: (708) 594-6131
Fax: (708) 594-8114
E-mail: dhammaram@yahoo.com
Web Page: <http://www.dhammaram.iirt.net>
(See Appendix 4)

Ritual Site

The Chicago *Wesak* took place at the Thai *Theravāda* Temple, now called Wat Dhammaram. It was established in 1976 and originally located at North Hoyne Avenue in Chicago's "predominantly Hispanic neighborhood" (Numrich 1996, 3). Originally an Evangelical Lutheran Church constructed in 1892, the newly acquired space quickly became the residency for two Thai monks previously living in New York. One of these monks, Phra Sudhiratanaporn, is still the abbot of this temple (Numrich 1996, 2). Growth in Chicago's Thai community in the late 1970s and early 1980s necessitated a move to a larger space. A former elementary school located at West 75th Street and Harlem Avenue in Chicago's southwest side was secured as the new temple site in July 1983 (Numrich 1996, 4). This ten-acre plot is the current location of Wat Dhammaram Thai Temple and Cultural Center. As the name suggests, the temple area is not only a place where religious rites are observed, but also one where cultural activities are available. While I was attending the *Wesak* celebrations, there were three teachers from Thailand (one man and two women) who had all been there for at least a year, and were in charge of teaching everything from the Thai language to traditional Thai music to the young teens in the community. Wat Dhammaram is a refuge for Thai culture in America.

The area around the temple consists of a large grassy area scattered with trees and a vegetable garden in the back surrounds a large two-story red brick building. Inside the building there is enough room on the floor of the main shrine room to hold more than five hundred people (Numrich 1996, 9) with the option of using cushions or chairs to sit on. Upon entering, one's attention is immediately drawn to the impressive fifteen-foot tall figure of a golden seated Buddha "with hands in a teaching gesture (*vitarka mudrā*): left hand in lap, palm upwards, right hand resting on right knee, palm facing outward to

viewer, thumb and forefinger touching together” (Numrich 1996, 3-4). This statue, named Phra Buddhajinadhammobhas, was presented to Wat Dhammaram by the king of Thailand in 1978, while it was still at the Hoyne Avenue residency. To the left, facing the golden Buddha, is a smaller table housing an equally impressive, but smaller statue of a seated Buddha.

Behind the main Buddha are six flags, three on either side. U.S.A. flags flank the four central ones, which are, from left to right, the Thai national flag, the flag of Chicago, the Illinois state flag, and Olcott’s Buddhist flag (a red *dharmacakka* against a backdrop of yellow). Across from the entrance, to the right of the main Buddha, is a raised platform (approximately 3 feet by 30 feet) on which the monks sit in rows during formal ceremonies. During the *Wesak* celebrations, in order to accommodate the overflow of overnight guests, some spend the night on the floor of the main shrine room.

Traditions Represented

Tibetan:	Shambhala Meditation Center; Tibet Center (Cultural Institute founded by the Dalai Lama for the preservation of Tibetan culture); Chicago Karma Thegsum Choling (In the tradition of the Seventeenth Gyalwang Karmapa).
Theravāda:	Buddhadharma Meditation Center (Thai); Chicago Insight Meditation Group (Vipassana); Midwest Buddhist Meditation Center (Thai); Buddhist Vihara (Sinhalese).
Mahāyāna:	International Buddhism Friendship Association (Vietnamese); Buddhist Temple of Chicago (Originally Chicago Buddhist Church, est. 1944; Pureland); Zen Buddhist Temple of Chicago (est. 1947; Soto Zen); Great Plains Zen Center (Soto Zen); Zen Buddhist Temple (Korean); Hanmaum Zen Center (Korean); Milwaukee Zen Center.
Non-Sectarian:	Heartland Sangha, American Buddhist Association.

The Congregation

Participants consisted of approximately one hundred lay Caucasians and other westerners. There were conspicuously few people in the congregation, with the exception of the monastics, who looked Asian. This part of the group sat on chairs divided into two groups of fifty. Within this group there were ten lay leaders, some wearing robes, who occupied the front row of chairs. There were eleven Thai monks present, four Burmese monks, two Zen priests, and one Tibetan representative. Approximately two-thirds of the entire group, and all of the monastics, were male. No children were present.

Formal Component

9:30 A.M.	Procession of Monks (signaled by 3 rounds on temple bell) Chanting <i>Theravāda (Pāli)</i> : Homage to the Triple Gem Offerings to the Three Buddha Images : Chanting (English): The Heart Sutra Tantra Offering <i>Vajrayana</i> (English) Welcome by Asayo Horibe, President of the BCM Dhamma Talk by Rev. Brian Bauerle, the keynote speaker Chanting : May the merit and blessing of this service, Spread to every being in all places, So that we and all others together, Awaken to the way of peace and harmony. Exit of priests and monks
11:00 A.M.	All others exit.

Ritual Description

The service began as soon as the lay participants were seated in their chairs. The ringing of a temple bell signaled the entrance of the monks who, led by the most senior Thai monk, Achan Chuen Phangcham, processed around the chairs to the front of the room and offered a lighted candle to the statue of the Buddha. The monks then took their place on the raised platform at the side of room. The lay representatives then entered each

carrying a bouquet of flowers. Before the chanting, a lay representative from the BCM announced that every stage of the ritual service would be introduced in English to the participants.

The first section of chanting, Homage to the Buddha the Triple Gem, was led by the *Theravāda* monks and was chanted in *Pāli*. A Caucasian looking Zen priest led the next chant, the Heart Sutra, in English. During the chanting of the Heart Sutra, a representative from each temple offered incense, sweet tea ablution of the Baby Buddha image, fruit to the standing Buddha image, and flowers to the reclining Buddha image. Next, the lay members of the congregation bathed the Baby Buddha image.

After the bathing of the Buddha statue the President of the BCM, Asayo Horibe, welcomed everyone to the 16th Annual *Visakha (Wesak)* Festival and introduced the keynote speaker, Reverend Brian Bauerle, who spoke for about forty-five minutes on the topic of joyfulness. To signal the end of the formal component of the celebration a chant of blessings was led by the *Theravāda* monks, who then processed out followed by the lay representatives and finally the rest of the congregation. The monastics were then served traditional Thai food in a separate room from the rest of the participants.

Informal Component

1-5 P.M.

Lectures and Meditation Instruction

1:00	Rev. Koshin Ogui	<i>Jodo Shinshu</i> and Zen
2:00	Rev. Brian Bauerle	American Buddhism/Non-Sectarian
3:00	Dr. Rahul Deepankar	Engaged Buddhism
4:00	Marvin Moser	<i>Vajrayana</i>
5:00	Robert Mawson	<i>Dhammakaya</i>

During this time period many different Buddhist groups set up promotional stalls in the hallways of Wat Dhammaram. Some of the groups did not actually attend the religious service but used the occasion as a convenient venue to promote their own centers.

6-9 PM

Dramatic Performances

6:15	Flag Ceremony: Representatives of BCM
6:30	Thai Dance: Thai Cultural and Fine Arts Institute
6:45	Ka Napuna Ukelele Group: Hawaiian Medley
7:00	Ka Ya Kim: Korean Instrumental
7:15	Coconut Shell Dance/Saravan Dance
	Alabany part Cambodian Dance Troupe
7:30	Vietnamese Dance: Lotus Sangha
7:45	Sri Lankan Dance and Song: Praise to the Buddha
8:15	Sunrise Comes Song/Manora Dance
	Wat Dhammaram Sunday School Children
8:30	Modern Dance Medley: TKA Group; Bo Wangwatana
8:45	Vocal Presentation: Miss Thailand World
9:00	Closing Statement

This aspect of the celebrations was hosted by Tanya Suesantisook, formerly Miss Thailand World. She now leads meditation retreats.

Day 2 of BCM *Visakha* Celebrations

Sunday, May 21

The Ritual Site

The ritual site for Day 2 of the 16th International *Visakha* Celebrations in Chicago were also held in the main shrine room at Wat Dhammaram.

The Congregation

The congregation present on Day 2 of the proceedings consisted of mostly Thai immigrants. The hall was full once again with approximately 150 people in attendance. The monks affiliated with Wat Dhammaram were the only monastics who participated in the ceremony. The two days of *Visakha* festivities seem to have been divided along ethnic lines. While on Day 1 the majority of the congregation consisted of Caucasians, Day 2 of festivities was oriented toward the Thai immigrant community. Amongst this latter group were the Thai Ambassador to the United States and his wife.

Formal Component

7:30 A.M.	Morning Chanting and <i>Metta-Bhavana</i> Visitors pay Homage to the Buddha
10:00	Alms Offering Ceremony (<i>Tak-bat</i>)
10:30	Blessing Chant
11:00	Lunch Offered to Monks and Laity
1:00 P.M.	<i>Dhammadesana</i> (<i>Dhamma</i> Talk) Offerings of flowers , candles, incense Offering of <i>Phapa</i> Tree (Money Tree) Monks give Rejoicing Chant

Ritual Description

The ritual began once the laity were seated and the monks had casually processed in taking their usual seats on the raised platform adjacent to the main altar. The most senior monk then led the congregation in the Morning chanting that is usually observed at Wat Dhammaram, and a special loving-kindness chant (*Metta-bhavana*). After an hour and a half of chanting alms (money) offerings (*Tak-bat*) were presented to the statue of the Buddha. This involved the laity filing up to the statue and ceremoniously placing an envelope with money inside onto a silver tray lying on the main altar. Next, the monks

performed a Blessing Chant for the alms that were offered. In between the morning and the afternoon rituals lunch was served to the monks and laity in separate rooms.

After lunch, the group reassembled in the main shrine room for a *dhamma* talk by a temple monk. Next, the Thai ambassador presented the head monk with the *Phapa* Tree, a tree with dollar bills taped to its leaves and stem. A Thai gentleman, speaking the Thai language, then thanked everyone for attending the event. The monks, marking the end of the program performed rejoicing Chants.

Montreal Pan-Buddhist *Wesak*

Date: Saturday, June 3, 2000

Location: Manjushri Buddhist Center
705 Chambly, Longueuil
Montreal, QC.
J4H - 2M1
Tel: (450) 677- 5038
(See Appendix 5)

The Ritual Site

The first pan-religious Montreal *Wesak* celebration was held at the Tibetan Manjushri center in Longueuil, a suburb of Montreal. The building itself was converted by members of the Manjushri community from a restaurant into a spacious area now used for sacred rituals. As one enters the building, to the right there are stairs leading up to a living room area, and directly in front is an efficient-looking kitchen space useful for catering religious events such as *Wesak*. To the left is a large open space (50 feet by 30 feet) that constitutes the ritual area. There is enough room to comfortably seat at least a

hundred people on cushions on the floor. The front row of cushions is red for the *sangha*, and the rest are blue for the laity. There are colorful Tibetan *thangkhas* hanging on both sides of the room, and delicate streamers shaped like windsocks dangling from the ceiling. At the far end of this main hall sits an ornately decorated shrine. There is a large standing golden Buddha directly in the middle, flanked by framed pictures of the Dalai Lama, both alone and greeting various monks and dignitaries. A long white scarf, representing the Buddhist notion of the interconnectedness of all things, runs through and around the large Buddha and the two dozen smaller Buddhist icons that cover the main altar. A skylight provides natural lighting to illuminate the proceedings. To honour this festive occasion there are also fresh flowers (pink carnations, sunflowers, and daisies), fruit, and an assortment of muffins on tables around the main altar. To complete the scene are requisite bowls filled with burning joss sticks and many small, lit candles which dot the space and lend a soft warm glow to the proceedings.

Traditions Represented

Tibetan:	Manjusri Buddhist Center; Kankala Buddhist Center; Rigpe Dorje Foundation; Rigpe Quebec.
Theravāda:	Agga Pannarama Meditation Center; West Island Mindfulness Meditation Group.
Mahāyāna:	Zen Center on the Main; International Buddhist Progress Society of Montreal (IBPS).
Academia:	Professor Victor Sogen Hori (McGill University).

The Congregation

In total, there were approximately 150 people present at the *Wesak* festival.

Women accounted for at least two-thirds of the group total. Due to the location of the

celebrations, almost one third of the participants were of Tibetan origin. Westerners, or Caucasians, comprised about half of the group. The rest of the congregation was primarily Chinese (IBPS representatives) with one monk from Bangladesh present. Very few children were in attendance. One toddler was sleeping in a corner and a couple of pre-adolescent children were present.

Formal Component

11:00 A.M.	Opening Bell (Offering of Incense) Welcome by Mr. Louis Cormier (English and French) Chanting <i>Theravāda (Pāli)</i> : Homage to Buddha, Three Refuges Chanting Tibetan: Homage to Buddha, Mantra, Offering of Auspicious White Scarf Talk : “The Meaning of <i>Vesak</i> ” by Victor Sogen Hori Chanting Chinese: Heart Sutra, Dharani of the Great Compassionate One, Parinama Food Offering to the Buddha Liturgy of Meals Bathing of the Buddha by <i>Sangha</i>
12:00 P.M.	Closing Remarks by Louis Cormier (English and French)

Ritual Description

The service began very promptly at 11 A.M. with an opening bell urging people to take their seats. The host, Louis Cormier, a twenty - year veteran of the Montreal Buddhist scene, gave an opening address explaining the process whereby this *Wesak* came to be. In particular he thanked the Venerable Thich Quang Due of the Vietnamese Vulture Peak Meditation Centre for his insight and vision in initiating the organizational meetings that culminated in this celebration. He also provided a French translation to the English commentary.

The ritual liturgy contained elements from the *Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna*, *Vajrayana*, and academic strains of Buddhism. The first ritual act performed was the chanting of

Homage to the Buddha in *Pāli*, led by Venerable Bhante Visuddhacara of Agga Pannarama Meditation Center. A period of Tibetan chanting, which lasted for about 15 minutes, was then led by the Tibetan leader, Yeshe Jimpa. The entire audience was standing during the chanting period. At the end of this chanting, white scarves, similar to the one entwined on the main altar, were handed out to those affiliated with the Tibetan tradition. People then came forward to receive a blessing from the highest-ranking lay elder present. This was administered by placing the scarf around their necks as the recipients bowed and touched foreheads with hands in a prayer position.

Next, Prof. Victor Sogen Hori, a professor in Religious Studies at McGill University, gave a talk entitled, “The Meaning Of *Vesak*”, which emphasized the many different forms of *Wesak*, in Southeast Asia and now in North America. Since this was the very first co-religious event to have been sponsored by the Montreal Buddhist community, this short talk provided some necessary historical references to other *Wesak* celebrations. This helped to define the current *Wesak* as the latest celebratory innovation within a long tradition of Buddhist *Wesak* festivals. This discourse served as an informal *dhamma* talk.

Next, the Venerable Man Hung, the IBPS²³ monastic representative, led a period of chanting in Chinese. Two women in brown robes (indicating their status as precept takers for the day) kept rhythm on a small wooden drum and a pair of hand chimes. After the chanting, a table containing a statue of the Buddha pointing to the ground and to the sky (similar to the one used by the IBPS at their Buddha’s Birthday Celebration) was brought out from the edges of the room to the middle. The two *sangha* members, Venerable Man Hung and Bhante Vissudhacara, and two lay Tibetan representatives, who led the respective chanting periods, were the first to pay their respects to the Buddha by pouring water on the statue’s body. Louis Cormier made an announcement before the

bathing began, asking that out of respect no one should pour water on the Buddha's head, only on his shoulders and body. True to the communication problems typical of multi-ethnic gatherings, there were those who did not understand the request and poured water on the Buddha's head. The host then thanked all those who had helped from the Manjushri center, the ordained *sangha* members who led the chanting, and Prof. Hori who had done much of the organization for the event.

Informal Component

This aspect of the proceedings consisted of informal discussion between the participants in the celebration. The host community, the Tibetan Manjushri Centre, provided an informal snack of beverages and a variety of different kinds of cookies.

5.2.3 Single Tradition *Wesak* Celebrations

The inclusive, highly public ritual expression that characterizes pan-Buddhist celebrations stands in stark contrast to the more private Tibetan and Burmese *Wesak* rituals that I attended in Montreal and Vancouver respectively.

Burmese *Wesak* (*Theravāda*)

Date: May 14, 2000

Location: 252 E. 65th Ave.
Vancouver B.C
V5X - 2P4
Tel: (604) 321-7634

The Ritual Site

The temple is a small three-bedroom house situated on the East side of Vancouver. The only permanent occupant is U Pannobhasa, the presiding monk from Myanmar, requested by the Burmese community in Vancouver. The house/temple has many windows and a modest front and backyard. Inside are a small kitchen, living room, and a bedroom. The living room serves as the main place of worship. It contains a small altar approximately 3 x 3 ft. across. Behind the altar is a large (2 x 4 ft.) flag of Myanmar. The centerpiece of the room is a 3.5 ft. white, porcelain representation of the Buddha with a flashing electric halo radiating out from the head in all directions. This Buddha sits in front of the flag and directly in the middle of the altar. The rest of the surface is brightly adorned with green plants and fresh flowers in vases, and a variety of carved renditions of the Buddha spread out across the top. The walls are sparsely decorated with tourism posters of Myanmar “The Golden Land”, and framed pictures of tourist attractions in Myanmar. There are multi-coloured Christmas style lights hung along the edges separating the walls from the ceiling. For *dhamma* talks and rituals, the monk sits in the northeast corner of the shrine room beside the main altar. Beside him is a small table that holds an assortment of offerings, ranging from packaged soap to canned corn.

The Congregation

The regular attendees consist of about forty Canadians of Burmese descent; most were born in Myanmar. About half of the members are men and half women. For this particular celebration there were more people attending than usual. A family of Burmese people had traveled from Seattle specifically for this *Wesak* celebration since Vancouver contains the closest Burmese temple. This brought the total to about eighty people. There were only a handful of small children under the age of ten in attendance. There were also

a handful of teenagers present. The rest of the attendees were middle-aged (40- 60 years of age). Five Caucasians attend the weekly meditation sittings which occur on Tuesday evenings, but there were only three Caucasians who attended the *Wesak* ceremony.

Formal Component

11 A.M.	Welcome Chant (<i>Pāli</i>)
	Recitation of the Heart Sutra (<i>Pāli</i>)
	Calling the Names of the Buddha (<i>Pāli</i>)
	<i>Dhamma</i> Talk (Burmese)
12 P.M.	Announcements (Burmese)

Ritual Description

The service began with a traditional Welcome Chant led by the resident Burmese monk and an offering of incense to the statue of the Buddha that sat on top of a small altar. Next, was the recitation of the Heart Sutra and the Calling of the Names of the Buddha by the entire congregation. In its entirety, the chanting component, performed in *Pāli*, lasted for approximately twenty minutes. Following this was a *dhamma* talk delivered by Siyado (teacher in Burmese) in Burmese, which lasted for about forty-five minutes. After the *dhamma* talk members of the congregation made announcements. One concerning a ten-day retreat given by a Burmese meditation master, and another reminding people to replace ritual objects back on the altar after use. This simple *pūja*, reminiscent of the early closed *Wesak* celebrations previously mentioned in the Chapter on Sri Lanka, comprised the formal aspect of this Burmese *Wesak*.

Informal Component

12 – 1 P.M.

The informal component of this service consisted of a very casual question and answer period in the main shrine room. Most of the questions were posed by the four Caucasians present. While the monk was fielding questions the rest of the congregation was partaking in a potluck meal and informal conversation. There were no cultural performances to supplement the program.

Tibetan *Wesak* (*Saga Dawa*) *Vajrayana*

Date: June 16, 2000

Location: Manjushri Buddhist Center
Montreal, QC.
(See Appendix 6)

Ritual Site

The ritual site for this Tibetan *Wesak* celebration is the same as for the Montreal Mini-*Vesak*. The ambience and *décor* were virtually identical except that a cushion was placed beneath the main altar reserved for the visiting Rinpoche.

The Congregation

The Manjushri Center is an interesting example of the inter-cultural blending that occurs in pluralistic settings such as North America. Although it is a Tibetan temple roughly half of the regular participants in the temple's activities are of Vietnamese descent. Approximately 150 people attended this *Wesak* celebration. The gender distribution was quite even with about one-third of the congregation under the age of

thirty. There were twenty-five Caucasians present, mostly French speaking women. Many of the Tibetan men and women were dressed in traditional Tibetan attire, which lent an ethnic quality to the proceedings.

Formal Component

7:30 P.M.	Prayer for the long life of H.H. the 14 th Dalai Lama (Tibetan) led by Venerable Khen Rinpoche Lobsang Jamyang Manjushri Praise (Tibetan) Offering of Food for the Hungry Ghosts
9:00 P.M.	White Scarf Blessing by Venerable Khen Rinpoche

Ritual Description

The ceremony consisted of one and a half hours of chanting from a Tibetan text, containing the Prayer for Long Life and the Manjushri Praise, which was provided in booklet form for those who did not have their own version. Venerable Khen Rinpoche Lobsang Jamyang, the official abbot of the Manjushri Community of Montreal, who currently resides at Sera Monastery in India, led the chanting. The script was in Tibetan but was romanized for those who did not read the Tibetan script. Many of the participants had their own version, written in Tibetan, which they opened and handled with extreme care, never letting the book touch the ground. Handheld drums and finger cymbals occasionally punctuated the chanting. At one point during the service a sea conch was blown. Presumably this is a local innovation used in place of the Tibetan long horn since the sound was quite similar.

After an hour of chanting, four Caucasian women, one Tibetan woman, and one Tibetan man handed out baskets and brown paper bags to receive blessed food in honour of the Hungry Ghosts. Wine and ground beef, described to me as “Food of the Buddha”

by a Mexican Canadian who practices Tibetan Buddhism, were passed around the congregation. The ritual prescriptions for tasting this special food is to dip the third finger on the left hand into the wine and then take a pinch of the ground beef. This imbues the recipient with the blessing of felicity. A variety of foods were then handed out to be placed inside the paper bags and taken home to give to others who did not come to the service. The foods included apples, cookies, donuts, pretzels, croissants, onion rings, peaches, and fried bread. The purpose of the food is to bestow merit upon those who give it to others. According to Tibetan tradition, since Wesak is a particularly auspicious time of year each piece of food offered is the equivalent of offering 100,000 apples dedicated to the Buddha.

After the food was distributed and the chanting had finished, people lined up to receive a white scarf blessing. Members of the congregation handed Khen Rinpoche a white scarf, bowed down and received a spoken blessing while Khen Rinpoche placed the scarf around their necks. This event signaled the culmination of the celebrations.

Throughout the service the atmosphere was extremely casual. Children played in the back of the shrine room and people intermittently took breaks from the chanting to stretch their legs outside.

Buddha's Birthday

Although the *Mahāyāna* celebration of the Buddha's Birthday only commemorates the birth of the Buddha, it is included here because it occurs at the same time of year, and its ritual content is similar to those found in a *Wesak* festival.

International Buddhist Progress Society (IBPS)
Mahāyāna

Date: May 7, 2000

Location: 7265 Rue de Gaspé,
 Montreal, QC.
 H2R - 1Z5
 Tel: (514) 278-0808
 Fax: (514) 278- 6361
 (See Appendix 7)

Background

The formal name of this Chinese Buddhist organization, as the International Buddhist Progress Society (IBPS), is more commonly known as Buddha's Light International Association (BLIA). BLIA is the lay component originally formed by IBPS, the monastic community, in order to handle the business aspect of running a religious center. This includes acting as the intermediary between the organization and government officials, handling inquiries from interested lay people, and organizing different religious and cultural activities. Although this group belongs to the *Mahayāna* tradition that traditionally celebrates the Buddha's birth, death, and enlightenment on three separate occasions, their "Buddha's Birthday" celebration contains many similar elements to those found in *Wesak*. The Buddha's Birthday is the closest *Mahāyāna* equivalent to a *Wesak* celebration. They celebrate the Buddha's enlightenment on the eighth day of the twelfth month (December), and while the Buddha's death is marked on the calendar as occurring on the fifteenth day of the second month there is generally no public ceremony to commemorate the event.

The Ritual Site

Due to the large number of people who attend festivals such as the Buddha's Birthday, the festival took place in the basement of a community center on the outskirts of Chinatown in downtown Montreal (1001 St. Dominique). In previous years it had been held at a downtown Holiday Inn. The space, when not used for community events, serves as a school gymnasium, with a large stage at the end of the room closest to the entrance. The stage was flanked by two sets of short stairs on either side of the hall leading up to an altar at the back of the stage supporting a golden Buddha statue. On either side of this statue were two large vases of pink and white flowers and plates laden with oranges. At ground level, directly in front of the main stage was another table which supported a small bronze statue of the Buddha with one finger pointing to the sky and one to the ground, the classic depiction of the baby Buddha's claim to spiritual authority on earth and heaven. The statue of the baby Buddha was standing on a raised platform in the middle of a large bowl filled with water and flower petals to be used in the bathing of the Buddha component of the service. Surrounding this statue were tables containing potted flowers, and imitation carnations that had been offered to the Buddha prior to the commencement of the service.

The seating arrangement was similar to that of a traditional Christian Church, with wooden chairs arranged in rows of ten (wide) by 13 (deep), divided down the middle by an aisle wide enough for people to process down. The walls were adorned with advertisements for different kinds of vegetarian food, which could be exchanged for coupons purchased at the entrance to the hall. There was also a large painted mural hanging to the side of the main stage, depicting the birth of the Buddha in the *Lumbinī* Grove. The back of the hall was filled with tables selling, not only traditional Chinese

food, but almost every item imaginable. Items of interest for sale were books on meditation, information about the founder and his ideas, tea, beads and amulets, incense that burned down to reveal a Buddha inside, Buddha purses, t-shirts and sweatshirts with Buddhist icons on the front, chinaware, and statues of Kuan Yin and other manifestations of the Buddha.

In total there were probably close to one thousand people present at the celebration. There were no empty seats and a substantial number of people were standing along the walls and at the back of the hall. The atmosphere was characterized by a feeling of constant motion throughout the entire day. Donations were being made, food coupons were being sold, food stalls were being organized, costumes adjusted, and the constant buzz of excited conversation permeated the proceedings. The noise did not cease during a *dharmma* talk given by Venerable Man Hung, and was only overpowered during the chanting part of the schedule.

The Congregation

The congregation present at the ceremony consisted of approximately 1000 people, of whom two-thirds were women and one-third men. There were a significant number of children who attended the service and later participated in the cultural performances. There were only a handful of Caucasians present. Within the assembly there were a variety of different uniforms and costumes, all representing a specific duty or office within the organization. An assortment of volunteers wore a yellow vest embroidered with the group insignia "BLIA" on the back. A handful of people dressed in brown robes who had taken the five precepts for the day, were helping Venerable Man Hung with the ritual elements of the service, such as playing the drum or bells. These were all women, except for one elderly man. Many of the audience members were

dressed in colorful costumes in preparation for the cultural events planned for after the religious service. This added an exotic flavor to the celebration.

Formal Component

10:00 A.M.	Bathing the Buddha Ceremony Chants: Praise for the Incense Offering Recitation of the Heart Sutra Praise for the Buddha Taking Refuge Food-Conversion Mantra Universal Offering Mantra
11:30 A.M.	Praise for Celestial Offering

Ritual Description

The religious component of the service was preceded by a short business component. This included a presentation by the Montreal IBPS representative, Venerable Man Hung, to a delegate from the Taiwanese government who had donated a small satellite dish to the center. There were also various announcements concerning practical matters such as instructions on where to pick up flowers that had been offered to the Buddha, a summary of the upcoming schedule, and a request that people remain silent during certain parts of the service! The service commenced with the rhythmic banging of a drum and the chime of a bell. Venerable Man Hung, two brown-robed assistants, and four young men dressed as monks for upcoming cultural events, slowly processed to the front of the altar accompanied by ritual music and a welcome chant (Praise for the Incense Offering) followed by the chanting of the Heart Sutra. The chants (see list above)

were not recited one after another, but were interspersed throughout the hour and a half service. All chanting was written in both Mandarin and English in the program.

This was followed by a period of offerings to the Buddha. Incense and flowers were offered while the congregation recited “a call for blessings” on this ceremony, and an invitation for all the Buddhas to come and be present during the proceedings. The order of presentation seemed to begin with the more elderly members of the community, and those who had volunteered their organizational skills for the event. Eventually, the children came forward to offer precious items. Within Chinese Buddhism, there are ten (an auspicious number in the Chinese tradition) kinds of offerings generally presented to an image of the Buddha: food, fruit, incense, flowers, candles (light), tea, jewelry, pearls, clothing, and make-up. These are considered the basic kinds of offerings, but any offering is considered worthwhile if it contains meaning to the devotee.

Next, there was a *dhamma* talk, given by Venerable Man Hung, on the Buddhist topics of emptiness, cause and effect (*kamma*), and the Middle Path. The talk was delivered in Mandarin translated into both French and English by a young member of the congregation.

The ritual bathing of the Buddha followed the *dhamma* talk. People filed up to pour water on the shoulders of the statue of the baby Buddha using wooden ladles. It is considered inappropriate behaviour to pour any water on the head of the Buddha. This lasted approximately thirty minutes, and when most people had finished the schedule moved on. The table supporting the statue was moved to the side of the stage where people continued to bathe the Buddha throughout the remainder of the ceremony. Thus far, with the exception of bathing the Buddha, the itinerary was identical to the form followed every Sunday during the weekly service conducted at the center in Montreal. The entire religious component lasted about 2 hours. The only deviation was the lack of

chanting and offerings for the sake of the ancestors, which is observed weekly at the temple. Also worked into the program was the offering of red roses to the participants in respect of Mother's Day which fell on the same weekend as the Buddha's birthday celebration.

Informal Component

1:00 – 4:00 P.M.

The cultural component began after a forty-five minute food break. The first two acts were women's choirs singing different songs with Buddhist themes. Next was a young teen who played a violin solo, followed by a Shaolin Kung-Fu demonstration performed by Caucasians who had studied in China. The final dramatization were two plays re-enacting traditional Chinese Buddhist folk tales. All the characters were dressed in elaborate costumes, and had obviously put a lot of time and energy rehearsing their performances.

The final segment of the Buddha's Birthday celebration took the form of a parade led by a traditional Chinese dragon dance (practiced in northern China predominantly). A small Toyota truck loaded with a huge drum beating out the rhythm for the dance followed the dragon. Next in line were volunteers carrying the statue of the baby Buddha on their shoulders. Following this float were members of the congregation sporting banners depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha, with captions explaining the scene. The procession wound its way through the streets of Chinatown, ending up back at the community center. The route covered approximately one kilometre, lasting about forty minutes.

The IBPS members did not invite other Buddhist centres to this celebration. It seemed to be an event aimed at bringing members of the Chinese community in Montreal

together. Ten members from this group also attended the mini-*Wesak* celebration held in Montreal, described above on p. 55.

Chapter Six

North American Adaptations

Introduction

This section of the paper examines the adaptations that have occurred in the organization and performance of *Wesak* in North America. As in the case of Sri Lanka, transformations in North American *Wesak* celebrations simultaneously reflect and influence changes taking place in the Buddhist tradition. The method of identity consolidation for North American Buddhists is also through imitation of the western Other, this time represented by postenlightenment ideals, such as secularism and pluralism, situated in a highly pluralistic social environment. This North American Buddhist transformation is characterized by the emergence of nonsectarian and ecumenical forms of Buddhist groups. *Wesak* provides a forum for viewing these changes and, in turn, through its annual re-enactment, effects a change within Buddhist identity.

6.1.1 The Secular Other

Secularism is one of the more salient challenges to the establishment of the Buddhist tradition in North America. At a rudimentary level, the term, “secularism”, refers to “a social process by which religious worldviews and institutions give way to more scientific outlooks and this-worldly views” (Bell 198). This social process involves what some theorists have called “institutional differentiation”, the different social systems i.e., religious, political, educational, economic etc., separate from one another and operate autonomously with varying degrees of dependence on one another (Bell

198). This lack of coherence is thought to result in social trends such as “the displacement of ritual... and the emergence of lay authority over clerical” (Bell 198).

While the word secularism may conjure up images of a society without religion, it can in fact be a source of religious innovation. According to Bell, “secularization is neither a linear developmental process that spells the demise of religion nor a mere interpretive bias on the part of western scholars” (Bell 200). Instead, it is a process that occurs when different cultures, each with a unique value system and form of social organization, encounter each other. The introduction of Buddhism into the secular context of North America has forced Buddhism to adapt to this secular perspective.

6.1.2 Accomodating the Secular Other

One way in which Buddhists have had to adapt to the secular setting of North America concerns the practical consideration of determining the date for *Wesak*. Although it may seem straightforward to celebrate a certain festival on a prescribed day, many contradictory variables affect the exact date of a *Wesak* celebration from year to year and place to place. Not only is there the problem of trying to synchronize the prescriptions of the old lunar calendar with the more internationally recognized Gregorian calendar, but local considerations also play an important part in organizing this event.

In North America, the considerations in setting a date for a *Wesak* festival reflect the different kinds of issues that will alter the shape of a distinctly North American Buddhist identity. One of the most obvious factors is that Buddhism is a minority religion, and therefore does not warrant a Canadian or American national holiday to honour its founder. Also, the increasing number of *Wesak* celebrations organized by pan-Buddhist groups complicates the organizational challenges of any festival preparation.

Given their minority religious status, and the secular nature of North American society, Buddhists must plan around other secular events taking place within a city. As a result, *Wesak* festivals are scheduled around the regular five-day workweek and fall on the weekend closest to the actual date.

6.2 Pan-Buddhist Groups and Co-religious Events

As a minority religious presence, one of the more prevalent ways in which Buddhists have responded to the challenges presented by the dominant cultural climate of the North American Other, i.e., secularism, is to combine their separate group identities into one collective identity via pan-Buddhist organizations. These urban Buddhist phenomena are formal organizations centered in a city, bringing together a variety of ethnic and occidental Buddhists who, despite traditional barriers, cooperate to organize co-religious events such as the *Wesak* festival. Although, such coalitions are not exclusively North American, they are a prominent characteristic of North American Buddhism²⁴ (see Appendix 8).

The formation of these groups reflects one of the most rudimentary forms of identity consolidation: forming groups to achieve a common cause. The goal, simply put, is to create a distinctively Buddhist presence in North America. *Wesak* celebrations provide the necessary impetus for the creation of these pan-Buddhist organizations, which, in turn, have led to the development of multi-denominational *Wesak* rituals.

Rituals such as *Wesak* define power in two ways: “first, they use symbols and symbolic action to depict a group of people as a coherent and ordered community based on shared values and goals; second, they demonstrate the legitimacy of these values and order of the cosmos” (Bell 129). Just as symbolic entities, such as governments, allow a varied group of people to be thought of as a single entity, the creation of pan-Buddhist

organizations enhances Buddhist claims to social legitimacy. One way in which political rituals, such as *Wesak*, define Buddhist communities is through symbolic displays. *Wesak* is an effective tool because “organizations can only be ‘seen’ through their symbolic representation; ritual provides the means by which such images are created and through which people are identified with them” (Kertzer 87). In a Buddhist paradigm, through symbolic displays, rituals provide the means whereby Buddhists communally identify with each other. The symbolic displays commonly found at any *Wesak* celebration, such as Buddhist flags, statues of the Buddha, the recitation of familiar chants, etc. are all ways of bringing the individuals into the community and establishing a social entity.

From the perspective of the outsider, or Other, Buddhists are identified through this symbolic representation. One way in which *Wesak* promotes social legitimation for Buddhists in North America is through endorsements (usually included in the *Wesak* program itself) for Buddhist celebrations from local and national politicians. The presence of the Thai Ambassador at the BCM *Wesak* held at Wat Dhammaram is one example of such social legitimation. Another good example can be gleaned from the program of the 1999 Buddhist Celebration for World Peace (a *Wesak* celebration organized by *sangha* members) held in Toronto. Inside the program booklet were endorsements from the Mayor of Toronto, Mel Lastman; the Minister of Citizenship, Culture and Recreation, Isabel Basett; the Premier of Ontario, Michael D. Harris; and from Prime Minister Jean Chretien (see Appendix 9). These advertisements demonstrate to Buddhists, and the interested public, that this ritual celebration and the tradition it represents, is a politically acceptable and legitimate group belonging to the larger society.

6.3.1 North American Adaptations: Responses to Pluralism

Due to the highly multi-cultural nature of the North American religious environment, Buddhists tend to adopt a pluralist model in addressing common concerns as a minority religious presence. This means that the diversity of each particular Buddhist group is considered to be important. Throughout North America, the inter-Buddhist associations or pan-Buddhist groups, try to incorporate “respect and appreciation for the uniqueness of each Buddhist group, with agreement upon commonly held concerns as a basis for unity” (Numrich 1999, 127). Pan-Buddhist organizations are run through the collaborative efforts of all the associated centres. With such a multi-cultural group, the only way to actualize co-sponsorship of an event such as *Wesak* is to allow for as much representation from each group as possible. Consequently, following a mandate of unity in diversity, the formal component of most pan-Buddhist celebrations includes aspects of all three main Buddhist traditions. For example, during the formal part of the mini-*Wesak* service observed in Montreal, chanting was conducted in Tibetan, Chinese and *Pāli*, representing all three main Buddhist traditions. The *Bodhisattva* Aspiration, the Transfer of Merit, and the Bathing of the Buddha (*Kambutsu* in Japanese) were included out of respect for the *Mahāyāna* tradition. The Tibetan chanting represented the *Vajrayāna* tradition, and a Bangladesh monk performed the final blessing in *Pāli* for the sake of the *Theravāda* adherents.

The dramatic component of *Wesak* also reflects this collective concern for mutually honouring distinctiveness. Cultural performances at the BCM *Wesak* ranged from a Japanese Taiko drum group to Miss Thailand World performing with a top hat and cane. This pluralistic mandate is expressed in the song “Roll the Dharma Wheel” written by a Sinhalese monk, Bhante Punjabi, and sung by Toronto Buddhist musician, Brent Titcomb at a variety of *Wesak* events.

In later years, the name of the song was changed to “The Unity Song”, reflecting the desire among some members of the Buddhist communities of the Toronto to promote unity amongst the diversity of traditions in the area. The lyrics emphasize this objective:

Buddha with his chief disciple
 Sariputra Great
 And all the saints who came thereafter
 Rolled the Dharma Wheel

So let's roll the Wheel
 Beat the Deathless Drum
 Let us all Buddhists unite
 To roll the Dharma Wheel

CHORUS:
 Roll along
 Roll along
 Roll the Dharma Wheel
 Let us all Buddhists unite
 To roll the Dharma Wheel

Ethnic pride and prejudice
 Is what divides Buddhists
 Rituals and Dogmas, too
 Divide Buddhists to sects

True Buddhists give up
 Pride and prejudice
 Let us all Buddhists unite
 To roll the Dharma Wheel

CHORUS

The Noble Life that Buddha taught
 Is free from greed and hate
 If we live this life enlightened
 The world will live in peace

So let's roll the Dharma Wheel
 Beat the Deathless Drum
 Let us all Buddhists unite
 To roll the Dharma Wheel

CHORUS

The title and lyrics of the song, emphasizing nonsectarian attitudes towards Buddhists of different sects, reflect the ecumenical nature of *Wesak* celebrations in Toronto and in North America in general. The dominance of the Judeo-Christian tradition and the fact that virtually every school of Buddhism is represented in North America have required Buddhists to adapt to this overwhelmingly pluralistic setting by cultivating cooperation between the various Buddhist groups.

6.3.2 *Wesak* as the Buddha's Birthday

In response to North America's pluralistic nature, Buddhists have found it necessary to foster an ecumenical attitude towards other Buddhists and those of different religious traditions. In order to strengthen their socio-cultural status, it is not uncommon to find *Mahāyāna* Buddhists celebrating alongside *Theravādans* at a *Wesak* ceremony. This kind of multi-denominational event requires that all traditions be fairly represented in terms of ritual content. Consequently, despite *Wesak's Theravāda* roots one popular ritual element that seems to have been adopted as a permanent fixture at inter-Buddhist *Wesak* rituals is the *Mahāyāna* tradition of "Bathing the Buddha".²⁵ Within the *Mahāyāna* tradition, this rite is performed in honour of the Buddha's birthday. In fact, from the *Wesak* celebrations I observed there seems to be little functional difference between the North American pan-Buddhist *Wesak* celebrations and the *Mahāyāna* celebration of the Buddha's birthday. In its eastern context, the most obvious similarity between the *Theravāda Wesak* and the *Mahāyāna* Buddha's birthday celebrations is that they occur at the same time of year. In *Mahāyāna* countries such as Korea, China, Taiwan, Japan, and Vietnam, the three seminal events in the life of the Buddha are celebrated on separate occasions. The Buddha's birth is celebrated on April 8, the

enlightenment on December 8, and the *parinibbāna*, or death, on February 15 (Gombrich 1986, 57).

The “Bathing of the Buddha” is the climactic activity within the religious service through its involvement of the entire congregation.²⁶ The entire lay congregation participates in the ritual bathing, which is usually followed by an informal component which involves eating, singing and dancing. This form of *Wesak* celebration certainly deviates from the traditionally austere practices associated with the conservative *Theravāda* tradition. It also reflects the emerging ecumenical Buddhism that the broader North American context necessitates for the survival of a religious minority.

6.3.3 New Buddhist Traditions

The pluralistic and competitive nature of North American society has precipitated a blending of Buddhist traditions in order to adapt to the demands of particularly the “occidental” or “white” Buddhists. *Wesak* has become an event not only for groups representing the three traditional divisions of Buddhism, but also for the new North American forms of Buddhism.

Many of these groups incorporate elements of the western Other into their basic structure and tenets. For instance, a non-sectarian brand of Buddhism is becoming popular in America. An example of this is Chicago’s Heartland Sangha. Founded in 1989, and affiliated with the American Buddhist Association, it professes to practice a non-dualistic, pan-sectarian Buddhism “drawn from the original teachings of Gautama Buddha, Jodo Shinshu, Zen Buddhism, and Engaged Buddhism” (Heartland Sangha Notes 20). There is an overwhelming emphasis on the ideal of oneness: “To us, recognition of differences is a way of Oneness. We don’t have to expect to be the same as

others, but we can make an effort to see the differences and acknowledge and respect differences and then, we can be united” (*Ibid.*).

The diversity of Buddhists is evident in the number of non-traditional groups that combine *Theravāda*, *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayana* beliefs and practices. These include groups such as Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO). McLelland asserts that participants in these non-traditional groups are “primarily Caucasians from a Judeo-Christian background, who actively pursue Buddhist meditation”, and also college and university students and teachers “interested in Buddhism, both from an academic and a participatory perspective” (McLelland 12).²⁷ The Tibetan Manjushri temple in Montreal, half of whose membership is Vietnamese, reveals that such blurring of traditional lines is not confined to Caucasian converts to Buddhism. In addition, there are lay teachers, such as Toni Packard, who runs the Springwater (retreat) Center near Buffalo, New York, who refuse to identify themselves as Buddhists although they have received specifically Buddhist training. While many of these new Buddhist groups do not participate in the actual *Wesak* ritual (probably due to a certain skepticism of “ritualism” associated with Buddhism in Asia), attending the festival affords them an opportunity to interact with other Buddhist groups and introduce themselves to the wider public.

The Chicago *Wesak* organized by the BCM provides a glimpse into the variety of different Buddhist traditions that compete for a wider audience alongside the more traditional schools. Many of the Centers that did not send representatives to the religious service conducted earlier that morning at Wat Dhammaram used the festival to advertise their own *Wesak* or Buddha’s Birthday celebrations. Some Centers, such as the Chicago Insight Meditation Center, handed out literature from a variety of sources. There was the bi-annual newsletter from the North American Headquarters for Vipassana Meditation located in Barre, Massachusetts, a newsletter published by the Heartland Sangha entitled

“American Buddhist Newsletter”, which contained articles written by authors belonging to the Zen, Tibetan, and Vietnamese traditions. They also distributed a newsletter called “Oneness”. There was also one messianic organization present whose only apparent connection to Buddhism is their use of the name of Maitreya, who, in Buddhist lore, is designated as the next Buddha.²⁸ The eclectic mix of groups gathered together at the Chicago *Wesak* celebration reflects the syncretic blending of religious and ethnic traditions that is a growing phenomenon in North American Buddhism.

At the same time, the fact that some groups refused to participate in the formal aspect of the Chicago *Wesak*, and chose only to set up tables for self-promotion, reflects the ethnic divisions that persist among North American Buddhists. For instance, the congregation for the formal component of the Chicago *Wesak* was predominantly comprised of Asian-Americans, while Euro-Americans, representing mainly non-sectarian groups, were the main participants in the stall advertising that followed the main service. Although *Wesak* provides a forum for these otherwise separate groups to interact, it would seem that *Wesak* is primarily an event for Asian-American Buddhists. Euro-American Buddhists, who obviously acknowledge the advantages of public gatherings with other Buddhists, are generally less interested in the ritualism and “cultural trappings” associated with traditional Buddhism, and have to create their own co-religious events that are more conducive to their particular needs.

6.3.4 CYM Day: The White *Wesak*

“Ethnicity determines not only the composition of members but also the activities of the group” (Tanaka 287). Besides allowing new forms of Buddhism to be displayed in a public arena, the celebration of *Wesak* has also spawned the conception of other co-religious events, such as “Change Your Mind Day” (CYM Day) sponsored by the

Buddhist review magazine, *Tricycle*.²⁹ CYM Day, which has been held in New York City's Central Park for the last seven years, is an example of an event oriented particularly towards Euro-American Buddhists. This event is continually growing in size and is rapidly becoming a tradition of its own. Two years ago, CYM Day branched out to include celebrations in San Francisco; Anchorage; Alaska; Kansas City; Williamsport, Pennsylvania; and Montoursville, Pennsylvania. This year it spread even further to include Austin, Texas; Seattle; Washington; and a satellite CYM Day, focusing on music, was held in Vancouver, B.C. (*Tricycle*, Fall 2000, 14-15).

The intent of this event is also very similar to that of *Wesak*. Organized by the magazine's board, their statement of purpose in organizing a "day of free Buddhist meditation" is to "reach out to the community, making dharma more accessible, and bringing together members of different *sangha*" (*Tricycle*, Fall 2000, 14). This mirrors the official intent of almost every other pan-Buddhist lay organization or event in existence. What has inevitably happened is this multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious environment has grown to include a variety of cultural events that are associated with the different Buddhist traditions. For example, most *Wesak* celebrations organized by pan-Buddhist groups include a cultural component comprised of singing, dancing, and other forms of artistic expression that have arisen in the countries that Buddhism has touched. CYM Day includes, besides different meditative techniques, demonstrations of T'ai Chi, Qi Gong, Zen archery, and musical performances using Zen drums and Tibetan long horn instruments. While these dramatic elements add depth and colour to the ritual proceedings, as well as legitimating new ritual traditions by associating them with the ancient customs of other Buddhist cultures, the main focus of the CYM Day activities remains spiritual teachings and meditation instruction. This is communicated through a series of lectures from various lay and ordained teachers. The intention, to bring different

Buddhists together and disseminate the *Dharma* to a wider public, may represent common ground for *Wesak* and CYM Day, but the ethnic differences that exist between Asian and Euro-American Buddhists have spawned the creation of a parallel practice. White Buddhists have created a tradition of their own in order to make Buddhism, essentially a foreign religion, a familiar and distinctly North American tradition. CYM Day, or “White Wesak”, reflects the existence of parallel Buddhist communities in North American Buddhism.

Ethnicity refers “to the recognition of two distinct and mutually isolated brands of Buddhism practiced by groups composed largely of Asian Americans, on one hand, and Euro-Americans, on the other” (Tanaka 287). In terms of practice, Euro-American Buddhists tend to focus mostly on meditation, e.g., *Vipassana* (See Fronsdal 163-180), and chanting, e.g., The Soka Gakkai – Namu Myoho Renge Kyo. On the other hand, Asian Americans are more likely to incorporate informal elements, which might include traditional dancing and musical accompaniment, into their form of practice. Paul Numrich uses the term “parallel congregations” to illustrate the dynamics that evolve when both ethnic groups are affiliated with the same temple or group. Within his case study of Wat Dhammaram, a *Theravāda* temple located in Chicago, Numrich describes how the two congregations “intersect” at certain events but do not “interact” (Numrich 1996, 63-65). *Wesak*, as well as certain meditation-centered events such as classes and retreats provide one of the few opportunities for interaction between the groups. When the two congregations do not intersect but remain parallel, conflict between tradition and interpretation remains minimal. Through the creation of pan-Buddhist groups, which are formed primarily for the purpose of organizing *Wesak* celebrations, opportunity for intersection increases.

6.4 Conclusions

The Buddhist response to North American influences such as pluralism and secularism has been adaptation. The creation of pan-Buddhist groups is an example of this adaptation. They represent an ecumenical approach to problems such as feelings of isolation and powerlessness, encountered by minority groups in a pluralistic setting. Through cooperation and inter-faith dialogue (with Christians as well) Buddhists are capable of organizing large-scale events such as the BCM *Wesak*, which not only enhance mutual understanding between different Buddhists but also announce their presence to the wider public. These symbolic acts create a very real sense of purpose and identity for Buddhists. Issues of ethnicity and the existence of parallel congregations does not detract from the fact that ecumenism is a growing trend in North American Buddhism. Inevitably divisions will persist but the consolidation of identity does not depend on unanimous agreement amongst all of the Buddhist groups; it only requires the participants to respect the diversity that already exists.

Chapter Seven

Conclusions

Throughout this thesis, the *Wesak* ritual has been examined in terms of its socio-historical function as a consolidator of a collective Buddhist identity. This function has come about primarily through a dynamic of imitation of the Other. In Chapter Two, the Other is manifested through the incorporation of indigenous practices into *Wesak*'s ritual content. The possibility of Indian and agricultural influences upon *Wesak* illuminates the syncretic nature of ritual development and its adaptability in the face of cultural and political changes. In the case of Sri Lanka, the Other is the colonial package comprised of Christianity and western European pedagogical techniques, whereas in North America the Other is represented by secular and pluralistic western political ideals. One can conclude from the resulting variety of *Wesak* rituals celebrated in different parts of the world, that no original or pristine form of *Wesak* exists, or has ever existed. Instead, due to constantly shifting socio-political environments, there is only a changing ritual form designated as the Buddhist ritual *Wesak*. Ritual continuity is maintained through commemoration of the life of the Buddha and, paradoxically, through the syncretic blending of Buddhist culture with that of the Other.

Wesak has also been used as a political tool for identity consolidation when tension arises due to cultural and political overlap. *Wesak* has functioned as a vehicle for the transformation that occurs in response to the challenges proffered by encounters between Buddhism and western ideals. This in turn consolidates identity for the Buddhist community, a minority presence in both Sri Lanka and North America. For instance, the

Christian influence upon *Wesak* festivities in Sri Lanka offers an excellent example of how incorporation of western social practices and festivals have helped to forge a distinctly Buddhist identity. This has resulted in parallel practices to such an extent that the contemporary celebration of *Wesak* in Sri Lanka has been designated as “A Buddhist Christmas”. In Sri Lanka, such syncretic *Wesak* celebrations have been instrumental in facilitating a resurgence in the popularity of Buddhist practices.

Western values such as secularism and pluralism have prompted Buddhists of different sects to foster cooperative approaches to ensure the survival of Buddhism in North America. The creation of pan-Buddhist groups, sometimes formed specifically for the purpose of organizing *Wesak* celebrations, has provided the necessary organizational structure for *Wesak* to be celebrated annually. The inter-sectarian cooperation encouraged through the organization of a Pan-Buddhist *Wesak* celebration also functions to instill a framework for the centralization of Buddhist communities. In Toronto, an example of such collaboration resulted in the formation of the Toronto Buddhist Federation in 1980, the first pan-Buddhist group in Canada, possibly in North America. Subsequently this also led to the creation of a Buddhist directory with a list of contact names and numbers for the different Centres. *Wesak* functions as a means of communication between different Buddhist groups and also the wider non-Buddhist public. Individual groups participate in co-religious events because they are occasions to identify with other Buddhists by expressing a common allegiance to the Buddhist tradition.

But *Wesak*'s social function goes deeper than this. Once it is understood that “rites create political reality” (Kertzer 1), a picture emerges of *Wesak* as a Buddhist ritual that has the potential to transform the very fabric of Buddhist identity, while also serving as a source of religio-cultural continuity, whether it be in Sri Lanka or Toronto. Through the ritual display of specific symbols, identity is confirmed; it is further entrenched

through ritual repetition as in the case of annual *Wesak* celebrations. This process of identity consolidation works both ways. As Hori points out, “In the long slow process of acculturation, the host culture and the guest religion change each other” (Hori 1998, 77). The ecumenical nature of *Wesak*, characterized by the inclusion of a variety of different Buddhist groups and a high level of lay involvement, also affects the wider Buddhist population in terms of how they choose to define themselves. By participating in the ecumenical North American *Wesak* celebrations, Buddhists are consciously acknowledging the transformation of their tradition. It is the innovatory potential of ritual that makes it such a “potent force in political change” (Kertzer 12).

Inevitably, a work such as this produces more questions than it answers. What will happen to *Wesak* in the future? Will issues surrounding ethnicity and the emergence of parallel congregations continue to persist in North America? Will *Wesak* persevere as arguably the most important festival of the year for Buddhists? Or will it become designated an “ethnic event” only? What does identity mean to a Buddhist who does not believe in, or use, those distinctions? All of these questions need a response eventually. Admittedly, my data is very limited and the conclusions I draw from them may seem disproportionately exaggerated at times, but hopefully this unfinished work will at the very least provide some insight into the issues that surround an emerging Buddhist identity in North America. I will leave the reader with a quote from Xunzi (third century BCE) that injects a sense of humility into my attempt to render *Wesak*, this ancient celebration, as something capable of being truly understood without fully experiencing it:

The meaning of ritual is deep indeed.
 He who tries to enter it with the kind of perception that
 Distinguishes hard and white, same and different, will
 Drown there.
 The meaning of ritual is great indeed.
 He who tries to enter it with the uncouth and the inane

Theories of system-makers will perish there.
The meaning of ritual is lofty indeed.
He who tries to enter with the violent and arrogant ways of
Those who despise common customs and consider
Themselves to be above other men will meet his
Downfall there.

(Xunzi, cited in Bell preface)

Notes

¹ Throughout this paper, as much as possible, terms such as *parinibbāna* and *Theravāda* will be rendered in the original source language, *Pāli*. The term *Vaiśākha*, is the Sanskrit term for the second month in the Indian calendar.

² This term, used by Paul Numrich in an article entitled “Local Inter-Buddhist Associations in North America” (1999), denotes the phenomenon of events such as *Wesak* that are organized through the cooperation of many different kinds of Buddhist groups.

³ The ritual proceedings were videotaped using a hand-held Hi-8 video recorder.

⁴ These accounts are compiled in works such as *Culture of Ceylon in Mediaeval Times* by Wilhelm Geiger, and *Buddhism: Beliefs and Practices* by Lynn De Silva.

⁵ See these works: *Theravada Buddhism in Southeast Asia* by Robert C. Lester, *Buddhism and Society in Southeast Asia* by Donald Swearer, and *World Conquerer and World Renouncer* by S.J. Tambiah.

⁶ Numrich broadly defines “Americanization” as the “adaptation of nonindigenous religious traditions to an American context” (Numrich 1996, 140). According to Numrich, an example of this process of cultural adaptation can be found in the “[l]aicization and voluntarism” of immigrant religions in America (Numrich 1996, 142).

⁷ A glaring example of this problem arose during research of the Burmese *Wesak* in Vancouver. First of all, there was an initial language barrier between myself and the Burmese-speaking monk, whose heavily accented, softly spoken broken English was difficult to understand. I had visited the temple a few days prior to *Wesak* in order to familiarize myself with the environment and to make sure it would not be intrusive for me to attend the service. I was told that it would be fine if I attended the *Wesak* ceremony, and that the service started at noon. The actual starting time of the service was 11 a.m. Both parties knew the difference between 11 and 12 o’clock. The fact that I was told a different starting time either indicates that there was a change in the schedule, or time means something else to Southeast Asian cultures.

⁸ For instance, at the Chicago *Wesak*, a lay representative from one of the Buddhist groups got quite angry with me and walked away thinking that I was a reporter of some kind; and I suppose I was.

⁹ Vows to abstain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and the use of intoxicants.

¹⁰ The figure of the Buddha, his Teachings, and his Community of followers.

¹¹ Activities often include dramatic reenactments of the Buddha's life, accompanied by traditional ethnic songs and dance performances.

¹² There is no biography of the Buddha in the *Pāli* Canon, the oldest collection of Buddhist literature, but the beginnings of one can be found in the *Suttapitaka* and the *Mahāparinibbāna Sūtra* (Khosla xi).

¹³ Aśoka's Rock Edicts, of which 30 have been identified in India and Afghanistan since 1873, are carved from polished stone or sandstone and depict mainly Buddhist teachings (Hirakawa 97).

¹⁴ Other examples of the blending of popular and more traditionally Buddhist practices found in *Wesak* celebrations in Southeast Asian countries such as Myanmar, where the watering of *pipal* trees (otherwise known as *Bhodi* trees) is a part of the ritual. In Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia, Buddhists circumambulate around an image of the Buddha carrying lighted candles and incense to honour the founder of their tradition (Lester 143-144). Other activities associated with *Wesak* celebrations may include any of the following: releasing caged animals and offering prayers, "watering Bodhi trees within monastery compounds, circumambulation of the *cetiya* reliquary at night with incense and candles, acts of social service such as feeding the poor and treating the sick in hospitals, pilgrimage to sacred sites, and the bathing of the Buddha images" (Swearer 1987, 548).

¹⁵ The term "New Age" is used rather loosely in the scope of this section, since Buddhism, until recently, was also classified as a New Age movement.

¹⁶ In this context, "*dhamma*" refers to the "truth", or "teachings" imparted by the Buddha.

¹⁷ The use of the term "myth" does not connote a lack of respect for the material at hand, nor discount the possibility that (although unlikely), the *dhammadīpa* myth is historically accurate. It only serves to emphasize the liberal approach applied by the authors of the Chronicles in their attempt to compile a religious, as opposed to an objective, history of Sri Lanka.

¹⁸ The contents of the myth are revealed in the "Ceylonese Chronicles": the *Dīpavaṃsa*, written between the beginning of the fourth century and the first third of the fifth century CE (Clifford 39); the *Mahāvamsa* (sixth century CE); and the *Cūlavamsa* (thirteenth century CE). Covering a period of approximately 1500 years, these mytho-historical texts are not so much concerned with an accurate rendering of Sinhalese history, but rather they emphasize the sacred history of the Sinhalese people and their identity as Buddhists. These historical narratives are constructed "around certain archetypal personages or events" (Greenwald 14) which serve to legitimate the unique historical connection between Sinhalese culture and the Buddhist tradition. In fact, these Chronicles record "the sacred history of a people destined with a sacred mission, namely, to maintain the purity of the *Dhamma* in a world of impermanence and self-seeking" (Smith 32).

¹⁹ The “colonial package” refers to the host of social influences that accompanied the colonial presence on the island of Sri Lanka. For instance, increased levels of education, urbanization, and the introduction of Christianity as the state religion. Many Sinhalese Buddhists converted to Christianity in order to increase their social prestige.

²⁰ Colonel Henry Steele Olcott was an American who, along with Madame Blavatsky, organized the Theosophical Society in 1875. He landed in Sri Lanka on 17 February 1875 (a day once celebrated as “Olcott Day” in Independent Sri Lanka) and proceeded to form the Buddhist Theosophical Society. He was influential in promoting a Buddhist revival in Sri Lanka (Fields 62).

²¹ The term “Protestant Buddhism” was coined by Gananath Obeyesekere in the article “Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon”. Used first to describe a protest movement against the Protestant Christian missionaries, the term actually denotes the adoption of important features of Protestantism by Sinhalese Buddhists.

²² In his article, Sugunasiri describes these “final wave” immigrants as “either businessmen attracted by the Canadian government’s new initiative of encouraging entrepreneurs with money to invest, or professionals (e.g. bankers) and skilled personnel, educated in English under a British system, qualifying under the independent category” (Sugunasiri 85).

²³ The Chinese Buddhist organization, International Buddhist Progress Society (IBPS) is more commonly known as Buddha’s Light International Association (BLIA). IBPS refers to the monastic component of this organization while BLIA represents the lay element.

²⁴ According to an anecdotal source in Toronto, the first pan-Buddhist group was possibly formed in Malaysia by Ven. Dr. K. Sri Dhammanada Maha Nayaka Thera as early as 1953 (Janet McLellan, July 31, 2000).

²⁵ The ritual observance of Bathing of the Buddha is widely practiced in countries where *Mahāyāna* Buddhism is practiced, such as China, Japan, Vietnam and Korea. As a ritual practice it finds scriptural precedence in the stories surrounding the birth of the Buddha in a grove of *sāl* trees called the *Lumbinī* garden (Bapat 20). It is derived from early accounts of the washing of the baby Buddha and his mother at birth. For example, one account described in the *Lalitavistara* depicts “two *nāga* serpents, *Nanda* and *Upananda*, bathing the *bodhisattva* after his birth” (Swearer 1987, 549). Another version mentioned in the *Mahāsattva Sūtra* describes how the newborn was “bathed by Indra and the four *deva* kings” (Swearer 1987, 549). This last account is elaborated upon in yet another early text which records the baby Buddha exiting from his mother’s womb and being cleansed as “two streams of water fall from the sky, one cold and one hot, wherewith they (the four gods) perform the washing for the *Bodhisatta* and his mother” (*Acchariyabbhutadhamma-sutta*, *Majjh.*, iii, 118, cited in Thomas 31). The *Mahāsattva Sūtra* also “designates the eighth day of the fourth lunar month as the time when all devotees should wash his [the Buddha’s] images in respect of the Buddha’s power to grant boons” (Swearer 1987, 549).

²⁶ The ritual activity focuses on a small statue of the baby Buddha in his defining posture, with one hand pointed towards the sky and one pointed towards the ground. This pose,

mentioned in the *Pathamasamphoti* text depicts the baby Buddha as “superior to the gods [in the sky] for they serve him [...] [and] the goddess of the earth for she testifies to his reigning virtue” (Swearer 1976, 45-46). The water is ceremonially poured over the body of the baby Buddha, standing on a platform in the middle of a large bowl or basin filled with water, using a wooden ladle. This ritual action denotes respect for the Buddha and also represents the washing away of one’s own impurities.

²⁷ McLelland provides a list, compiled in 1988, of a variety of different Buddhist groups in her book, see pp.221-223.

²⁸ Originally a *Mahāyāna* conception, according to Buddhist tradition recounted in the *Jātaka* Tales, the “historical” Buddha, Siddhatha Gautama, was only the latest incarnation in a successive line of beings who achieved Buddha-hood. Maitreya is the name given to the next being to achieve Buddha-hood.

²⁹ Another such event is the “Buddhist Fair”, first organized by the Buddhist Association of Southwest Michigan in 1997.

³⁰ These two terms are attributed to Thomas Tweed (1992).

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Appendix 1

Inaugural *Wesak* Celebration in Toronto

(Toronto Sun article, 1981)

14 The Toronto Sun, Monday May 11, 1981



marie grossman

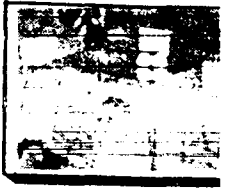
BUDDHA'S BIRTHDAY

Yesterday was the 2,525th anniversary of the birth of Gotama, commonly known as the Buddha, founder of one the world's major religions. The occasion was marked by a ceremony at Nathan Phillips Square sponsored by the Toronto Buddhist Federation. There are nearly 40,000 adherents of Buddhism in Metro.

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Appendix 2

United Nations International Recognition of the Day of *Vesak*



General Assembly

Distr.: Limited
13 December 1999

Original: English

Fifty-fourth session

Agenda item 174

International recognition of the Day of Vesak

Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Chile, Cyprus, Grenada, Iceland, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Lao People's Democratic Republic, Maldives, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Portugal, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation, Seychelles, Slovakia, Spain, Sri Lanka, Suriname, Thailand and Ukraine: draft resolution

International recognition of the Day of Vesak at United Nations Headquarters and other United Nations offices

The General Assembly,

Acknowledging the hope expressed by the International Buddhist Conference, held in Sri Lanka in November 1998, that the Day of Vesak, the Day of the Full Moon in the month of May each year, be internationally recognized and, in particular, at United Nations Headquarters and other United Nations offices,

Recognizing that the Day of the Full Moon in the month of May each year is the day most sacred to Buddhists, who commemorate, on that day, the birth of the Buddha, his attainment of enlightenment and his passing away,

Considering that international recognition at United Nations Headquarters and other United Nations offices would constitute acknowledgement of the contribution that Buddhism, one of the oldest religions in the world, has made, for over two and a half millennia, and continues to make to the spirituality of humanity,

Resolves that, without cost to the United Nations, appropriate arrangements shall be made for international observances of Vesak at United Nations Headquarters and other United Nations offices, in consultation with the relevant United Nations offices and with permanent missions that also wish to be consulted.

Appendix 3

Wesak Cards and Poems

(Buddhist Annual)

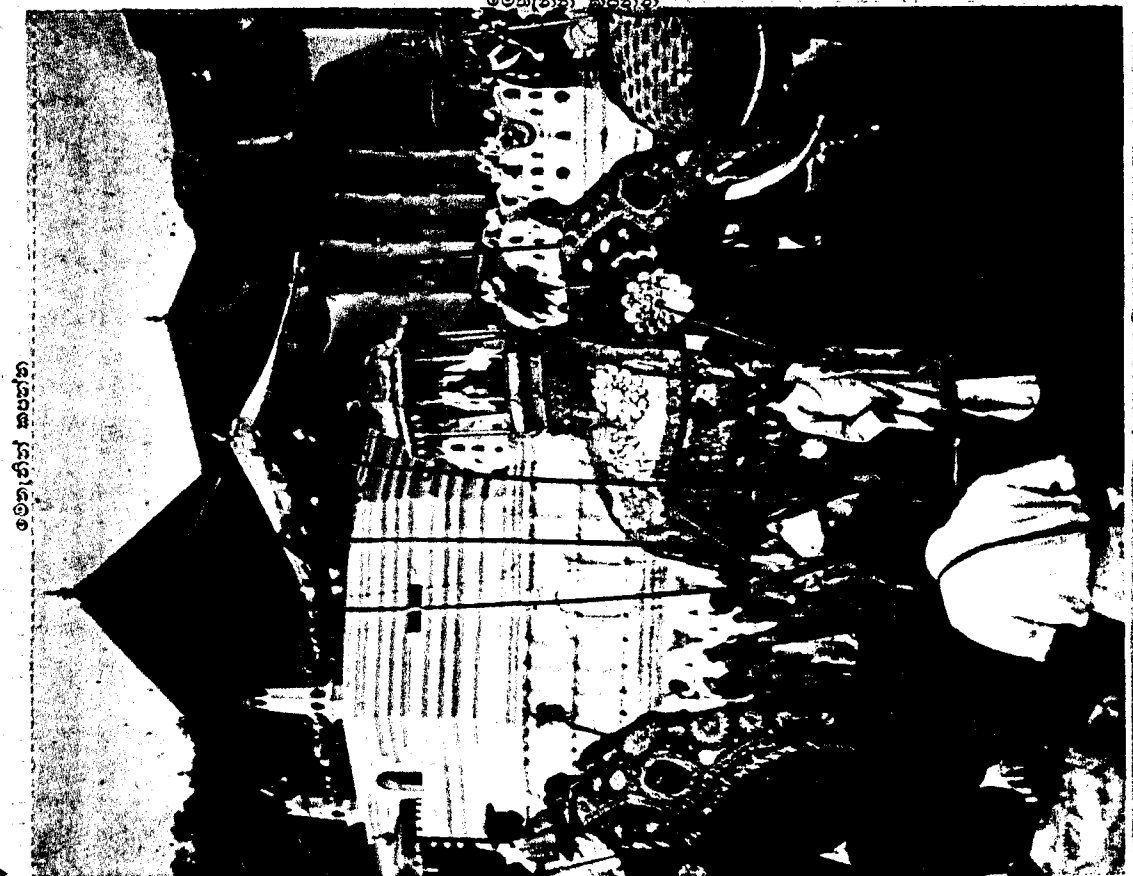


2514 BUDDHIST ANNUAL

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මේමදුම තැපෑල

This greetings card
comes to you
with best wishes for
a very happy Wesak
from Meemaduma—
sellers and distributors of
quality motor spares.
Fill in the card and
post it to a friend
or a relative
and let us share our Joy
with them.
Meemaduma
7, Panchikawatta Road
Colombo 10.
Tel. 33451.
Branches:
Negombo
Gampaha
Matara

මීමඩුම



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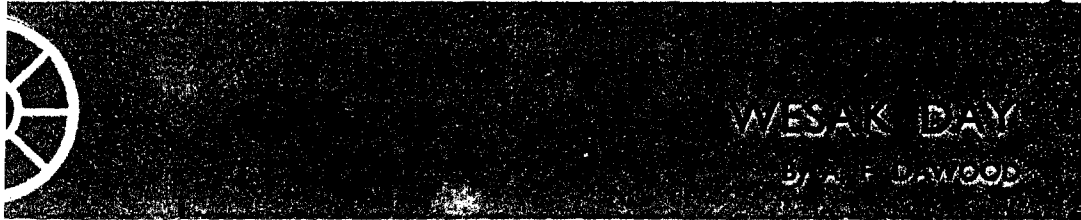
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වෙත

◀ This greetings card comes to you with best wishes for a very happy Wesak from Meemaduma—

Fill in the card and post it to a friend or a relative and let us share our joy with them.

Meemaduma
197, Panchikawatta Road,
Colombo 10.



To life has come the slumbering village
For it is the happy Wesak day,
Brighter gleams the sun toning the foliage,
Where the 'cuckoo' coos in ceaseless gay.

From break of dawn, there is hustle and bustle,
In every hut and hovel lanterns dangle;
In thanks for Wesak breeze the leaves rustle,
In sunlit path many a tot run and ramble.

The air is filled with a cacophony of sound-
Rabana trobs, crackers crack, birds twitter;
The fair and the smart clad in gaudy hues abound
The village, to cull flowers from hither, thither,

When the sun-kissed land fades, peeps the moon-
A round moon to shower its beams on the land;
Then the lantern lights mingle and seeps so soon
And brown oil wicks dance in style so grand.

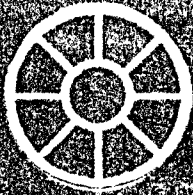
In the moon-drenched hamlet traverse the dames
To temple with basket of sweet smelling flowers-
Na-mal, Orchids, Jasmine, Nelun, the names;
So ample of fragrance to greet swelling comers.

When the golden moon dazzles in the starlit sky
Thousands throng in glee to worship
The Blessed One—Lord Buddha revered high;
To forget, forgive and renew friendship.

While the temple bells peal and sadhus rent the air
The milling crowd kneel in their folded palm;
Fine, the simple folks feel the festive peace, and share
The blessing of Lord—healing their countless harm.

When the bells of temple chime, calling all to grace.
As in morn, when breeze plays, waves sleepy trees;
Carols girls twinkle fine smile-wreathed face;
Blazing lights of pandal glows—turns hamlet to peace.

It's Wesak poya that calls once a year,
Chaperoned with peace and serenity to all;
So the folks saddened in moonlight cheer
Wesak—Birth, Enlightenment, Death that fall.



WESAK

By ADELA P. ABEYRATNE

What is it I feel, as lowly I bow in adoration
At the image of the Buddha, 'neath the Bodhi Tree?
Does this aroma of incense and josticks rise for thee
Lord, in soft veils of mists, arousing contemplation

Of the Four Noble Truths—the Eightfold Way—
Taught by the Great Teacher, five and forty years,
When he sojourned in this lonesome valley of fears
And pointed to where conquest over self lay.

Awake, sister, it is the sacred Wesak morn,
'Tis not a dream, 'Tis true I see the hallowed sight,
Of azure blue, white and saffron with deep rose light,
Midst circlets of orange bright and gold born

In a luminous halo and moving like a harbinger,
Before the retreating Prince Siddhartha—
Once born of common clay—now a Buddha,
Whose message of contentment on earth will linger.

Look, sister, the radiance of the Poya Moon sheds
Over Lumbini and holy Gaya's Tree and Kusi's Twin Tree,
Awake and rejoice, 'Tis the birthday of the Preacher free,
Who led us far from desire's crippling treads.

Arise, sister, this is the May Full moon—
The Poya—the birthday of the Enlightened One—
Let us to meditation sit like Sakya's Noble Son,
And learn to conquer ignorance, pain and gloom.

Hark, sister, the irresistible call of bells fill
The thoughts of devotees, now in mystic flight,
With off'rings of frangipani, camphor and jasmins white
And serene reflection—Panca or Dasa Sil.

All the rustic hamlets are astir with joy,
The yellow lanterns swing from thatch and tree,
The Bo leaves swaying whisper in chimes and see
The glorious birth of Maya's Little Boy.

Arise, sister, this is the May Full Moon—
The Poya—the birthday of the Enlightened One.

Appendix 4

Program from the BCM *Visakha* 2000



Visakha Festival 2000

The traditional Buddhist
holiday honoring the birth,
enlightenment and passing
of the Buddha

Saturday,
May 20, 2000

Keynote Speaker
Rev. Brian Bauerle
from Asian Leadership Institute
and the Wisdom Trust

Join the Buddhist community in celebrating at:
Wat Dhammaram Thai Temple

7059 W. 75th Street
Chicago, IL 60638

For information call (773) 583-5794

Ample parking available

9:30 AM to 11 AM Religious Ceremony

1 PM - 5 PM Lectures, Meditation Instruction, Exhibits
Children's Program

6:30 PM - 9 PM Cultural Performance

Free blood pressure checks by the Thai Nurses Association

MIDWEST BUDDHIST COUNCIL VISHAKA 2000

May 20, 2000

Religious Ceremony, 9:30 - 11:00 AM

Order of Service

Procession of monks and priests (signalled by 3 rounds on temple bell)

Chant leader: Now let us pay preliminary homage to the Buddha

All: Homage to the Buddha (chanted in Pali 3X)

All: Homage to the Triple Gem (chanted in Pali, three times with bow after each)

Chant leader: Now let us chant in praise of the Buddha

All: Homage to the Buddha (chanted in Pali, followed by bow)

Chant leader: Now let us chant in praise of the Dhamma

All: Homage to the Dhamma (chanted in Pali, followed by bow)

Chant leader: Now let us chant in praise of the Sangha

All: Homage to the Sangha (chanted in Pali, followed by bow)

All: Five Precepts (chanted in Pali)

Offerings to the Three Buddha Images

Chant leader: Maha Prajna Paramita Heart Sutra

All: Heart Sutra (chanted in English, repeated until all representatives have offered)

During the chanting of the Heart Sutra, a representative from each temple will offer incense, sweet tea abluion of the Baby Buddha image, fruit to the standing Buddha image, and flowers to the reclining Buddha image.

Tantra Offering (presented by Vajrayana representative, in English)

Introduction of Dharma Speaker (by chant leader)

Dharma Talk (by Brian Bauerle)

Chant leader: (repeated three times)

May the merit and blessing of this service

Spread to every being in all places,

So that we and all others together

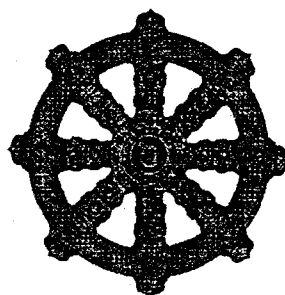
Awaken to the way of peace and harmony.

Exit of priests and monks

All others exit

INTERNATIONAL VISAKHA 2000

Meditation Instruction



STYLE	INSTRUCTOR	TEMPLE	ROOM	TIME
Shikantaza, zazen	Rev. Suirin Witham	Zen Buddhist Temple of Chicago	1	1:00
Chanting, Lotus Sutra	Kyoji John Schuh	Rissho Kosei-kai	1	2:00
Theravada	Robert Mawson	Dharmakaya Meditation Center	2	2:00
Oneness (zazen)	Rich Zenyo Brandon	Harmony Zen Center	1	3:00
Theravada	Ven. H. Kondanna	N.Y. Buddhist Temple	2	3:00
Insight Meditation	Ven. Chuen Phangcham	Midwest Buddhist Meditation Ctr.	1	4:00
Ch'an	Chin Steve Kirchhoff	Int. Buddhist Friendship Assoc.	1	5:00

Lecture Series
1pm to 5pm
Queen Sirikit Hall

Host: Professor Lakshman Mapa

<i>1:00 pm</i>	<i>Rev. Koshin Ogui</i>	<i>Jodo Shinshu and Zen Mahayana Tradition</i>
<i>2:00pm</i>	<i>Rev. Brian Bauerle</i>	<i>American Buddhism Non-Sectarian Tradition</i>
<i>3:00pm</i>	<i>Dr. Rahul Deepankar</i>	<i>Engaged Buddhism</i>
<i>4:00pm</i>	<i>Marvin Moser</i>	<i>Vajrayana Tradition</i>
<i>5:00pm</i>	<i>Robert Mawson</i>	<i>Dhammakaya Theravada Tradition</i>

Cultural Performance

6:30PM to 9:30PM

Queen Sirikit Hall

Hostess: Tanya Suesantisook, Miss Thailand World

6:15pm Flag Ceremony: Representatives Of BCM

6:30pm Thai Dance: Thai Cultural and Fine Arts Institute

6:45pm Ka Napuna Ukelele Group: Hawaiian Medley

7:00pm Ka Ya Kim: Korean Instrumental

7:15pm Coconut Shell Dance/ Sarayan Dance
Albany Part Cambodian Dance Troupe

7:30pm Vietnamese Dance: Lotus Sangha

7:45pm Maturi Taiko Group

8:00pm Sri Lankan Dance and Song: Praise to the Buddha

8:15pm Sunrise Comes: Song /Manora Dance
Wat Dhammaram Sunday School Children

8:30pm Modern Dance: Medley

..... TKA Group ... Bo Wangwatana, ... Ben Sriaroon, Rey Sriaroon,
..... Woody Deeudomchan, Wat Deeudomchan

8:45pm Vocal presentation: Miss Thailand World
..... Tanya Suesantisook

9:00pm Closing Statement

Appendix 5

Program from the Montreal Mini-*Vesak*

Order of Service Vesak Montreal

Centre Bouddhiste Manjusri
705 Chambly, Longueuil, QC J4H 2M1
Saturday June 3, 2000 11 a. m.

Programme

11:00 a. m. Opening Bell

Offering of incense.

Welcome

Mr. Louis Cormier (Eng. and French)

Chanting (Theravada):

Homage to Buddha, Three Refuges

Led by Bhante Visuddhacara, Centre de Meditation Agga Pannarama

Chanting (Tibetan):

Homage to Buddha, Mantra, Offering of Auspicious White Scarf

Led by Yeshe Jinpa, Centre Bouddhiste Manjushri

The Meaning of Vesak

Professor Victor Sogen Hori, McGill University

Chanting (Chinese):

Heart Sutra, Dharani of the Great Compassionate One

Parinama (Turning over Merit)

Led by Ven. Man Hung, IBPS

Food Offering to Buddha

Liturgy of Meals

Led by Ven. Man Hung, IBPS

Bathing of Buddha by Sangha

Closing

Mr. Louis Cormier

Vesak de Montréal

Célébration de la naissance, de l'éveil et du Parinirvana du Bouddha

Montreal Vesak

Celebration of the Buddha's Birth, Enlightenment and Parinirvana

Adresse de correspondance / Correspondance address: 6015, rue Hochelaga, Montréal (Québec) H1N 1X5 Canada ☎ (514) 899 8042

Centres invités Invited Centers:

Association de Chan Hai Lei Jang
 Association chinoise de Montréal
 Association du Québec Wat Buddha Sodhara
 Association bouddhiste Bo-De du Québec
 Association bouddhiste Thuyen-Ton
 Association de Montréal
 Association bouddhiste Kankala
 Association bouddhiste Manjusri
 Association nautique & Culturelle Boud. Lao
 Association Soka Gakkai
 Association d'éducation Agga-Pannarama
 Association d'éducation Sommet du Vautour
 Association de Dorjé
 Association nautique Montréal
 Association culturelle boudd. Huyen-Khong
 Association Zen
 Association Zen de Vaudreuil
 Association de la Main
 Association de Montréal
 Association de Sutton
 Association d'Occident Buddhist Order
 Association d'ipassana
 Association Buddhist Meditation Center
 Association Buddhist Progress Society
 Association bouddhiste de Montréal
 Association bouddhiste Church
 Association bouddhiste Tu-Quang
 Association mère du Canada
 Association de-Hoa
 Association de-Bao
 Association de Montréal
 Association bouddhiste Les-Érables
 Association bouddhiste Quan-Am
 Association bouddhiste Tibétain
 Association de Zen Ji
 Association Mindfulness Meditation Group
 Association nautique d'Ipssana

Ritual Respect

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammā sambuddhassa
(3 times)

Buddhāṃ saraṇaṃ gachāmi
 Dhammāṃ saraṇaṃ gachāmi
 Sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gachāmi

Dutiyāṃ pi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gachāmi
 Dutiyāṃ pi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gachāmi
 Dutiyāṃ pi sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gachāmi

Tatiyāṃ pi buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gachāmi
 Tatiyāṃ pi dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gachāmi
 Tatiyāṃ pi sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gachāmi

Turning Over Merit

回向

Parinamana Gatha

慈悲喜捨遍法界。

TZU BEI SHI SER PIEN FA CHIEH °

Kindness, compassion, joyfullness and generosity premeats the Dharmadhatu °

惜福結緣利人天。

SHI FU CHIEH YUAN LI JEN TIEN °

Treasure the merit, make friends, benefiting heaven and earth.

禪淨戒行平等忍。

CHAN CHIN CHIEH HEN PIN DEN JEN °

Meditate, chant, follow precepts and equally tolerance to all.

慚愧感恩大願心。

TSAN KUEI GAN ERN DA YUAN SHIN °

Shamefulness, thankfulness and vow for the highest pledge.

Offering of Food

Congregation chant:

南無靈山會上佛菩薩 (三稱)

NA MO LING SHAN HUEI SHANG FO PU SA (repeat three times)

Let's take refuge in the assembly of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas on Vulture Peak

Congregation repeats the chanting three times

南無常住十方佛。

NA MO CHANG CHU SHIH FANG FO。

Let's take refuge in the Buddhas eternally dwelling in all space.

南無常住十方法。

NA MO CHANG CHU SHIH FANG FA。

Let's take refuge in the Dharma eternally dwelling in all space.

南無常住十方僧。

NA MO CHANG CHU SHIH FANG SENG。

Let's take refuge in the Sangha eternally dwelling in all space.

南無本師釋迦牟尼佛

NA MO BEN SHIH SHIH CHIA MO NI FO。

Let's take refuge in our teacher, Sakyamuni Buddha.

南無消災延壽藥師佛

NA MO SHIAO TSAI YEN SHOU YAO SHIH FO。

Let's take refuge in the savior and healer, Bhaisajayaguru Buddha.

南無極樂世界阿彌陀佛

NA MO CHI LER SHIH CHIEH O MI TO FO。

Let's take refuge in Amitabha Buddha of the Land of Ultimate Bliss.

南無當來下生彌勒尊佛

NA MO DANG LAI SHIA SHENG MI LER TSUN FO。

Let's take refuge in the honored Maitreya, the next Buddha.

南無十方三世一切諸佛

NA MO SHIH FANG SAN SHIH YI CHIEH CHU FO

Let's take refuge in Buddhas of all time and space.

南無大智文殊師利菩薩

NA MO DA CHIH WEN SHU SHIH LI PU SA。

Let's take refuge in Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of great wisdom.

南無大行普賢菩薩

NA MO DA HENG PU SHIEN PU SA。

Let's take refuge in Samanthabhadra, the Bodhisattva of great benevolence.

大悲觀世音菩薩

IO DA BEI KUAN SHIH YIN PU SA °

ke refuge in Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of great compassion.

大勢至菩薩

O DA SHIH CHIH PU SA °

ke refuge in Bodhisattva Mahasthamaprapta.

青淨大海眾菩薩

O CHIN CHING DA HAI CHUNG PU SA °

ke refuge in all the Bodhisattvas in the congregation of the great sea.

大願地藏王菩薩

O DA YUAN DI TSANG WANG PU SA °

ke refuge in Ksitigarbha, the Bodhisattva of great resolve.

護法諸天菩薩

O HU FA CHU TIEN PU SA °

ke refuge in all celestial Bodhisattvas, the protectors of the Dharma.

藍聖眾菩薩

O CHIEH LAN SHENG CHUNG PU SA °

ke refuge in all the holy Bodhisattvas of the Sangharama.

歷代祖師菩薩

O LI DAI TSU SHIH PU SA °

ke refuge in the Bodhisattvas who are masters and patriarchs of all past generations.

真言 (三遍)

Inversion Mantra (Repeat three times)

縛怛他耶多。縛嚧枳帝。

SA WA TA TO YE TO ° WA LU CHIH DI °

跋囉。三跋囉吽。

AN PO LA ° SAN PO LA HUNG °

真言 (三遍)

Mantra (Repeat three times)

嚩婆耶。怛他耶多耶。怛姪他。

SU LU PO YE ° TA TO YE TO YE ° TA CHIH TO °

嚩。蘇嚩。鉢囉蘇嚩。鉢囉蘇嚩。娑婆訶。

LU ° SU LU ° PO LA SU LU ° PO LA SU LU ° SO PO HO °



此食色香味。上供十方佛。中奉諸聖賢。

**TSU SHIH SER SHIANG WEI • SHANG KUNG SHIH FANG FO • CHUNG FONG
CHU SHENG SHIEN •**

This food of supreme flavor and color, we offer to all Buddhas and Saints.

下及六道品。等施無差別。隨願皆飽滿。

SHIA CHI LIU DAO PIN • DENG SHIH WU CHA BEI • SUI YUAN CHIEH BAO MAN

It is also meant for all beings. It is shared equally to satisfy and fulfill all.

令今施者得。無量波羅密。

JIN CHIN SHIH CHEH DER • WU LIANG PO LO MI •

All those who have contributed. They acquire immeasurable paramita.

三德六味。供佛及僧。

SAN DER LIU WEI • KUNG FO CHI SENG •

The three qualities and the six favors. We offer them to the Buddha and the Sangha.

法界有情。普同供養。

FA CHIEH YO CHING • PU TUNG KUNG YANG •

All the beings in Sharmaksetra, let's make the offering together.

Gatha for Bathing the Buddha

我 今 灌 沐 諸 如 來 ,

WO JIN GUAN MU ZHU RU LAI ,

Today I offer my service for Buddha's Vesak shower

淨 智 莊 嚴 功 德 海 .

JIN ZHI ZHUANG YAN GONG DE HAI .

In the Great Ocean of pure wisdom, merits and virtues.

五 濁 眾 生 離 塵 垢 ,

WU ZHUO ZHONG SHENG LI CHEN GOU

May all the confused beings leave the realms of darkness,

同 證 如 來 淨 法 身 .

TONG ZHENG RU LAI JIN FA SHEN .

And together we shall reach the bright and pure buddhahood.

Appendix 6

A Prayer for the Long-Life of H.H. the Dalai Lama

(Tibetan *Saga Dawa*)

A PRAYER FOR THE LONG LIFE OF H.H. THE 14TH DALAI LAMA

AM GYEL-WEY SANG-SUM MA-LÜ-PA
ÜL CHIR-YANG CH'AR-WEY GYÜ-TRÜL-GAR
E GE-LEG KUN-JUNG YI-ZHIN-NOR
GYÜ DRIN-CHEN LA-MEY TSO-G-NAM-LA

HAG DUNG-SHUG DRAG-PÖ SÖL-DEB-NA
CHEN GON-PO TEN-ZIN GYA-TSO-YI
E MI-SHIG KEL-GYAR RAB-TEN-CHING
ON LHUN-GYI DRUP-PAR JIN-GYI-LOB

ING KÜN-SEL KYÖN-DANG NYAM-JUG-PEY
REL DE-CHEN YE-SHE GYÜ MEY TRIN
E MEY TEN-DANG TEN-PEY KYIL-KHOR TU
WEY YI-DAM LHA-TSOG T'AM-CHEY-LA

HAG DUNG-SHUG DRAG-PÖ SÖL-DEB-NA
CHEN GON-PO TEN-ZIN GYA-TSO-YI
E MI-SHIG KEL-GYAR RAB-TEN-CHING
ON LHUN-GYI DRUP-PAR JIN-GYI-LOB

TOG YÖN-TEN LHÜN-ZOG TRIN-LEY-KYI
WA DRO-KHAM GYA-TS'OR TAG-TZEN-PEY
ZEY TOB-CHU NGA-WA LHA-YI-LHA
M TÛ SUM GYEL-WA THAM-CHEY-LA

HAG DUNG-SHUG DRAG-PÖ SÖL-DEB-NA
CHEN GON-PO TEN-ZIN GYA-TSO-YI
E MI-SHIG KEL-GYAR RAB-TEN-CHING
ON LHUN-GYI DRUP-PAR JIN-GYI-LOB

N SUM-LEY GANG-GI NGE-DRÖL-ZHING
TU ZHI-WA NAM-JANG NOR-BÜ-TER
E MI-YO KUN-ZANG GE-WEY-PEL
IM DAM-PEY CHÖ-KYI TSO-G-NAM-LA

HAG DUNG-SHUG DRAG-PÖ SÖL-DEB-NA
CHEN GON-PO TEN-ZIN GYA-TSO-YI
E MI-SHIG KEL-GYAR RAB-TEN-CHING
ON LHUN-GYI DRUP-PAR JIN-GYI-LOB

TRÜL-KHOR JOM-LA CHE-PA-WEY
ON NGÖN-SUM JEL-WEY YE-SHE-CHEN
AR DOR-JEY DRONG-LEY MI-CHEY-PA
ÖL PAG-PEY GEN-DÜN THAM-CHEY-LA

HAG DUNG-SHUG DRAG-PÖ SÖL-DEB-NA
CHEN GON-PO TEN-ZIN GYA-TSO-YI
E MI-SHIG KEL-GYAR RAB-TEN-CHING
ON LHUN-GYI DRUP-PAR JIN-GYI-LOB

Ö ZHING-DANG NEY-YÜL DUR-TRÖ TU
G NYAM-GYAR RÖL-PEY TZEY-JO-YI
R LAM-ZANG DRUB-LA DROG-DZEY-PEY
M PA-WO KHAN-DRÖ TSO-G-NAM-LA

Let us pray with fierce intensity
To the host of kind Lamas, personal and historical
Wish-granting gems, source of all perfection here and beyond

Whose magic show creates whatever educates beings
Who own all three secrets of the superb Victors.
Bless Tenzin Gyatso, Protector of the Land of Snows
May his life not fail, but last a hundred eons
And may his will be effortlessly accomplished!

Let us pray with fierce intensity
To the whole countless host of Yidam Gods
Who arise in the physical and psychic mandalas
Magic clouds of taintless wisdom and great bliss
Evenly pervading the clear space of the Dharma realm
Bless Tenzin Gyatso, Protector of the Land of Snows
May his life not fail, but last a hundred eons
And may his will be effortlessly accomplished!

Let us pray with fierce intensity
To all superb Victors, past, present, future,
Gods of the gods, Masters of the ten powers,
Who always help beings, sprouting in the ocean of universes
Appearing with deeds naturally perfect in freedoms and realizations
Bless Tenzin Gyatso, Protector of the Land of Snows
May his life not fail, but last a hundred eons
And may his will be effortlessly accomplished!

Let us pray with fierce intensity
To the masses of Holy Teachings of the three vehicles
Stainless, unwavering, all-good glory of virtue
Treasury of gems of purity and supreme peace

Definitely liberated from the three worlds
Bless Tenzin Gyatso, Protector of the Land of Snows
May his life not fail, but last a hundred eons
And may his will be effortlessly accomplished!

Let us pray with fierce intensity
To the whole Holy Community of liberated intellects
Great in heroism to conquer the engine of existence
Whose wisdom directly meets the import of the Truths

Who never part from the diamond city of liberation
Bless Tenzin Gyatso, Protector of the Land of Snows
May his life not fail, but last a hundred eons
And may his will be effortlessly accomplished!

Let us pray with fierce intensity
To the hosts of heroes and dakinis of the three places
Who befriend the yogis who practise the good path
With playful charms, sporting the hundreds of fashions of inseparable bliss/void

HAG DUNG-SHUG DRAG-PÖ SÖL-DEB-NA
CHEN GON-PO TEN-ZIN GYA-TSO-YI
MI-SHIG KEL-GYAR RAB-TEN-CHING
ON LHUN-GYI DRUP-PAR JIN-GYI-LOB

EY CHANG-GI KA-TAG CHAG-GYE-DÜ
EL REL-PEY TÖ-DU NYER KÖ-NEY
ANG TEN-ZIN KYONG-WEY TÛ-TZEL-CHEN
E CHEN-DEN TEN-SUNG GYA-TSO-LA

HAG DUNG-SHUG DRAG-PÖ SÖL-DEB-NA
CHEN GON-PO TEN-ZIN GYA-TSO-YI
MI-SHIG KEL-GYAR RAB-TEN-CHING
ON LHUN-GYI DRUP-PAR JIN-GYI-LOB

R LHU-MEY KYAB-KYI CHOG-NAM-LA
DRAG NYING-NEY GÜ-PEY SÖL-TAB-TÛ
NYIG-MEY ZUG-NGÜ RAB-NAR-WEY
G GANG-JONG DRO-WEY GÖN-CHIG-PU

ANG LO-ZANG TEN-DZIN GYA-TSO-CHOG
SUM MI-SHIG MI-GYUR MI-NUB-PAR
ZHIG YONG-DREL DOR-JEY NYING-PÖ-TRI
A GYA-TSOR YO-MEY TAG-TEN-SHO

AM GYEL-WA KÜN-GYI DZEY-PEY-KUR
TOB TRAG-PAR ZUNG-WEY LAB-CHEN-GYI
EY KÜN-PEN NOR-BÜ NYING-PO-CHEN
A JI-ZHIN LHÜN-GY DRUP-GYUR-CHIG

DZOG-DEN KEL-ZANG NAM-KHAY-GO
EN NGEL-SÖ CHI-DU TAG-DRÖL-ZHING
EN CHOG-DÜ KÜN-TU RAB-DAR-WEY
EN SI-ZHI TZE-MOR GYE-GYUR-CHIG

A PEY-MÖ JIN-LAB DÜ-TZEY-GYÜN
G NYING-GI ZUNG-SU TAG-MIN-CHING
N DRUB-PEY CHÖ-PEY RAB-NYEN-NEY
ANG CHÖ-CHOG GYA-TSO TAR-SÖN-SHOG

JNG SEY-CHEY GYEL-WEY JIN-LAB-TANG
REL LHU-WA MEY-PEY DEN-PA-TANG
I LHAG-SAM DAG-PEY TU-TOB-KYI
EY DÖN-KÜN DE-LAG NYUR-DRUB-SHOG

In Dakini-land and the earthly burning-grounds
Bless Tenzin Gyatso, Protector of the Land of Snows
May his life not fail, but last a hundred eons
And may his will be effortlessly accomplished!

Let us pray with fierce intensity
To the ocean of wisdom-eyed Protectors of the Teaching
Whose powers are deployed to guard the Teaching and its
upholders
Having erected inseparably on their head-dress
The knot of the seal of the command of Vajradhara
Bless Tenzin Gyatso, Protector of the Land of Snows
May his life not fail, but last a hundred eons
And may his will be effortlessly accomplished!

By the power of these intense prayers sent devotedly from
the heart
To the supreme refuges who do not deceive
May the supreme Ngawang Losang Tenzin Gyatso
Sole protector of the beings of the Land of Snows
Like me tormented by the wounds of the endless age of
degeneration
Always stand firm, unwavering during oceans of eons
On the throne of the diamond essence, free of all
discouragement
Indestructible with the three secrets, unchanging and
without failure
May he whose essence is the wish-granting gem, whose
deeds are wholly beneficial
Whose great energy sustains the burden of his great heart
Responsible for the activities of all the superb Victors
Effortlessly accomplish whatever is his will.
By the power of that, through the door of the sky of the good
eon of fulfillment
May beings always be from in a springtime of relief from
their weariness
And may the virtuous standards of the transmission of
Buddha's Teaching in all times and places
Flourish at the summit of both existence and transcendence.
May the steam of the nectar of the blessing of Padmapani
Ever ripen in the reservoirs of our hearts
And pleasing him by offering the achievement of his
teachings
May we cross the ocean of supreme deeds of universal
goodness
By the power of the blessings of the Victors with their
wondrous children
Of the truth of inexorable relativity
And of my pure high resolve
May all aims of these prayers be swiftly and easily
accomplished.

Appendix 7

Program from the Buddha's Birthday Celebration

慶祝釋迦牟尼佛誕辰



Célébration de L'anniversaire du Bouddha Sakyamuni Birthday Celebration of Sakyamuni Buddha

Date: **Dimanche, 7 Mai 2000 / May 7, 2000 (Sunday)**

Contenu / Content:

- ✧ Cérémonie du Bouddha Sakyamuni / Bathing Buddha Ceremony **10:00AM ~ 11:30AM**
- ✧ Vente de Charité de la Cuisine Végétarienne et Performance
/ Fair and Charity Sale and Performance **12:00PM ~ 2:00PM**
- ✧ Defilé Religieux / Parade **2:30PM ~ 4:00PM**

Lieu / Location: **1001 St-Dominique, Montréal (Sous-sol / Basement)**

~~~ *Merci de Participer / Welcome Participate with your family* ~~~

**法會時間: 2000 年 5 月 7 日 (星期日)**

**法會地點: 華人大樓(地下室) 1001 St-Dominique, Montréal**

### 內容:

- |                 |                           |
|-----------------|---------------------------|
| 一、浴佛法會          | <b>10:00AM ~ 11:30 PM</b> |
| 二、素食園遊會、節目表演、義賣 | <b>12:00PM ~ 2:00 PM</b>  |
| 三、佛祖巡遊          | <b>2:30PM ~ 4:00 PM</b>   |

St-Dominique → De La Gauchetière → St-Urbain → René-Lévesques → Clark → Parc (中山公園)

**主辦單位:** 佛光山華嚴寺、國際佛光會滿地可協會、國際佛光青年團滿地可分團

Tel: (514)278-0808

Fax: (514)278-6361

◎ 屆時歡迎闔家蒞臨，共襄法益 ◎



## **Appendix 8**

### **Examples of Pan-Buddhist Groups**

## Examples of Pan-Buddhist Groups

Pan-Buddhist groups exist at the local, national, and international levels. These include (in chronological order according to the date of formation):

The Maha Bodhi Society, established in 1891, is an example of an international organization. Identified by Heinz Bechert as “the first international Buddhist organization”, it “aimed to unite Buddhists of all countries and to make *Bodh-Gāyā* [the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment] a center of religious devotion again” (Bechert 1984, cited in Numrich 1999, 130).

The World Fellowship of Buddhists established in 1950 by the scholar G.P. Malalasakera, and The World Buddhist Sangha Council established in 1966, are other examples of international pan-Buddhist groups.

National representation of Buddhists via these groups exists throughout most countries in Europe and North America, wherever there are a significant number of Buddhist practitioners. For example, The *Deutsche Buddhistische Union* established in the late 1950s in Germany “has shown a special interest in political advocacy, and in the mid-1980’s drafted a statement of commonly held doctrines and ethics called *Buddhistisches Bekenntnis* (Buddhist Confession)” (Numrich 1999, 129).

The now defunct Buddhist Council of Canada established in 1986, and the American Buddhist Congress established in 1987 are also examples of national pan-Buddhist groups.

Some pan-Buddhist groups include only ordained *sangha* members. An example of this at the international level is The World Buddhist Sangha Council whose statement of purpose is to:

unite all Buddhist monks in the world today, both Theravada and Mahayana, as one solid organization in spite of superficial minor differences and in order to develop their ethical, intellectual and spiritual standards and adapt themselves to changing social and economic conditions in the modern world. (Bechert 1984, 285, cited in Numrich 131)

At the regional level, the groups in existence are the Buddhist Sangha Council of Southern California established circa 1980, and the Sangha Council of Ontario Buddhist Associations.

In the North American context, there are a number of different local pan-Buddhist groups that have arisen, all of which organize *Wesak* celebrations. Listed alphabetically, they include:

the Buddhist Association of Southwest Michigan; Buddhist Coalition of New England; Buddhist Council of the Midwest; Buddhist Council of New York; Buddhist Council of Northern California; Hawaii Association of International Buddhists; Texas Buddhist Council (Numrich 1999, 123).

Groups in the initial stages of development bear mentioning. These include “a recent, unsuccessful attempt to form a local inter-Buddhist association in Denver, Colorado” (Numrich 1999, 123); the different Buddhist traditions in Montreal, Canada, that came together in 1999-2000 to organize the first pan-Buddhist *Wesak* celebration; and the Buddhist traditions in the Detroit and Washington D.C. area, first held an “International *Visakha*” celebration at *Wat Thai* in 1999 and then again in the year 2000

at the Cambodian Buddhist Temple in the Washington D.C. area (Achan Chuen Phangcham, June, 15, 2001).

## **Appendix 9**

Buddhist Celebration for Canada and World Peace

# Buddhist Celebration for Canada and World Peace 1999



Date:  
Saturday  
June 5, 1999  
10:00a.m.-4:00p.m.

Place:  
Nathan Phillips Square  
Toronto City Hall  
100 Queen St. West

*Admission is free.*

Non-perishable food items and donations would be appreciated  
on behalf of Daily Food Bank in the Buddhist spirit of compassion.

Sponsored by  
Sangha Council of Ontario Buddhist Ministry  
1000 Queen St. West, Toronto M6J 1H1  
(416) 588-3251