

How do festivals, like Wesak, shape Buddhist faith?

Ben: Hello. You're listening to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm your host Ben Hurst. I'm a writer and presenter, and in this series, we'll be exploring the key aspects of Buddhism to help you prepare for your GCSE. But I'm not doing it alone because in every episode, I'm guided by practising Buddhist Gabrielle Westhead. Hi Gabrielle!

Gabrielle: Hello! I'm a writer and I'm a Buddhist so I'm really happy to be exploring Buddhist beliefs and practices with you. I started practising in my teens and I love speaking about it. So, what are we learning in this episode?

Ben: We are looking at why festivals are significant within Buddhism.

Gabrielle: Oh, I love our festivals. This will be great. There's lots to dig into.

Ben: Absolutely. And remember, there's loads more information on all of the topics covered in this series over on the Bitesize website. Just search for Bitesize GCSE Buddhism.

Gabrielle: And stay listening to the end of this episode, because there'll be a quick quiz.

Ben: OK Gabrielle, I would love to hear about how you celebrate your faith. Tell me about some of the festivals and special days.

Gabrielle: Sure. Like many religions, we have special days in Buddhism, but there are none that are celebrated by all Buddhists everywhere, and they vary a lot. One of the biggest is Wesak. It's a joyous occasion. It includes celebration, but it's also a sacred day for worship, meditation, and acts of kindness.

Ben: What are Buddhists celebrating during Wesak?

Gabrielle: Well, there are many schools and traditions within Buddhism, and they may celebrate festivals like Wesak in slightly different ways. Some celebrate the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha all in one at Wesak.

Others mark only his enlightenment and have different festivals for his birth and death. Some Buddhists call Wesak 'Buddha Day' and it's usually celebrated in May or June, on the night of the full moon.

Ben: So now we know what Wesak is about in different traditions, tell us about how it's celebrated Gabrielle.

Gabrielle: Each Buddhist culture has its own ways of celebrating, but let's look at some examples of how many Buddhists celebrate. Many Buddhists will attend their local temple or Buddhist centre. They might take part in chanting and meditation, bring offerings and share food. Friends might send Wesak cards to each other. I took part in a Bathing the Buddha ceremony at a Chinese Buddhist temple in London once.

We poured water over a statue of the Buddha as a baby to celebrate his birth and as a reminder for us to purify our minds from unkindness and selfishness. Buddhist monks may make offerings to the Buddha and give talks about the Buddha's life. People may decorate temples and release paper lanterns. This symbolises the light to the path of enlightenment

Ben: That sounds amazing. You can find out more by searching 'Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies Buddhist celebrations.' So, what do you love about Wesak Gabrielle?

Gabrielle: Well, my favourite part of Wesak is coming together with my community. In Buddhism we call the community the Sangha and it's just a lovely opportunity to be together and celebrate the Buddha.

Ben: That honestly sounds really special.

Gabrielle: It really is. During Wesak, Buddhists may also make donations to those in need, and to monasteries and temples too. Generosity is a really important part of Buddhism. We call this dana. Wesak donations may include money, food offered to monks and nuns, or giving clothes, medicine and necessities to those in need. Generosity is one of the six perfections, which we spoke about in our episode on life and suffering.

Ben: Why is generosity, or dana, so important for Buddhists?

Gabrielle: Well, let's look at a quote from Samyutta Nikaya - that's a collection of Buddhist scriptures. The extract is from Samyutta Nikaya 1.32:

"Some provide from the little they have. Others who are affluent don't like to give. An offering given from what little one has is worth a thousand times its value."

The Buddha taught generosity as a key, everyday practice. It helps us feel less separate from others, brings us closer to our community and helps us on our path towards enlightenment. Although it may be particularly emphasised during festivals like Wesak, it's an ongoing practice in daily life.

Ben: Wonderful to hear about Wesak. Thanks Gabrielle. Could you tell us about some of the other important Buddhist festivals?

Gabrielle: Absolutely. Parinirvana Day is another one. It's predominantly celebrated in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, and it takes place in February.

Ben: What does Parinirvana Day signify?

Gabrielle: Parinirvana actually means full or perfect nirvana, which only comes at the physical death of a person who has gained enlightenment. The festival remembers the death of the Buddha, when he finally passed into nirvana. So, Buddhists reflect on death and remember loved ones who have died.

Ben: Why is it significant for Buddhists to reflect on the death of the Buddha?

Gabrielle: For Buddhists who celebrate Parinirvana Day, it gives a space to think about how they can reach nirvana themselves. It also allows them to reflect on the idea of annica - the belief that everything is impermanent and always changing.

Ben: Yes, annica is the belief that nothing lasts forever.

Gabrielle: Exactly.

Ben: So how do some Buddhists celebrate Parinirvana Day?

Gabrielle: Well Buddhists who celebrate Parinirvana Day may go to the temple, meditate and reflect. Some may also go on pilgrimage to Kushinagar, a town in northern India.

Ben: Why is that site an important one?

Gabrielle: Kushinagar is an important pilgrimage site because many believe it is the place where the Buddha died and entered Parinirvana - final, perfect nirvana. That could be a great opportunity to reflect on impermanence and the Buddha's final teachings.

Ben: You mentioned a pilgrimage there Gabrielle, is that an important practice for many Buddhists?

Gabrielle: Yes, pilgrimage is important in Buddhism, especially visiting places connected to the Buddha's life. Bodhi Gaya is another important pilgrimage site in India. It's the place where the Buddha is believed to have reached enlightenment.

Ben: Are retreats significant too?

Gabrielle: Yes. Retreats aren't the same as festivals. They are gatherings over several days, weeks, months or even years, when Buddhists step away from everyday life, and turn off their phones, to rest, meditate, and reflect on the Buddha's teachings, often alongside other Buddhists.

Ben: Shall we look at an example of a retreat?

Gabrielle: Good idea. One important retreat is called Vassa. It's for Theravada Buddhist monks and nuns around the world.

Ben: And when does Vassa take place?

Gabrielle: Vassa is also known as Rains Retreat because it takes place every year during a three month period from July to October. That is the rainy season in most Southern Asian countries.

Ben: And why is Southern Asia significant here?

Gabrielle: It's where the Buddha lived, in India, and after his death Buddhism spread throughout southern Asia before gradually spreading all over the world.

Ben: And why does Vassa take place during the rainy season?

Gabrielle: Well, the Buddha and his earliest monks lived outdoors in a lot of little groups. But during the rainy season they needed to take shelter from the endless rain. So, they used this as an opportunity to gather together in one place indoors and focus on meditation and study, which is what Theravada monks and nuns still do. Although these are part of their life year-round, the retreat is a time for a more intensive practice.

Ben: So do lay Buddhists, as in those who aren't monks or nuns, get involved in Vassa too?

Gabrielle: Yes, lay Buddhists can be involved. They may take part in ceremonies with monks and nuns at the end of Vassa, to celebrate them. And they thank them by making donations to the monasteries, including new robes.

Ben: These are just some examples. There are lots of different festivals and rituals across all of the different schools of Buddhism. I'd recommend going to the Bitesize website for more information - just head to the GCSE Religious Studies pages.

Gabrielle: Shall we do a little quiz now to see how much you've learnt about Buddhist festivals Ben?

Ben: My favourite part of every episode. If you want to join in whilst you listen, grab a pen and paper, or open your notes app, and write down your answers as we go.

Gabrielle: First question. What do we call the festival where Buddhists celebrate the Buddha's enlightenment, and maybe also his birth and death?

Ben: That would be Wesak.

Gabrielle: Correct! Next question. What is Parinirvana Day for?

Ben: It's a time to reflect on the Buddha's death, his achievement of enlightenment and his reaching nirvana. It's a day when Buddhists, mostly in the Mahayana tradition, reflect on their own death.

Gabrielle: Great answer. And finally, what is the name of the retreat that Theravada monks and nuns take part in every year?

Ben: The retreat is called Vassa, or Rains Retreat. It's a time for Buddhist monks and nuns to study and meditate intensively together.

Gabrielle: Well done!

Ben: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast.

Gabrielle: Next time, we're bringing all of this series' learning into an exam skills episode, so make sure you head to the BBC Sounds app to listen to that one.

Ben: And you can always check out the other Bitesize podcasts on subjects like English, history and science. Head to the GCSE pages on the Bitesize website.

Gabrielle: See you next time!

Ben: Bye!