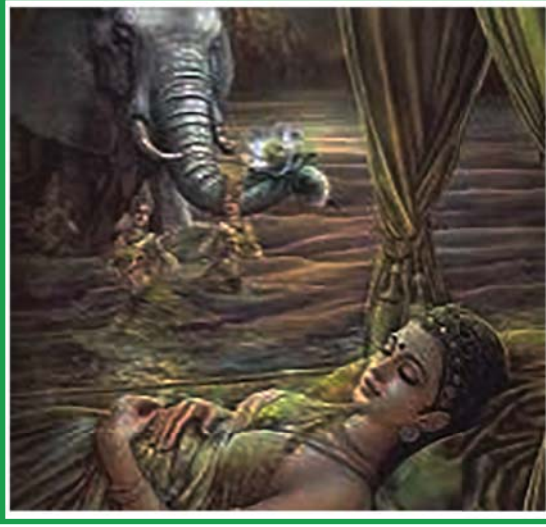

Significance of ESALA POYA



- After Vesak and Poson full moon days come the Esala full moon day, usually in the month of July/August of the Gregorian calendar. It is also referred as the month of Āsaḷha. Many important events in the life of the Buddha happened during that month. It is of great significance for all Buddhists in general and of great cultural significance to the Buddhists of Sri Lanka in particular.
- The conception of the *Bodhisatta* in the womb of Queen Mahamaya occurred on an Esala full moon day. The Buddha-to-be was in Tusita heaven and before being born in the realm of humans looked to five factors, namely, time (*kāla*), continent (*dīpa*), country (*desa*), clan (*kula*) and the mother (*mātā*) in order to ensure the best environment for achieving enlightenment and spreading the teachings. In Buddhist literature it is referred as *pañca mahā vilokhaṇa* (පස් මහ බැලුම්) – ‘the five great considerations.’



- Another important event was the birth of Prince Rahula that took place in the month of Esala.

The Bodhisatta was in a thoughtful mood after seeing an ageing person, a sick person, a corpse, all of which he realized as afflicting every sentient being, and a peaceful ascetic, which showed him a way. When he was informed of the birth, his immediate reaction was that it will be an impediment or bond (*rāhula*) that will delay his quest to end the cycle of samsara. Hence, on that eventful night, Siddhattha Gotama left the palace seeking for a way to emancipate humankind from the bonds of samsara. The baby prince was named Rāhula.

- The Noble Triple Gems of the Buddhists, namely, the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha came into being on an Esala Full Moon Day.

After spending seven weeks under and around the Bodhi Tree, on the fiftieth day the Buddha left for Isipatana (modern Sarnath) to announce the Path of Liberation to the five ascetics. To them the first discourse, that was named the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, followed by the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, were explained. The emergence of the second gem, Dhamma Ratana, occurred thus.

- The five ascetics, Kondañña, Assaji, Bhaddiya, Vappa and Mahānāma were with the Bodhisatta, when he was practicing extreme asceticism for six years. After listening to the first discourse, all decided to become followers of the Buddha. The first to understand and realise the new Teaching was ascetic Kondañña. He was the first to become a bhikkhu that happened with the Buddha uttering the words *Ehi bhikkhu* - 'Come, O bhikkhu!'. The other four ascetics too received ordination the same way. In this manner, the third gem, the Sangha emerged, thereby completing the Noble Triple Gem.
- The full moon day of Esala is of great significance to all bhikkhus ordained in the Theravada tradition. The commencement of *vassāna* or rainy season is from this full moon day according to Indian tradition at the time. The four months ahead is a period of great dedication to learn, practise and attain spiritual goals. All *upasampadā* bhikkhus are compulsorily obliged to observe the Rains Retreat or *vas*. After purifying themselves within a

Sīma they go to the place where they have been invited by the lay followers to spend the period of *vas*. They then determine individually that the period of *vas* will be observed in that place. The first *Vas* in the dispensation of Gotama the Buddha was at Isipatana, Sarnath 2612 years ago. The tradition still continues.

- The *Yamaka Pāṭihāra* (යමා මත පෙළහැර), the twin miracle was performed by the Buddha on very special occasions. It was on an Esala full moon day that the Buddha displayed this capability for the first time to silence the six other teachers of repute living during the same time as the Buddha.
- The Buddha's teachings are in three baskets referred to as the *Tipiṭaka*. The commencement of the preaching of the *Abhidhamma Piṭaka* to his mother Queen Mahamāyā, who on her demise was reborn as a deity in Tāvatiṃsa heaven, was in the month of Esala. Sankissa, which is located in Uttara Pradesh, marks the place the Buddha descended to earth after completing his preaching of the Abhidhamma and is a place of pilgrimage now.
- An important historical event that happened in Sri Lanka was the commencement of Svarṇamāli Caitya by King Duṭugāmunu. One full chapter of the Mahāvamsa (Chapter XXIX, *The Beginning of the Great Thupa*) is devoted to this event.

‘Eight splendid bricks did he lay, each one apart by itself. When he then had commanded an official chosen for this and adorned in every way to take one

of them, he laid on the East side, which had been prepared with many ceremonies, the first foundation stone, solemnly, upon the sweet-smelling clay. When jasmine flowers had been offered on that spot an earthquake came to pass. And he caused the other seven (stones) to be laid by seven (other) ministers and ceremonies (of consecration) to be carried out. Thus, he caused the stones to be laid on the day appointed, **the fifteenth uposatha day in the bright half of the month of Āsaḷha.** (Mv.Ch.XXIX vv.59-63)

- Annually in the month of Esala the Sacred Tooth Relic is taken in procession mounted on a caparisoned tusker with the lay custodians in full regalia. It is called the *Esala Perahāra*, a cultural pageant that is of world fame. Simultaneously is held the *Esala Perahāra* of Kataragama.

