

It was with a tinge of nostalgia that I read the Vesak greetings of President Barack Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry. It was 35 years ago, in 1981, that I had the pleasure and privilege of introducing the term Vesak to Canada, and organizing the first Vesak in Toronto, said to be the first in North America as well. The year before, I had taken the initiative, with the help of Fujikawa Sensei of the Toronto Buddhist Church, to bring together the Buddhists of Toronto for the first time. It was to invite participation in an Interfaith Service organized by the Canadian Council of Churches, and sponsored by the World Conference on Religion for Peace, a Japanese outfit. Both Fujikawa Sensei and I were members. The meeting was in a room at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (now University of Toronto) where I had earned my doctorate two years earlier.

Invited to speak at the Interfaith Service, I cracked a joke in the course of my presentation. A requirement in Canada when applying for a job is to have a Social Insurance Number, or SIN for short. I said that when I was asked for my SIN, I said that I was a Buddhist and had no sin!

About 75 Buddhists participating in the service, it was decided that we continue to meet. There soon came to be formed the Toronto Buddhist Federation, later renamed, Buddhist Federation of Toronto. Elected the (Founding) Coordinator, a Constitution drafted by me was duly adopted following discussion. The Toronto Buddhist Church, at 918 Bathurst St, opened its doors to BFT, where meetings continued to be held.

Over the history of 2500 years, Buddhism had come to be divided into different schools, taking on the cultural trappings of the country it was introduced to as well. While just about all these groups had come to make up the small Canadian Buddhist mosaic, now for the first time anywhere in the world perhaps, Buddhists had come together, unified under the umbrella of the Buddhist Federation of Toronto. Happily by now were also white Canadians, Anglo-Saxon and Jewish but also other, who had come to be attracted to Tibetan Buddhism in particular and had formed their

own groups.

This was not an opportunity to be lost. Looking for an event to keep the Buddhists united, Vesak appeared on my screen. It was already bringing together the Buddhists of Asia under the aegis of the World Buddhist Federation. So why not?

But I had some misgivings. First, Vesak was the pinnacle event in Sinhala Buddhism. I was afraid that it would be seen as an attempt to shape the newly formed BFT along the lines of Sri Lankan Buddhism. Second, and more troubling for an academic, was that while the event celebrated the triple event of Birth, Enlightenment and Parinibbana 'Final Demise', there is no textual evidence of the three events coalescing into the Full Moon Day of May. However, the Full Moon Day was significant for all Buddhists, and provided a common ground. Also, not finding an alternative, I introduced Vesak as our annual Buddhist celebration. It was to my pleasant surprise that it was adopted unanimously.

Proposal accepted, a poster was done up in Calligraphy by Sujata (Linda Klevnick), ordained in the Korean Zen Lotus temple. The Vietnamese community did a 40 ft banner of the Buddha as a background on the stage put up for the event. Everybody else pitched in to make a success of the event.

Our first Vesak was at the Nathan Phillips Square, at Toronto City Hall, in the heart of the City, in pouring rain. The phone was off the hook all morning, when I said that rain was a good omen! The event, as reported in the Toronto Sun, was attended by over a 1,000, including likely the curious non-Buddhist, simply intrigued by the novelty of the event. Buddhists of all traditions present in the city were there in their full complement - Burmese, Kampuchean, Chinese, Indian (Ambedkar Mission), Korean, Japanese, Lao, Sri Lankan, Thai, Vietnamese, Tibetan, Anglo-Saxon, Jewish, to list from memory.

Developing an inclusive Religious Program was another challenge. While what was finally accepted was based in the Sinhala Buddhapujava, much variety was built into it enabling the participation of any and every geo-cultural expression. Following

the Homage to the Buddha and taking the Triple Refuge in Pali, we switched to English (if my memory serves me right) when it came to the five Training Principles (aka Precepts) (sikkhapada).

Flowers, incense and candles were passed around along the rows of chairs, to be touched by everyone as in Sinhala Buddhist practice. Then there were the religious chanting by the various temples.

Concluding the spiritual dimension was a particularly novel ritual to me - the bathing of the Baby

Buddha, practiced in Japanese, Korean, Tibetan and several other Mahayana traditions. If the flower

offering allowed a quiet participation without moving from their positions, this allowed for everyone to come out and participate individually, standing in line for a long time.

The religious and the pious had come in large numbers for the event, along with their young ones. So how could we keep these young Buddhists interested in a ritual of which they had no understanding, On a wider scale, how could the young within Buddhism, now or in the future, growing up in a materialistic, capitalist and Christian culture be kept within the fold? How could we attract the non-Buddhist? So it was towards this that a cultural program was offered following the religious program.

And it is with a smile on my face, as I write this, that I recall how, prior to leaving for overseas, I had written an article in a Sinhala newspaper, under the title, 'No Faith is heightened by a Vesak Torana.' I had argued that the Vesak pandals, and the dansala 'alms hallways' offering free food for come one, come all, etc. were more festivity than spirituality. However, I was now in a different milieu, and entertainment seemed to serve the need of the hour.

Among the items presented was a dance by Torontonians Hema Perera, the well-known danseuse and student of Maestro Nittawela Gunaya, her Catholic faith notwithstanding. Adding colour were the Tibetan, Vietnamese and other cultural groups.

Capping it all was the 'Unity Song', composed by Bhante Punjabi

of the Toronto Mahavihara, at my invitation. Entering the robes late in life, he would bring to it his piano playing skills, composing the tune on the piano at our home. Leading from the stage, with the participants joining in, reading the song sheet handed out, was Brent Titcombe, with his guitar. The first two lines went, Roll along, roll along, roll the Dhamma Wheel Let us all unite to roll the Dhamma Wheel...

The event indeed ended with what could qualify as a dansala, the different communities bringing their own specialties for sharing with everyone else.

It was much later that I came to know that the event had been covered by at least one newspaper, now defunct Toronto Sun. (See picture). In later years (2001), David Turpie, a student of McGill University, Montreal, Canada, was to do a Master's Thesis on Wesak and the Recreation of Buddhist Tradition.

Here, then, for your viewing pleasure, is that historic photo of first North American Vesak of

1981(https://www.google.ca/search?q=suwanda+sugunasiri&sa=N&biw=1271&bih=631&tbm=isch&tbid=U&source=univ&ved=0ahUKEwj_ksmGoLMAhXCIYMKHUzHBHI4ChDsCQgo#imgsrc=5hQVVgB2r0ldfM%3A).

If the 1981 event was local, in 1985, Vesak was to go national, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation giving one full hour to telecast it across the country on Open House. To maintain a national presence, I spoke a few words in French, too, having learned it as a requirement for my Master's Degree in Linguistics from the Univ. of Pennsylvania, when I originally came on my Fulbright Scholarship.

The year 2006 was when we celebrated 100 years of Buddhism in Canada. To mark the occasion, we arranged to hold a Vesak ceremony on the lawn of the Ontario Legislature, putting up the Buddhist flag. It, too, was said to be a first - Vesak on public grounds anywhere in Canada [pix]. In 2012, we were successful in getting the City of Toronto make a Vesak Proclamation.

This then is how Toronto, Canada, can be said to have set the ball rolling for Vesak in North America, now ending in the Oval Office in Washington DC. Hooray! Finally it has made its way after 35 years!

For those who missed the President's words, here it is:

"Michelle and I extend our warmest wishes to Buddhists in the United States and around the world in their celebration of Vesak, a day honoring the birth, enlightenment, and passing of Buddha. During this season, we reflect on Buddha's universal teachings of peace, service, and recognition of common humanity — shared values that also bind us all as Americans. This occasion gives us an opportunity to commemorate the many contributions of Buddhists to our progress and to recommit ourselves to building a brighter future for all communities, cultures, and religions. As we come together in hope for wisdom, courage, and compassion, our family sends our best wishes during this season."

What pleased me in particular was that the Presidential Greeting was a personal one, "Michelle and I extend our warmest wishes...", the greetings coming from "our family". What I read into them is that the message was not merely politically motivated, but seemingly stems from a personal conviction as well of the quality of Buddhism, and the role and the contribution it can make to a healthier, happier human community.

This then is why I read the President's Message with a tinge of nostalgia.

It must be my good kamma that I have lived to see the fruits of my labour, small as it may be. And it is in some humble pride that I share the good news by way of fulfilling the responsibility of recording history for posterity, as only I can do.

Wishing you the best in health and happiness!