

Foundational Milestones on the Fiftieth Day after attaining Buddhahood

by

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This article is written as we approach ‘the seventh week of *Satiya*’ - the end of the seven week long, spiritually-special time period that Buddhists revere, in the aftermath of the epic Awakening to Buddhahood that we celebrate on Vesak Poya Day.

These seven weeks are considered special and commemorative because of the deeply meditative and reflective aspects that form the essence of this time in the Buddha’s Life. Each of the seven weeks had its own distinctive occurrence and are honoured in terms of location and its significance to the dhamma and its practice.

Let us ponder on the Seventh Week when the Buddha meditated under the Rājāyatana tree. The end of the week or more specifically the Fiftieth day, saw the arrival of two merchants named Tapassu and Bhalluka who were travelling tradesmen. Their arrival was the Buddha’s first meeting with human beings after attaining Enlightenment. An encounter which turned out to be historic.

The ‘First Two Disciples’ were the starting point of Buddha’s dispensation. It has since grown to a mammoth and continues expanding even after twenty-six centuries, vibrant and thriving, drawing to its folds, men, women, young and old of all walks of life, from all continents of the world. And the two merchants, Tapassu and Bhalluka are renowned as ‘The First Two Disciples’ - a unique position they hold throughout the Buddhist world.

Significance of this meeting is manifold and contains many 'Foundational Firsts' worthy of recollection. Historic milestones in Buddhist history, these two merchants have to their names, include Offering of the first meal, Donors who helped end the long fast after attaining Buddhahood, The First humans to hear the Buddha's Teachings, First lay devotees to declare their confidence (faith) in the Buddha and His Teachings, First to recite the Two-fold Refuge, the First Devotees, First *Dvevācika Upāsaka* (prior to existence of the Sangha), First to receive a relic for worship, and First to build a place of worship enshrining relics.

The Vinaya Pitaka records the two merchants hailing from Ukkala, a region which scholars believe is Orissa. Their renowned role in the Sasana is evident by many countries claiming to have the hair relics enshrined by Tapassu and Bhalluka in their ('home') countries,.

Buddhism spread early to Afghanistan (then Bactria). The two merchants were caravanning Bactrians according to *Lalitavistara Sūtra*¹. Bhallika² who later ordained enshrined the hair relics in his hometown Balkh (now in Northern Afghanistan) a former centre of Buddhist activity in Central Asia. Myanmar claims hair relics in Shwedagon are from the merchants on returning home. In North-East Sri Lanka, Girihandu Seya in Tiriyaya is believed to contain the hair relics; because the merchants found the casket immovable on departure. A nearby rock inscription mentions Tapassu Bhalluka as Trapusaka and Vallika.

Irrespective of which of the above is correct the *saddhā*, the confidence placed in the Buddha, of the two merchants who asked for a sacred item to keep with them, is irrefutable.

- 1 The Lalitavistara Sūtra is a Sanskrit Mahayana Buddhist Sūtra that tells the story of Gautama Buddha from the time of his descent from Tusita until his first sermon at Sarnath. (Wikipedia)
- 2 The most common Sanskrit version of Tapassu-Bhalluka is Trapusa-Bahalika / Bhallika.