

**Virtual Belated Commemoration of  
the International Day of Vesak 2020**  
at the UN, New York  
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Venerables, Your Excellencies and Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am very honored to be with you here today on this virtual belated commemoration of the International Day of Vesak 2020 at this august gathering at the United Nations. Many thanks to His Excellencies Ambassadors & Permanent Delegations of Thailand and Sri Lanka to the United Nations for putting their effort together to organize this Vesak commemoration and invited me to say a few words.

I am a member of the Sakya clans myself. In my family, we believe that we are a descendent of the Buddha's clan. Therefore, I am ever so delighted to see how the Sakyamuni Buddha's teachings have been instrumental in building sustainable peace in this world. In this age of disruptive technology, we may have witnessed that the term Buddhism is not that popular as its teachings itself. In the modern world, the essence of Buddhism has indirectly applied under many other labels such as 'mindfulness,' 'peace,' and 'sustainable development.' Indeed, Buddhism has universalized itself beyond the field of religion and became an instrumental source of creating sustainable development in the world.

The last full moon of May was the International Day of Vesak 2020. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 global pandemic stopped all ceremonies and commemorations.

The world commemorates the Vesak to reflect upon many aspects of the Buddha's life. The most important aspect is he is the Buddha. Buddha means he transcended his intellect. *Bu* means intellect *ddha* means one who is above. One who is above his intellect is a Buddha. This means anyone can be a Buddha when we can resolve the problem of who we are. The only problem is, there is no resolve as every minute our intentions are constantly changing. If we cognize what is within us it wouldn't take long for realization. It should happen in a moment. Because there is no distance to travel. There is nothing to pursuit. Time is a quantity that is necessary only when there is a distance to travel. If there is no distance to travel time is not relevant. If I ask you how long does it take for you to sit here? This would not be a valid question as there is no distance for you to travel. You are already sitting here. It doesn't take any time for realization. When he understood this, he was fully enlightened and became the Buddha.

The heart of Buddhism is the Triple Gem. They are the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The significance of the International Day of Vesak is a day we dedicate ourselves for the heart of Buddhism.

The first Triple Gem is the Buddha. Buddha's birth on the human planet not only proclaimed the independence of humanity from the power of God but also guaranteed the state of spiritual awakening for everybody. Therefore, the Buddha's birth not only proved him to be a human but also the ultimate achievement a human can achieve i.e. Nirvana.

The second Triple Gem is the Dharma. Similarly, the second important event of the Vesak day is the Enlightenment of the Buddha. The Enlightenment transformed Prince Siddhartha to the Buddha. It is the Dharma that transformed him to be the Buddha. The Buddha also guaranteed to everyone that proper realization of Dharma will certainly lead to the Enlightenment, the unsurpassed liberation from being a slave to one's craving, hatred, and illusion. Therefore, the Dharma stands here for the Enlightenment itself.

Moreover, Dharma etymologically means sustainability. If we have to translate the United Nations' term 'sustainable development' to ancient Sanskrit or Pali language of Buddhism it would be exactly 'Dharmacakra.' The root 'tenere' of 'sustain' in Latin happened to be the same root in Sanskrit/Pali i.e. 'Dhr' of Dharma. Both terms mean 'uphold.' Cakra etymologically means 'forwarding with a firm ground' which is the exact meaning of the prefix 'sus' in Latin. Therefore, a Buddhist term Dharmacakra means 'sustainable development' in the modern sense. The development of creating sustainable peace and happiness on this planet. Importantly, the Buddha emphasizes on the practice of sustainable development i.e. pravattana, not mere as an ideology. The first sermon of the Buddha accordingly named 'Dharma-cakra-pravattana' which translates as 'Sustainable Development in Action.' **Therefore, I suggest that the United Nations should consider announcing the International Day of Vesak also as the Sustainable Development Day. Because the essence of Buddhist teachings itself is teachings about achieving sustainability of humans and planet regardless of religions, races, languages, and nationalities.**

The Third Triple Gem is the Sangha. Sangha is a community. The sangha's role is unsurpassed because sangha is the witness of the Buddha's Enlightenment. Without sangha and their practice, we would not know the Buddha's Enlightenment is true and achievable. Therefore, sangha embodies the teachings in action for all to see as an example.

The third Vesak event was the Buddha's death. His last teaching was an encouragement for a mindful living in the community. Since then the history of Buddhism shifts from Buddha to sangha i.e. community as an embodiment of the Dharma in action or sustainable development in action. The death of the Buddha

transcends his teachings to the community. The sangha signifies the community of sustainable developers itself.

In fact, the message of Vesak matches with the United Nations' 2030 agenda for the SDGs which the late King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand presented it as Sufficiency Economy Philosophy or the SEP. The SEP is a key to the SDGs. In practice, the SEP manifests itself through the Middle Path consists of speech, strategy, sustenance, effort, exactness, engrossment, penetration, and perception. The middle path leads us to achieve the SDGs. The Vesak is the day the Buddha first enlightened the very core of sustainable development.

The Covid-19 global pandemic freaked out people's health, business, lifestyle, and their future as a whole. The global pandemic even forced us to rethink about the 17 SDGs. Originally, for sustainable development to be achieved, it is crucial to harmonize three interconnected core elements: economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection. The Recent devastating effect on health and wealth raises questions on the SDGs. Nowhere in the targets of the SDGs mentions the global pandemic on such a scale as we are facing at the moment. The damage created by Covid-19 pandemic is worse than what we expected from any of the economic, social, and environmental declines. Suddenly, the Covid-19 pandemic creates a dilemma between health and wealth. The SDGs needs to expand security of health as well as wealth.

To face the current dilemma we have to refresh the definition of 'health' which is defined by the WHO as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Adding on to the WHO definition, Buddhism defines health even broader as 'wellbeing of health, mind, social, and spiritual.' Accordingly, the UN needs to reconsider additional aspects of mental and spiritual wellbeing which are missing out from the SDGs.

Last but not least, Happy Birthday Buddha, the presenter of the SDGs! Happy Birthday Dharma, the principle of SDGs! And Happy Birthday Sangha, the actors of the SDGs! The very cause which brings us here together in happiness to commemorate the International Day of Vesak.

Thank you.

*Anil Sakya*