



New Zealand Buddhist Council

NZ Buddhist Council has managed to remain active in these months of new circumstances, locally and globally. For our executive meetings, and to join interfaith events in the regions and nationally we have often used Zoom, but recently we have been able to return to some face to face interactions.

With that in mind we look forward to something special about 2021. For once, the Vesak and Saga Dawa Duchen both fall on the same day, meaning that 26 May is an important commemoration for both Theravada and Tibetan Buddhist practitioners. That presents an opportunity to have events of an inter-tradition nature in each region on an adjoining weekend. Keep that in mind, and do talk with us concerning possibilities you see. In notice 6 below we discuss broadly when different traditions celebrate the major Buddhist anniversaries. We are always learning more from our members, so please feel very welcome to send us information from your tradition that can continue to widen our collective understanding of the varieties of practice.

In this last bulletin to members for 2020 we would like to update you on some events of Buddhist significance held by our members this year, and to share information and pictures we have from those.

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Obviously for many of us this has been a year with unexpected difficulties and challenges to adapt.

Major Buddhist calendar days such as Vesak and Kathina were in most cases celebrated later than when the ceremonies would normally be held.

Remembering Venerable Sengchanh Solatanavong



Phra Ajahn Sengchanh Solatanavong was born on the 28th November 1946. In 1966, at the age of twenty, he received full ordination in Laos. In 1999 he was invited to visit Wat Lao Buddharam in Otahihi, Auckland by then president Mr. Tulai Paivijitr, and in June 2000 he was appointed abbot.

On the 21st of February 2020 Phra Ajahn Sengchanh was admitted to Auckland hospital and passed away in peace on the 3rd of March 2020 at 23:45, at the age of 74 years (54 vassa).

His funeral was held in Auckland on 18 July, when Covid 19 alert levels permitted, and was widely attended by Sangha in his acquaintance and representatives of many Buddhist communities.



New Zealand Buddhist Council's message to the event was: *We acknowledge the blessing that Venerable Sengchanh's life was to us all, especially the Lao community in New Zealand. He was a long standing individual supporter of Council right up till the end of his life. We sincerely appreciated his calm and supportive presence. He assisted us at key moments such as taking the Dhammapada to Parliament, attended our English class for Sangha, and was at many of our annual meetings across the years. We give thanks for his dedication, kindness, wisdom and peacefulness. We pray that he swiftly attains full liberation.*

Bodhi House project in Wainuiomata



The Sangha and Supporters of Dhamma Gavesi Meditation Centre in Wainuiomata have recently constructed a protection house for their newly planted Bodhi Tree. Around the protection house they built small kutis for 28 Buddhas.

The plan is that on some occasions they can use this sacred site for homage ceremonies, chanting and meditation, and visitors to the centre can have peaceful meditative time in the vicinity of this Bodhi House and Buddha shrines.

Office of Ethnic Communities released a final report on the hui we attended in February and March

Since the 15 March 2019 terror attacks in Christchurch, the New Zealand Government has indicated a desire to "focus on fostering greater interfaith unity and understanding in Aotearoa New Zealand". The Government does not have much experience in this area, and it is questionable how well the Office of Ethnic Communities are able to understand, let alone participate in Interfaith interactions. The very term "interfaith unity" speaks to a misconception.

Nonetheless, the Office of Ethnic Communities (OEC) organised hui in Dunedin, Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington which we attended. A thank you to those from member centres who took time to be part of our contingent. It was essential that we saw for ourselves what was taking place.

The final version of the OEC report on the hui "Connecting with Faith Communities and Interfaith Groups:

growing a socially inclusive Aotearoa New Zealand to counter racism, discrimination and religious intolerance report" was released in November. If you wish to read this, it is available at from the OEC website [here](#).

The report draws on the discussions that were held at these hui and in some cases extemporises on the themes that emerged. Usefully, it proposes that there is a need to look at the importance of an education system in respect to normalising faith and ethnic diversity and to address the importance of the media in promoting social inclusion. Regarding next steps it suggests that community-led actions are important and Government involvement is as "an enabler", and that there is a need to ensure better connections and collaboration between faith groups and Government.

On 8 December the report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the terrorist

attack on Christchurch masjidain on 15 March 2019 was presented to Parliament and made public. It can be read here <https://christchurchattack.royalcommission.nz>.

OEC has said that they will take into consideration both the hui report and the Royal Commission report as they prepare their work programme and budget for the next financial year, from 1 July 2021.

Two members of the executive, Robert as chair and Derek as secretary, have been developing relationships with OEC in Christchurch and Wellington and will continue to do this as appropriate to represent the interests of Buddhist council members. OEC roles include policy advice to the Government on ethnic matters. Mid-2021 OEC is being upgraded to become the Ministry of Ethnic Communities.

The attacks last year were primarily against a faith rather than an ethnicity. As an organisation representing a faith practiced by people of many ethnicities

we know well that faith cannot be "reduced to a matter of ethnicity". We consider it important that Government policy reflects that and also the understanding that faith communities are important influences for harmonising and uplifting many New Zealand people's lives.

We can all benefit from the greater safety and understanding that results when there is less prejudice based on viewpoints and "otherness" about people of different faiths. To achieve less prejudice requires creating opportunities for communication, and well-researched steps within the education system.

We have good contacts and understanding around the country in the field of interfaith communication. We will continue to be a voice for wider understanding and harmony in our relationships with other faith communities and will present realistic and inclusive perspectives of faith in our communications with OEC.

Japanese Buddhist calendar - Bodhi Day on 8 December each year

Our most recent news is from Japanese Zen Buddhist members who have just celebrated Bodhi Day (the romaji for the Japanese word is "Rōhatsu") on 8 December.

Auckland Zen Centre describes Bodhi Day or Rohatsu as follows.

"Celebrated each year in early December, this beautiful ceremony commemorates 'the reopening of the Way' by Shakyamuni, the Buddha of our world cycle. The evening sitting starts with zazen, then Sensei tells the story of the Buddha's Great Enlightenment, and passages from the sutras are read aloud as everyone chants. Following the ceremony a special dessert of sweetened milk-rice (kheer) is served. This is the first nourishment that the Buddha took to gain strength after his period of extreme ascetic practice and before accomplishing anuttara samyak sambodhi (complete, perfect enlightenment)."



The Annual Kaṭhina Robe Offering Ceremony observed by our Theravada members

Kaṭhina festival originated in the time of the Buddha, and is the most significant alms-giving ceremony of the Theravada Buddhist year. Each year the monastic communities have observed retreat by carefully staying three months in only one residence. In some climates this is the Rains Season, so the retreat is called vassāvāsa "rains-retreat". Vassāvāsa begins on the first day of the waning moon of the eighth lunar month.

To end the retreat the pavāraṇā ceremony takes place within the monastic community, where there is confession and atonement between the monks for any breach of rules during the retreat period.

When that is concluded the Kaṭhina robe-offering festival can begin. In contemporary times this is usually a large festival where Buddhists can come together and make merit by offering robes and alms to the monastics.

The Pali word Kaṭhina originally means "hard" or "difficult". This refers to how Kaṭhina traditionally took place. First cloth was offered to the monks after the end of the Vassāvāsa, and then the monks sewed their robes. The hardness refers to a wooden frame used by the monks in sewing. These days the Kaṭhina cīvāra (outer robe) is offered to the monastic Saṅgha by lay followers. The historical story is that while the Buddha was dwelling at Jetavana Vihāra in Sāvattthī, after Vassāvāsa concluded a group of thirty monks visited the Buddha. The Buddha asked them about their retreat knowing that they had hoped to reach him before the retreat

period started. He also noticed the poor condition of their robes, which were made from pieces of cloth collected from different places such as rubbish heaps. The Buddha gave them some cloth, which he had received from one of the lay community and told them to sew a robe and then bestow it upon one of their company. With this he gave a teaching that generosity and sharing are of the utmost value, and established the conditions for the practice of the Kaṭhina ceremony.

According to the Vinaya Piṭaka the offering of Kaṭhina robe creates a particularly high form of merit, and so this ceremony is an annual high point for those involved.

On the Kaṭhina festival day people arrive at the monastery in the morning, undertake five precepts, and listen to Dhamma talks. Before noon the lay followers serve a meal to the monastic Saṅgha. The main ceremonies of the Kaṭhina then begin at midday. Monks give Dhamma talks, including on the significance of the Kaṭhina robe offering, and a representative of the lay people leads the robe offering ceremony. Then after receiving the robes, monks undertake some specific chanting ceremony related to the Vinaya.

The festival is concluded by dedication of merits to relatives and to all sentient beings. Then in the evening there may be cultural programs for the practice community.

[material sourced from article by Bhikkhu Dipananda]



Following are pictures of some of our members celebrating Kathina (Wat Buddha Samakhee Invercargill, Bodhinyanarama Buddhist Monastery, Dhamma Gavesi Meditation Centre, Sri Lankaramaya)



When different traditions commemorate the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha

What we may know in English as Buddha's birthday celebration is known as Vesak, Bodhi Day, or Saga Dawa depending on which tradition's calendar and observances one is following. Some Buddhist traditions celebrate the three anniversaries of Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and attainment of parinibbāna (parinirvāṇa) all in the same period, but others celebrate each of these three at different times of the

year.

Theravada Buddhists observe Vesak as the time to celebrate all three anniversaries. This falls on the full moon of the sixth lunar calendar month. In most Mahayana Buddhist countries, these three events are celebrated on separate days. For example in Japan it is the Buddha's birth on April 8, his enlightenment on December 8, and his death on February 15.

Tibetan Buddhists celebrate Saga Dawa (Saka Dawa) over the course of a full month each year to commemorate the birth, enlightenment, and death of Buddha. In Tibetan, "dawa" means month, and "saga" (or "saka") refers to a specific star that's particularly visible during the time of year when Saga Dawa is celebrated—the fourth month of the Tibetan lunar calendar, or generally early June on the Gregorian calendar. The period of Saga Dawa is a time for making merits, carrying out "meritorious actions." These generally fall into three categories: generosity (dana), morality (sila), and meditation (bhavana). Saga Dawa Duchen, the day of the full moon during Saga Dawa, and is typically regarded as an especially auspicious time for performing meritorious deeds.

