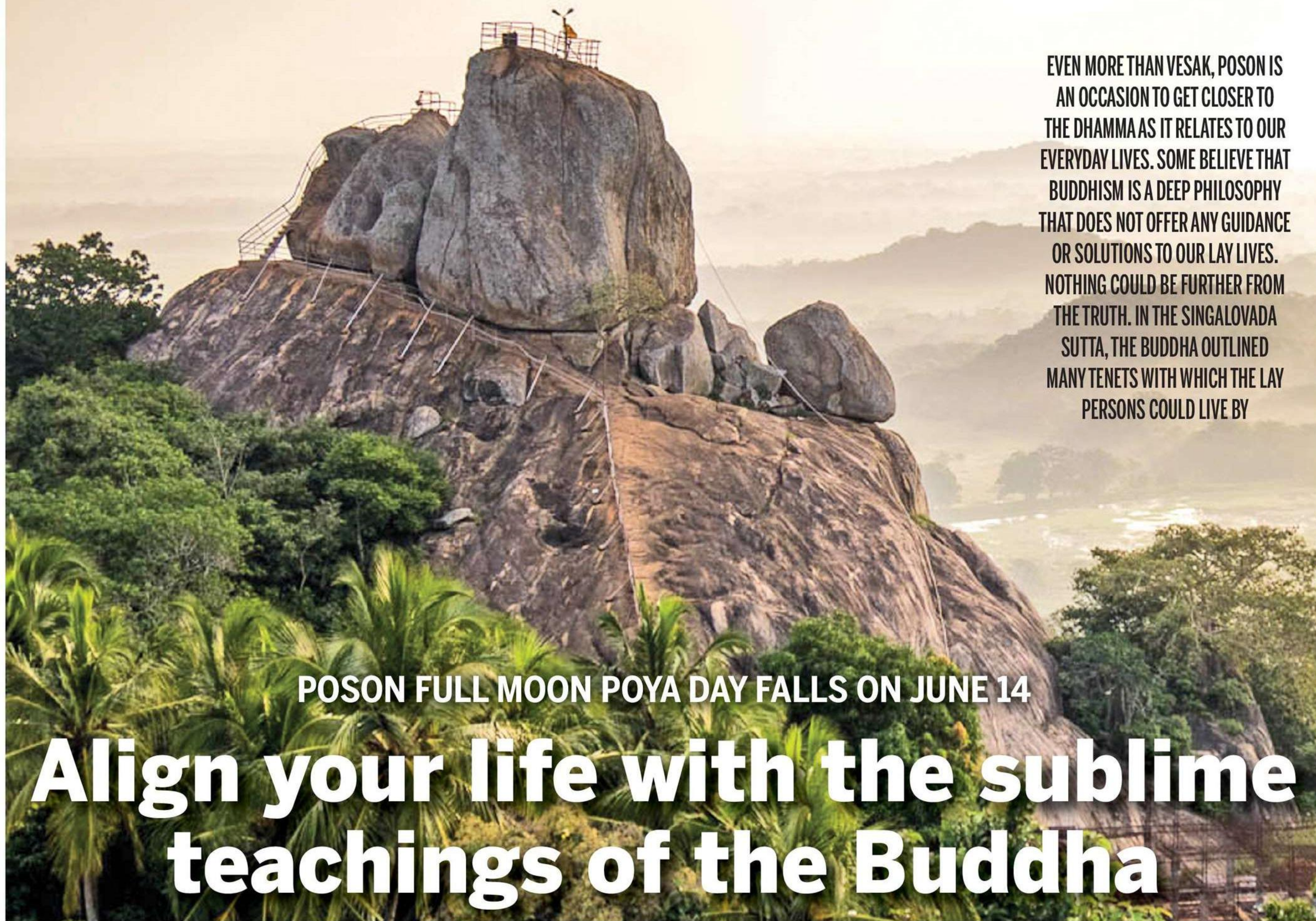


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POSON FULL MOON POYA DAY FALLS ON JUNE 14

Align your life with the sublime teachings of the Buddha

EVEN MORE THAN VESAK, POSON IS AN OCCASION TO GET CLOSER TO THE DHAMMA AS IT RELATES TO OUR EVERYDAY LIVES. SOME BELIEVE THAT BUDDHISM IS A DEEP PHILOSOPHY THAT DOES NOT OFFER ANY GUIDANCE OR SOLUTIONS TO OUR LAY LIVES. NOTHING COULD BE FURTHER FROM THE TRUTH. IN THE SINGALOVADA SUTTA, THE BUDDHA OUTLINED MANY TENETS WITH WHICH THE LAY PERSONS COULD LIVE BY

BY PRAMOD DE SILVA

Legend has it that one fine Full Moon Poya Day nearly 2,330 years ago, Sri Lanka's King Tissa was hunting deer in a park close to the royal city of Anuradhapura. Then he heard someone calling his name. Since no one in the country dared to call the King by his name, he turned upward to see just who could denigrate the King in this manner. It was a sight that immediately calmed him down – a retinue of saffron-robed bhikkhus and a sage. The visitor on top of the rock was none other than Arahath Mahinda, son of Emperor Dharmashoka in neighbouring Jambudvīpa, present day India. Arahath Mahinda Thera and his companions - four Arahats - Itiya, Uththiya, Sambhala, Bhaddhasaala and the bhikkhu Sumana and layperson Bhanduka, arrived here in the 236th year after the Maha Parinibbana of the Buddha in India.

Precious gift

He had brought the precious gift of the Buddha Dhamma to Sri Lanka. It did not take too long from that moment for the King and his 40,000 followers to embrace the timeless words of the Enlightened One after Arahath Mahinda Thera delivered the discourse on *Chulla Haththi Padopama Sutta* (Simile on the Foot of an Elephant). It is a *Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikaya* (Middle-length Discourses of the Buddha of the *Sutta Pitaka*) that clearly explains the path to Nibbana, the ultimate goal of a Buddhist.

In the *Chulla Haththi Padopama Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikaya*, the Buddha gave the simile of the elephant's footprint to explain the Dhamma step by step. Using an analogy of a skilled elephant-forester finding a big bull elephant, the Buddha explained the way a disciple should follow to find the Truth to a Brahmin named Janussoni who met the Buddha with a real desire to understand Buddha's teachings.

This *Sutta* comprises almost all the teachings of the Buddha, such as, the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths. It also gives a clear understanding of the Triple Gem. It gives us a clear understanding of how a follower recognises the Samma Sambuddha-hood of the Buddha through his/her active involvement in the path trodden by Him.

King Tissa even earned the sobriquet "Devanampiya" (Beloved of the Gods) after he embraced Buddhism. This was the precise moment that

started a Buddhism-based civilisation and an agri-based socio-cultural revolution in the land of Sri Lanka that continues to this day. Thus Poson can be called a watershed moment in Sri Lanka's rich annals. To Sri Lankan Buddhists, it is second in importance only to Vesak, which marks the Buddha's Birth, Enlightenment and Passing Away and which they celebrated last month even amidst the present trying conditions.

Multi-cultural milieu

While Sri Lanka later on embraced a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural milieu, the tenets and ethos of Buddhism have permeated to every level of our society, regardless of ethnicity and religion. Indeed, both Vesak and Poson are marked in various ways by non-Buddhists as well. Poson celebrations centre on Mihintale, off Anuradhapura, where thousands of devotees converge to recall with gratitude Ven. Arahath Mahinda's journey to Sri Lanka. Lake House, the publisher of this newspaper, conducts an annual Aloka Pooja there which has now been held for more than 60 years continuously.

It is this unique adherence to the Four Sublime States mentioned in Buddhism – *Metta* (Loving Kindness), *Karuna* (Compassion), *Muditha* (Sympathetic Joy) and *Upekkha* (Equanimity) that has enabled Sri Lankans to wither any obstacle in life, be it the war, the Boxing Day tsunami, the Coronavirus pandemic and now the economic downturn.

The Buddha Dhamma gave prominence to two factors that are essential for life – health and the environment. In fact, the Buddha noted that health was the greatest wealth. This was not surprising, since the Buddha had realised the essential link between the two, having attained Enlightenment under the shade of a mighty Bo Tree.

Again, our affinity for Nature and the Environment goes back all the way to that initial interaction between Arahath Mahinda Thera and King Devanampiyatissa at Mihintale. Arahath Mahinda stopped the King's hunt, extolling that all life is precious and that we should radiate compassion towards all beings.

Intelligence test

He then tested the King's intelligence with questions about the mango grove in Mihintale, which the latter successfully answered. From then on, our ancient Kings declared Abhaya Bhoomi or sanctuaries where life was allowed to blossom freely. Mihintale too is a sanctuary to this day.

As the Buddha and Arahath Mahinda Thera espoused, respect for life and the environment is one of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism.

A recent United Nations (UN) Report has warned that human actions, including deforestation, encroachment on wildlife habitats, intensified agriculture, and acceleration of climate change, have pushed Nature beyond its limit. It would take 1.6 Earths to meet the demands that humans make of Nature each year. If we continue on this path, biodiversity loss will have severe implications for humanity, including the collapse of food and health systems.

This is no laughing matter – if,

for example, bees go extinct, there is every possibility that all life on Earth could follow suit. The emergence of Covid-19 has underscored the fact that, when we destroy biodiversity and interfere with Nature, we destroy the very systems that support human life. Ironically, Nature bounced back in a remarkable manner during the months of lockdown sans human activity, which in itself is a lesson for humanity.

Today, Nature is under severe strain due to a variety of factors from plastics pollution to fossil fuel usage. Many of the animals and plants that we now take for granted could be gone from our midst in just 50 years.

If we continue burning fossil fuels, our coastal cities could be inundated by 2100 as a result of Climate Change and an associated sea level rise. It is time for the world to work together to honour the commitments to the environment and save the only planet we have.

Lessons

The Covid-19 virus, which is said to have originated in animals and then jumped to humans (Zoonotic transmission) has taught us another lesson – it is good for the entire planet and our health if we keep away from consuming animal flesh. The farming

of animals for human consumption is resource-intensive and is known as one of the main causes of greenhouse gas emissions that cause global warming. Abstinence from consuming animal flesh also resonates with the words of the Buddha, who enunciated compassion for all beings. Thus Poson should be an occasion to align our lives with the sublime teachings of the Buddha and the paramount need to save our Planet.

Even more than Vesak, Poson is an occasion to get closer to the Dhamma as it relates to our everyday lives. Some believe that Buddhism is a deep philosophy that does not offer any guidance or solutions to our lay lives. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the Singalovada Sutta, the Buddha outlined many tenets with which the lay persons could live by.

He also offered advice for rulers on governing according to the Dhamma and in fact, long before Arahath Mahinda's arrival here, the Buddha visited Sri Lanka three times – on one of those occasions, he settled a dispute regarding governance between two warring tribes in Nagadeepa. It is not known whether anyone in the island embraced Buddhism during or after the Buddha's three visits to the island, leading to the intriguing possibility that Buddhism may have existed in some form in this island before Arahath Mahinda's arrival at Mihintale in Anuradhapura.

More research should be done in this regard. But there is no doubt whatsoever that Buddhism flourished in Sri Lanka to this extent only after Arahath Mahinda's arrival with the precious gift of Buddhism.

The Anuradhapura *Atamasthana* (Eight Places of Worship) in Mihintale and Thanthirimale centric 2330th State Poson Festival will be celebrated in a simple manner due to the prevailing economic situation in the country.

Poson Full Moon Day falls on June 14 and the Anuradhapura State Poson Celebrations Steering Committee has declared the week from June 11 to 17 as the Poson Religious Week. A Special Steering Committee meeting presided over by Atamasthanadhipathi Ven. Pallegama Siriniwasa Nayaka Thera with the Chief Incumbents of other major Buddhist shrines at the Anuradhapura Kachcheri recently, Anuradhapura Government Agent Janaka Jayasundara said that without depending on Government and Private Sector funds, the 2022 Poson Festival would be limited mainly to the major Poson religious rituals at the Anuradhapura Mihintale and Thanthirimale Sacred Cities.

