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UN Vesak Day:

International Interfaith Mindfulness Day

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Abstract

Vesak Day commemorates three pivotal events in the Buddha's life: his birth, enlightenment, and passing into *Maha Parinibbana*. As Buddhism spread across regions, Vesak celebrations also evolved, blending local traditions while maintaining their core significance.

More than a religious observance, Vesak emphasizes ethical living, compassion, and mindfulness meditation as pathways to peace and liberation. Beyond its Buddhist origins, mindfulness meditation has gained global recognition, secular and inter-religious aspects, as a practice that enhances physical and mental well-being across cultures and traditions.

This article proposes recognizing the UN Vesak celebration as ‘**International Interfaith Mindfulness Day**’. Such a designation would highlight Vesak's universal themes and provide a global platform for fostering mindfulness, interfaith dialogue, and collective reflection. Establishing Vesak Day as International Interfaith Mindfulness Day would inspire a worldwide commitment to peace, happiness, and harmony, exemplifying the Buddha's timeless teachings and their enduring relevance in today's interconnected world.

Key words: Vesak, Mindfulness, Interfaith, Meditation.

UN Vesak Day: International Interfaith Mindfulness Day

1. INTRODUCTION

Vesak Day is an annual observance for Buddhists globally and is regarded as one of the most sacred dates. The day is also considered as one of the auspicious days in the Buddhist calendar that marks the special day of celebration every year due to its connection with the life of the Buddha. It is to commemorate the three pivotal events in the life of the Buddha: his birth, his enlightenment and *Maha Parinibbana*, his passing away.¹ These days, each highlighting the Buddha's profound understanding of suffering and the path to liberation, are central to the spiritual observance of Vesak. As Buddhism spread across the world, particularly during the reign of King Ashoka of India the celebration of Vesak evolved, integrating local traditions while maintaining its core significance.²

The Vesak is a day that reminds people to walk on the path to the peace by practising sharing and caring, living an ethical life and understanding the natural phenomena of impermanence, suffering and non-self. Furthermore, it serves as a promotion of a life of kindness and compassion, mindful living and attaining liberation.

The Vesak celebration emphasizes practices beyond mere worship and praise of the Buddha. Primarily, it focuses on participating in religious activities, such as giving offering, observing moral practices, listening to dhamma talks, and engaging in mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness meditation is essential part of the practice to gain right understanding and liberation but not exclusive to Buddhism. Accordingly, the Vesak celebration could promote mindfulness not only in a secular context³ but also as a universal platform for interfaith awareness and practice, which has not been identified so far. Mindfulness meditation is one of the effective pathways to peace and liberation for everyone, regardless of their background, religion, ethnicity, or nationality, which is also supported by the UNDV declaration 2013.⁴ Therefore, it would not be exaggeration to recognise 'The Vesak Day' as an 'International Interfaith Mindfulness Day.'

¹ Phra Brahmagunabhorn, (2554 BE), Important days for Thai Buddhists, Thailand: Sahadhamma printings, p.30.

² Vincent Smith (1901), Rulers of India. Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, p.118.

³ UNDV declaration 2013, item number 8.

⁴ UNDV declaration 2013, item number 5; '.... Spreading the Buddha's wisdom on the interconnectedness of all humans'.

2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF VESAK

The day of Vesak or Visakha Puja (Thai) is the day of worshipping or merit-making event for Buddhists all over the world. The most venerable Phra Brahmaganabhorn explains the term ‘Visakha Puja is an abbreviation derived from the Pali term *Visakhapunnami* Puja. It is sometimes written as Vesak, which is founded on the Sanskrit term *Vaisakhapaurname* puja.’⁵ On this sacred day, Buddhist believed that coincidentally the birth of the Buddha to-be (Pali:*Bodhisatta*, skt: *Bodhisatva*), his attaining enlightenment and entering *Mahaparinibbana* or passing away all these three events took place on the full moon day of Vesak Lunar month.

The legends suggest that on the full moon day of Vesak, the sixth lunar month,⁶ the *Bodhisatta* was born into the royal family of *Kapilavatthu* (skt. *Kapilavastu*) at the beautiful grove named Lumbini, presently located in modern Nepal. He was named Prince *Siddhattha* (skt. *Siddhartha*) and lived a princely luxurious life. At the age of 29, he left the palace in search for the truth and became a royal-ascetic wandering around practising contemporary austerities in search of freedom. After six years of practice at the age of 35 at dawn on the full moon day of Vesak, 588 BC, 45 years before the Buddhist Era, he finally attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree at *Uruvena* village in current *Bihara* State of India, known as Bodhgaya. Ever since, he is known as the ‘Buddha’, the compassionate one, an enlightened one, a fully liberated one. For forty-five years after his enlightenment, the Buddha, out of compassion, tirelessly spread his findings for the good and happiness of all beings. Finally, at the age of eighty on the full moon day of Vesak, the Buddha travelled to the Sala Grove in *Kusinagara* modern India and passed away.⁷

Therefore, the Vesak day is an auspicious day for Buddhists to celebrate the life of the Buddha out of gratitude and appreciation for his compassion to show us the path to liberation. It is also known as ‘*Buddha Purnima*’, ‘*Buddha Jayanti*’⁸ or ‘*Swanyapunhi*’⁹ to commemorate the three important events in the life of the Buddha.

⁵ Phramaha Hansa Dhammhaso, (2011), *Vesak Day and Global Civilization*, Thailand: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya press, p. 6.

⁶ Scholarly The most widely accepted scholarly estimate places the year at 623 BC, which is technically 80 years before the beginning of the Buddhist Era. The current Buddhist Era is 2568 in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, while other Buddhist traditions recognize it as 2567 BE.

⁷ Handy Inthisan, (2007), *Walking on the Path of the Buddha*, Thailand: Pimpinit Printing, p.134.

⁸ IBC, (2009), *Vesak Day: The Buddha’s Birth, Enlightenment and Passing away*, Thailand: IBC, p. 1.

⁹ Sujankirti, (2007), *The Buddha and Baisakha Purnima*, Kathmandu: Nagar Mandapa Shreekirti Vihara, p.16.

3. HISTORY OF VESAK CELEBRATION

It is understood that Vesak was not an organized celebration during the time of the Buddha. Nevertheless, a historian and Buddhist scholar, the late Venerable Sudarshan *Mahasthavira* of Nepal, advocated that the Vesak celebration very likely originated with the birth of Prince *Siddhartha* and his return to *Kapilavatthu*. He argued that the joyful occasion of the Queen *Mahamaya*'s return to *Kapilavatthu* after the Bodhisattva's birth in Lumbini grove was a moment of great happiness for the people of the *Kapilavatthu*. They celebrated by gathering in the streets, singing, dancing, and decorating the city with flowers. This tradition, known as '*Swanyapunhi*' in the Newari language, which means a celebration with flowers, is said to be the origin of the Vesak celebration. On the day of his attainment, he further argues that numerous celestial beings were present and celebrated by sprinkling flowers over the Buddha achievement. Similarly, on his passing away day, both celestial beings and humans worshipped him with great honour and respect with flowers.¹⁰ This assumption may be plausible; however, one can argue that it is probably based on his faith and confidence in the Buddha. Historically it would be troublesome to accept as the official Vesak celebration.

The first concrete historical records appeared to be the time of King Ashoka. As Buddhism spread beyond the Indian continent with the support of King Ashoka, accounts indicate he himself organised Vesak Celebrations to pay great respect and honour to the Buddha. According to the Chinese pilgrim Fa Hian who visited India around the 5th century records further confirms the Vesak celebration of a grand procession of the Buddha at *Pataliputta* that continued from the time of the Ashoka. According to the description, they made a four-wheeled chariot, and on it they erected a structure of five storeys by tying bamboo together... on the four sides are niches with a Buddha seated in each, and a Bodhisattva standing in attendance on him. Such celebrations continued even after the King Ashoka.¹¹ Unfortunately, the tradition was discontinued due to the political and religious landscape changing over time.

Another important evidence appeared to be chronicles from Sri Lanka. *Mahavamsa*, one of the chronicles provides tangible records of the celebration of Vesak. According to these records it is suggested that in the 5th-6th century CE the term Vesak was mentioned where it says that the King *Dutthagamini* (101-77 BC) of Sri Lanka organised twenty-four great Vesak Celebrations.¹² The chronicles also further record that the successors of King *Dutthagamini* also continued the tradition. It is also believed that this tradition was actually introduced to Sri Lanka with the expansion of

¹⁰ Sujankirti, (2007), *The Buddha and Baisakha Purnima*, Kath: N.M. Shreekirti Vihara, p.16.

¹¹ Vincent Smith, (1901), *Rulers of India*, Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, p.118., Sujankirti, (2007), *The Buddha and Baisakha Purnima*, p. 17.

¹² IBC, (2009), *Vesak Day: The Buddha's Birth, Enlightenment and Passing away*, Thailand: IBC, p. 1.

Buddhism during the time of King Ashoka, where it received state patronage and flourished in Sri Lanka.¹³ Successively, the tradition was believed to be introduced to Thailand during the Sukhothai period. According to the *Nangnopphamat*, a book on the Loi Krathong Festival, a joyful and colour celebration took place in the city of Sukhothai. The Royal Family would observe *sila*, precepts and perform many meritorious deeds.¹⁴

4. SYMBOLISM AND SPIRIT OF VESAK

In the modern era, the Vesak celebration serves not only as a commemoration of the Buddha's life but also as a reminder of his teachings on mindfulness, compassion, and enlightenment. It calls individuals to commit to ethical conduct, the path of peace, and understanding, thus aligning their lives with the Dharma.

Nowadays, Vesak is celebrated across the Buddhist world with rituals such as devotional activities; expression of respect and devotion by organising processions of the Buddha image, lantern lighting, offering flowers and decorating monasteries and streets. Lay Buddhists are visiting monasteries to offer food and other requisites to monastic and observing precepts as well as listening to the sermons to advance understanding as well as performing acts of charity and kindness to embody the Buddha's teachings on compassion and selflessness. Lastly, reflection through sermons and group meditations which enhance spiritual growth and mindfulness. Nonetheless, while the core principles of Vesak remain consistent, different cultures bring unique elements to the observance such as:

- In Sri Lanka, lantern lighting, oil lamps and vibrant decorations adorn homes and monasteries.
- In China, Vietnam and Korea, the bathing of Buddha statues symbolizes purification.
- In Thailand, state holiday and encouraged people to attend merit making in different forms and participate candlelit processions known as Wian Tian at temples.
- In Nepal, procession of a decorated chariot with a Buddha image taken around the city with traditional music bands and candlelit processions.¹⁵

These diverse customs emphasize Vesak's ability to unite people from various cultures while honouring the Buddha's timeless teachings.

¹³ Vincent Smith, (1901), *Rulers of India*, Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, p.118.

¹⁴ IBC, (2009), *Vesak Day: The Buddha's Birth, Enlightenment and Passing away*, p. 5.

¹⁵ Sujankirti, (2007), *The Buddha and Baisakha Purnima*, p.19-23.

5. RECOGNITION AS A UNIFIED BUDDHIST FESTIVAL

In 1950, during the inaugural World Fellowship of Buddhists conference in Colombo, Sri Lanka Vesak day was officially acknowledged as a day to commemorate the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and passing.¹⁶ Similarly, almost a half a century later, the United Nations' resolution to celebrate Vesak marks a historic acknowledgment of the global significance of the Buddha's life and teachings. It was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) in 1999, recognizing Vesak as an international observance.¹⁷

The United Nations resolution was initiated by predominantly Buddhist countries, particularly led by Sri Lanka, with support from other 33 nations with significant Buddhist populations, such as Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Bhutan. The proposal emphasized the Buddha's universal teachings of peace, compassion, and non-violence, which resonate with the UN's values. Subsequently, the proposal was approved. The resolution received widespread support and was agreed unanimously reflecting the international respect for the Buddha's teachings.

The UN General Assembly adopted the resolution on December 13, 1999 (A/RES/54/175), with provisions that can be summarised into; firstly, the UNGA officially declared Vesak Day as an international observance, acknowledging the day's importance to the global Buddhist community. Secondly, the resolution invited UN member states, UN agencies, and international organizations to constitute acknowledgement of the contribution of Buddhism and, where appropriate, celebrate Vesak Day. Lastly, the United Nations Headquarters and regional offices were encouraged to mark Vesak Day with commemorative activities.¹⁸

Every year since the resolution was approved Vesak day, it has been internationally celebrated as a global observance. The first ever Vesak celebration took place in 2000 at the UN Headquarters in New York and other UN offices worldwide. The first Global celebration took place in Sri Lanka with a state sponsorship, the second year at the UN headquarters in New York, the third year with the support from Myanmar government it was organised in UN Headquarters. In 2004-7 under the leadership of *Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya* University (MCU) supported by the Thai government the Vesak Celebration was organised on completely different scale by inviting Buddhist scholars from around the world to participate and so began future productive projects including cultural performances, speeches by Buddhist leaders, Mindfulness Meditation sessions and discussion on peacebuilding. The celebration

¹⁶ Sujankirti, (2007), p.6.

¹⁷ MCU (2010), *The Vesak Day, History, Significance and Celebrations*, Thailand: Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya press, p.14.

¹⁸ MCU, *Messages on UN Day of Vesak Celebration 2023*, P.7., accessed on January 26, 2025, available at, www.undv.org.

highlighted the importance of Buddhist study, practice, propagation, and protected. In 2008 for the first time the Vietnamese Buddhist Sangha hosted the United Nations Day of Vesak in Hanoi with 87 countries participating. The main theme of the conference was Buddhist contributions to building a just, democratic and civilised society.¹⁹ Subsequently, Vietnam sponsored the organisation of the celebration in 2014 in Ninh Binh with 95 Countries, and in 2019 in Ha Nam with 112 countries taking part.²⁰ Once again Vietnam is organising this United Nations Day of Vesak Celebration 2025 at the Vietnam Buddhist University, Ho Chi Minh City.

6. UNIVERSALIZED MINDFULNESS PRACTICE

At the Bangkok Declaration of the 10th Anniversary celebration of the UN Day of Vesak in 2013, representatives from 34 countries presented nine key points. The second last of these points says: to promote the ethical use of mindfulness in a universally applicable manner, in such fields as healthcare, education, management, and community development.²¹

Traditionally, there are two types of meditation practices: *Samatha*, serenity meditation and *Vipassana*, insight meditation. The practice of serenity meditation aims at the development of calmness and finding inner peace whereas insight meditation is to gain direct knowledge regarding natural phenomena.²² These practices aim to cultivate mindfulness, *sati* to develop discernment, *panya*.

The *Satipatthana Sutta*,²³ the Discourse on the four Foundations of Mindfulness is a foundational text in Buddhism that outlines how to practice mindfulness and describes its profound benefits. This practice is central to the cultivation of serenity, *samatha* and development of insight, *vipassana* leading to the realization of liberation (*nibbana*). The Satipatthana Sutta identifies four areas of mindfulness practice.²⁴

1. Mindfulness of the Body (*kayanupassana*): Observing breathing, postures, and bodily sensations to understand the impermanence of physical form.

¹⁹ ICDV, (2012), *Buddhajayanti: The Celebration of 2600 years of the Buddha's Enlightenment*, Thailand: the 9th IBC on the UNDVC, p. 3., UNDV, (2013), *Buddhajayanti*, <https://www.undv.org/vesak2013/en/index.php>.

²⁰ MCU, *Messages on UN Day of Vesak Celebration 2023*, p.7; ICDV, *Success Story of the UN Day of Vesak*, accessed on January 26, 2025, available at: www.undv.org.

²¹ UNDV, (2013), Bangkok Declaration of the 10th anniversary celebration of the UNDV, accessed December 1, 2024, available at: www.undv.org/vesak2013/en/index.php.

²² H. Gunaratna, (2013), *The Path of Serenity and Insight*. USA: Bhavana Society, p. 3.

²³ Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), (2005), *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, USA: Wisdom Publications, pp.145s.

²⁴ Bhikkhu Bodhi (2005), *Ibid*. P. 145; Thich Nhat Hanh (2019), *The Miracles of Mindfulness*. London: CPI Mackays, p.111.

2. Mindfulness of Feelings (*vedananupassana*): Noticing pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral feelings to reduce attachment and aversion.
3. Mindfulness of Mind (*cittanupassana*): Observing the state of the mind (e.g., calm, agitated, joyful) to recognize its transient nature.
4. Mindfulness of Mental Objects (*dhammanupassana*): Contemplating mental phenomena such as thoughts, emotions, and the principles of the Buddha's teachings (e.g., the Four Noble Truths).

Mindfulness meditation is a practice that involves cultivating awareness and presence in the current moment without judgment. Mindfulness is a fundamental element of Buddhist meditation practices. It has various ways of mindfulness in all Buddhist traditions as well as in modern usage.²⁵ Generally, this practice involves focusing attention on the present moment, observing body, feeling, thoughts, emotions, and external stimuli with clarity and equanimity. Mindfulness meditation typically includes Awareness of body by paying attention to the rhythm of breathing and further bodily activities including observing physical sensations in the body. It also involves contemplation on different sensations and feelings, watching mental thoughts and emotional patterns and understanding conditioned realities without attachment or aversion.

The benefits of mindfulness meditation are both spiritual and practical. In terms of spiritual benefits, the Buddha clearly outlined these in the discourse;²⁶

“Monks, this is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of dukkha and discontent, for acquiring the true method, for the realization of *Nibbana*.”

Besides these benefits, modern research studies suggest further benefits can be expected from the mindfulness practice. It helps calm a restless mind and fosters concentration developing mental clarity and focus. Practice of observing thoughts and emotion non-judgementally helps to reduce stress and anxiety. It teaches individuals to be in the present moment and trains them to respond to rather than react to the situation. Regular mindfulness practice increases emotional awareness, allowing practitioners to identify and address emotions effectively, fostering inner peace and stability. The practice also encourages introspection and self-discovery. This heightened awareness of one's thoughts, feelings, and actions align with Buddhist teachings on understanding the nature of self.

In the modern context, mindfulness has been universalised and is emphasised as a psychological tool rather than a strictly spiritual or religious practice. This secular

²⁵ Analayo (2017), *Early Buddhist Meditation Studies*, USA: Barre Centre for Buddhist Studies, pp.19s.

²⁶ Bhikkhu Bodhi (trans.), (2005), *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, USA: Wisdom Publications, p.145; Analayo (2006), *Satipatthana*. USA Windhorse Publication, p. 17.

approach emphasizes emotional regulation, stress management, and mental well-being, often promoted in contexts such as healthcare, education, and workplaces without any explicit reference to Buddhist philosophy, which is one of the objectives of 10th UNDV declaration.

Mindfulness universalized and popularized through programmes such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) by Jon Kabat Zinn²⁷ and that followed Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), or Mindfulness Based Intervention (MBIs) programs,²⁸ These programs are backed by scientific research that highlights its benefits in reducing anxiety, improving focus, and fostering emotional well-being. Such practices have gained global accessibility and also adapted to suit diverse audiences, transcending cultural and religious boundaries.

Nowadays, mindfulness practices such as mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful eating, and body scanning are widely taught in non-religious settings. Since the focus lies in practicality, mindfulness meditation prioritises practical outcomes over philosophical exploration, making it an attractive tool for the challenges of modern life. Nevertheless, some argue that this adaptation risks diluting the depth of traditional mindfulness by divorcing it from its ethical and spiritual roots in Buddhism. Furthermore, it is also criticised as over-commercialised and too simplified which may lead to harmful results in the longer term. Nonetheless, it is widely acknowledged as having its origin in Buddhist psychology of meditation practice.

7. MINDFULNESS MEDITATION AND VESAK DAY

The Vesak Day is actually a commemoration of mindfulness practice in the Buddha's journey from birth, enlightenment and *Mahaparinibbana*, passing away. Each event definitely highlights mindfulness practice as essential. First, the Buddha's birth symbolises the beginning of the self-awareness and the quest for the truth to free from all bondage and conflict. Mindfulness meditation was the key practice for that freedom. On his birth, the Bodhisattva proclaimed;

‘mindful and fully aware the *Bodhisatta* passed away from the Heaven of the Contented and descended into his mother's womb.’... as soon as the *Bodhisatta* was born,... uttered... this is the last birth; now there is no more renewal of being in future lives.’²⁹

The practice of Mindfulness played a fundamental role in the Buddha's journey to enlightenment. It was through mindful observation of his thoughts, feelings, and

²⁷ Jon Kabat Zinn (1994), *Mindfulness Meditation for Everyday life*, USA: Hyperion, p.3.

²⁸ Ruth Baer et al., *Frequency of Self-reported Unpleasant Events and Harm in a Mindfulness-Based Program in Two General population Samples*, *Mindfulness* Vol. 12, p.763-774, March 2021.

²⁹ Bhikkhu Nanamoli (2015), *The Life of the Buddha According to the Pali Canon*, Kandy: BPS, pp. 3/5.

sensations that he gained insight into the nature of suffering and the path to liberation. His awakening enabled insight into the Four Noble Truths, suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering and the path to end the suffering.³⁰

His passing away exemplifies the profound awareness cultivated through the teachings and liberation. In *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, the Buddha's last days, Venerable Anuruddha uttered on the Buddha's passing:

‘The sage who’s free from lust has passed away to peace. With mind unshaken he endured all pains: by Nibbana the illumined’s mind is freed.’³¹

One of the main principles of the Vesak celebration, therefore, is to reflect and follow the footsteps of the Buddha and his enlightenment. He achieved the liberation through mindfulness practice under the Bodhi tree and taught for forty-five years encouraging everyone to work mindfully towards that freedom. His last statement was ‘don’t be negligent, live mindfully’.

Mindfulness meditation, as a result, undoubtedly, is deeply connected to Vesak Day. It offers an opportunity not only limited to Buddhists, but for anyone who seeks peace and harmony to renew their commitment to mindfulness practices through various activities.

The Vesak celebration is further marked by acts of kindness and charity, which reflect mindful awareness of the suffering and needs of other. Activities such as feeding the poor, releasing captive animals, or engaging in community service are performed with a spirit of merit-making but generally carried out with a spirit of mindfulness and compassion.

8. VESAK DAY PROMOTES GLOBAL MINDFULNESS

Nowadays, Vesak Day celebrations have been transferred from Buddhist background to the global stage and have received UN recognition.³² Similarly, Mindfulness meditation has a global recognition, and its landscape has changed from a Buddhist and spiritual base to a secular and scientific environment.³³

As mindfulness promotes physical and mental well-being that has global recognition and as it becomes more universal attracting people from various background, Vesak Celebration too brings millions of people together to cultivate mindfulness and conducting mindful actions, fostering a shared experience of presence and unity. Undoubtedly, the Vesak Celebration can inspire not only Buddhists but

³⁰ Anne Bancroft (2002), *The Dhammapada*, London: Vega, pp.59-60.

³¹ Maurice Walshe (1996), *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*, USA: Wisdom Publications, p.271.

³² MCU, *Messages on UN Day of Vesak Celebration 2023*, accessed on January 26, 2025, available at, www.undv.org.

³³ Ruth Baer et al., *Frequency of Self-reported Unpleasant Events and Harm in a Mindfulness-Based Program in Two General population Samples*, *Mindfulness* Vol. 12, p.763-774, March 2021.

people of all faith-beliefs to reflect on their lives with awareness, kindness, and compassion.³⁴ In addition, it also serves as an annual opportunity to deepen one's mindfulness practice - based on their faith- and integrating mindfulness into daily life for the benefit of physical and mental well-being.

The connection between Vesak celebrations and mindfulness meditation extends beyond Buddhist communities, providing a universal framework for fostering mindfulness, compassion, and ethical living. It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that mindfulness practice is no longer confined solely to Buddhism; it has become integrated into secular discourse and interfaith contexts, encouraging mindfulness practices across various religions, cultures, and traditions. Buddhism undoubtedly serves as a rich repository for both the theoretical and practical aspects of mindfulness. However, as mindfulness has become more universalized in recent history, diverse faiths and religious groups have also embraced mindfulness practices rooted in their own faiths.³⁵

9. INTERFAITH PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS

As mindfulness practice becomes more universal, it provides a foundation for inter-religious engagement by offering a neutral, secular approach that can be seamlessly integrated into specific religious contexts. This neutrality enables mindfulness to act as a bridge between faith groups, fostering dialogue and mutual understanding. Over time, mindfulness meditation has evolved into a shared platform that supports physical and mental well-being across diverse backgrounds.

In this context, mindfulness meditation serves as a non-threatening common ground in interfaith settings, promoting respect and the exchange of experiences among individuals from various religious traditions. This interfaith approach to mindfulness plays a significant role in building mutual respect and understanding, helping to bridge divides between religions. A notable example is Scotland's annual **Interfaith Mindfulness Day**, which organised to celebrate Vesak Day. This is a collaborative initiative event organized by the Varapunya Meditation Centre and the Aberdeen Interfaith Group, which exemplifies this spirit of unity and shared practice.³⁶

³⁴ Patricia Findlay and S.M. Sujano (2023), *Interfaith Stories Celebrating 30th Anniversary of Aberdeen Interfaith Group*. Scotland: Aberdeen Interfaith Group, p.38.

³⁵ Jim Garrison and Jim Burklo, *A Short Interfaith Guide to Meditation Practices*, accessed on January 25, 2025, available at: www.orsl.usc.edu.

³⁶ Patricia Findlay, *Interfaith Mindfulness Day*, Interfaith Scotland, Newsletter Autumn 2019: issue 32, p.17

10. INTERFAITH MINDFULNESS: COLLABORATION AND PRACTICE

Interfaith refers to the interaction, cooperation, and dialogue between individuals or groups from diverse religious traditions and spiritual beliefs.³⁷ Such initiatives foster understanding, respect, and collaboration among communities of differing faiths. One such organization advancing this mission is the Aberdeen Interfaith Group (AIFG), a member of the umbrella organization Interfaith Scotland. The AIFG was established in 1993, coinciding with the centenary celebrations of the World Parliament of Religions, a historic event that marked a significant moment in global interfaith dialogue.³⁸ Since its inception, the AIFG has provided a platform for individuals and groups to engage in meaningful conversations, fostering mutual respect and cooperation. The AIFG celebrated its 30th Anniversary in 2023 in the Aberdeen Town Hall.³⁹

The Varapunya Meditation Centre (VMC) in Aberdeen Scotland is a Buddhist monastery which was established in late 2012 under the spiritual guidance of Ajahn Sujana along with pious devotees. The Centre offers Buddhist studies and meditation sessions at the Centre, in various places in the city and online. Since the establishment the VMC has been a member of the AIFG and working in collaboration ever since.⁴⁰

As a member of the AIFG since 2012, Ajahn Sujana, the resident monk at VMC, an honour of representing the centre and contributing to its initiatives. His journey has been profoundly shaped by this work, especially in his role at the meditation centre in Aberdeen, Scotland. The support and inclusivity of the AIFG have provided with an invaluable platform to connect, learn, and collaborate with individuals from various faith traditions. Together, they have worked toward shared objectives such as fostering mutual understanding, combating prejudice, and promoting peace. Through initiatives like interfaith walks and cultural exchange programs, AIFG has created meaningful opportunities for dialogue and unity, highlighting the power of collective efforts in bridging cultural and religious divides.

³⁷ IFN, 'Inter Faith'- What and Why?, accessed on January 25,2025, available at: www.interfaith.org.uk.

³⁸ Patricia Findlay and S.M. Sujano (2023), Interfaith Stories Celebrating 30th Anniversary of Aberdeen Interfaith Group. Scotland: Aberdeen Interfaith Group, p.16.

³⁹ News, *30 Years of Aberdeen Interfaith*, Interfaith Scotland magazine Spring 2024: Issue 41, p. 19

⁴⁰ Ven. S.M. Sujano (2017), Kalyana Mettacitta: Stories of a Bhikkhu on the Block, Scotland: Varapunya Meditation Centre, p.4.

11. INTERFAITH MINDFULNESS DAY: A MODEL PROJECT

The Vesak Day is traditionally observed with rituals and worship, Ajahn Sujana envisioned celebrating it in a way that would resonate with Scotland's multicultural and interfaith context, an inclusive approach, inviting members of other faiths to participate. Motivated by those intentions, in collaboration with AIFG and VMC the 'Interfaith Mindfulness Day' project was launched in 2018 at the Varapunya Meditation Centre Aberdeen, Scotland.⁴¹ Since then, it has gained special status among Interfaith events in Scotland. The event serves as a platform for people of diverse faiths—including branches of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Brahma Kumaris, Bahai, Sikhism, Quakerism and Humanists—to explore mindfulness practices in the context of their spiritual traditions. This is a day program featuring activities within the Buddhist environment such as a mindful walk in nature, sharing food in a spirit of community, and reflections tied to themes of mental health, aligning with Scotland's Mental Health Week. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these celebrations successfully transitioned to an online format, demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of interfaith initiatives. The event has grown in popularity, highlighting how mindfulness—a universal practice transcending religious boundaries—can bring people together.

The initiative builds on the idea that mindfulness is a bridge connecting various spiritual and cultural practices. For instance, a similar event, Be Still and Know is an Interfaith Day of Mindfulness,⁴² (Lance Smith, 2024) was held in rural Massachusetts in 2014. Inspired by traditions ranging from Buddhism to Native American spirituality, it featured sitting and walking meditation, silent contemplation, and shared reflections. These practices exemplify the power of mindfulness to create spaces for shared understanding and collective peace.

12. INTERFAITH MINDFULNESS DAY: MOVING FORWARD

Interfaith mindfulness events offer a unique opportunity to address global challenges such as mental health, social cohesion, and environmental awareness. They create a framework where individuals from different backgrounds can come together, not to debate differences, but to celebrate shared values like mindful living, compassion, presence, and inner peace. The collaboration between Aberdeen Interfaith

⁴¹ Patricia Findlay, *Interfaith Mindfulness Day*, Interfaith Scotland, Newsletter Autumn 2019: issue 32, p.17

⁴² Lance Smith, *Be Still and Know: An Interfaith Day of Mindfulness*, accessed on November 30, 2024, available at: <https://bestillandknowinterfaith.blogspot.com>.

Group and the Varapunya Meditation Centre exemplifies how local initiatives can inspire broader efforts to promote harmony in diversity.⁴³

Interfaith mindfulness initiatives foster respect for diversity and promote common goals, encouraging a broader perspective on a more inclusive, peaceful world. These gatherings have successfully demonstrated how mindfulness can unite different faiths and traditions, focusing on shared values such as mindful living, compassion, and an awareness of the natural world. They also have been facilitating interfaith reflections and dialogues, cultivating a sense of community among diverse belief systems.

The Vesak commemorates the Buddha's life and teachings, emphasizing the profound impact of mindfulness meditation in fostering inner peace and transformative growth.⁴⁴ It serves as a reminder for individuals from all backgrounds to integrate mindfulness into their daily lives, uniting diverse communities in honouring the Buddha's legacy through mindfulness, compassion, wisdom, and self-awareness.

By promoting the Vesak celebration on an international and interfaith mindfulness meditation platform, Vesak transcends cultural and religious boundaries, inspiring people to embrace its essence. This celebration strengthens the connection to the Buddha's path, guiding practitioners toward happiness in this life and future lives, and ultimately, toward enlightenment. Therefore, celebrating Vesak Day as **'International Interfaith Mindfulness Day'** beautifully honours the Buddha's teachings by inspiring global citizens to live with awareness, compassion, and wisdom. This celebration certainly highlights the transformative power of mindfulness on both personal and collective levels.

13. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Vesak Day has evolved from a traditional Buddhist observance into a global celebration recognized by the United Nations, symbolizing the universal significance of mindfulness meditation. Similarly, mindfulness, rooted in Buddhist teachings, has transcended from its origins to become a widely embraced secular and scientific practice, fostering physical and mental well-being across religions, cultures, and traditions. Both Vesak and mindfulness uphold the values of awareness, compassion, and unity, offering a common foundation for diverse communities.

The connection between Vesak and Mindfulness Meditation transcends religious boundaries, creating a framework for ethical living and fostering collective harmony. Vesak offers an annual opportunity for individuals from all backgrounds to deepen their

⁴³ Ajahn Sujana, *Aberdeen Interfaith Group*, Interfaith Scotland Newsletter Autumn 2022: Issue 36, pp16-17.

⁴⁴ UNDV, UNDV, (2013), Bangkok Declaration of the tenth anniversary celebrations of the United Nations Day of Vesak, accessed December 1, 2024, available at: www.undv.org/vesak2013/en/index.php.

mindfulness practices, reflect with kindness and compassion, and reconnect with the Buddha's transformative teachings. Initiatives such as **Interfaith Mindfulness Day** in Scotland exemplify how mindfulness can act as a bridge between traditions, creating inclusive spaces for healing, dialogue, and shared understanding.

To further amplify this vision, the Vesak Day celebration could be formally recognized as **International Interfaith Mindfulness Day**. This proposal aligns seamlessly with Vesak's universal themes and its potential to unite people of all traditions. By serving as a global platform for interfaith engagement, mindfulness practice, and collective reflection, the Vesak as International Interfaith Mindfulness Day would inspire a worldwide commitment to unity, happiness, and harmony—critical elements for cultivating a compassionate and peaceful world.

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BIO

Venerable Sujano Sujano (Maharjan), a Buddhist monk and scholar, embodies the timeless wisdom of the Dhamma infused with a modern academic vision. Born on September 2, 1978, in Balambu Village of Kathmandu, Nepal, he embarked on his spiritual journey with novice ordination in 1997 under the mentorship of Bhikkhu Buddhaghosa Mahathera and Bhikkhu Sudarshan Mahathera. By 1999, he achieved higher ordination at Wat Paknam in Bangkok, conferred by Somdej Phra Maharatchamangkalajarn, earning the title Sujano Bhikkhu.

A passionate academic, he holds a Bachelor's and Master's degree in Buddhist Studies from Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand, and an MSc in Religion and Society from the University of Aberdeen, Scotland. Currently pursuing his PhD on Buddhist psychology at Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University, Thailand, his scholarly focus seamlessly intertwines Buddhist philosophy with contemporary societal issues.

As the Abbot of Wat Varapunya Meditation Centre in Aberdeen, Scotland, he guides practitioners in the art of mindfulness and meditation, fostering a global understanding of the Dhamma. With 25 vassa (rainy season retreats) and a wealth of knowledge, his life and work resonate with profound spirituality and an enduring commitment to uplifting humanity through education and practice.