

Nikiṇi poya – Sāvana uposatha (August)

Nikiṇi - the day of the full moon uposatha

The full moon of *Nikiṇi poya* has great significance in the Buddhist calendar. According to Buddhist history, many significant events took place on the day of *Nikiṇi* full moon *poya*. The great Buddha preached the importance of observing discipline among the *bhikkhus*. It is a two-way process between *bhikkhus* and lay people. The connection between the two segments is considered the golden thread that binds them together. *Nikiṇi poya* is thus the second *poya* of the *vassa* season and falls in August. It is the first convocation of Buddhist monks to the *Dhamma Saṅgāyanā*. *Nikiṇi poya* is ranked second to *Vesakhā* because it marks the first convocation of 500 *bhikkhus*. The first council played a vital role in paving the way for the new tradition.



Important events that took place on the day of Nikiṇi poya:

- Venerable Ānanda attain an *arahatship*
- First Council of the Monastic Saṅgha (*Dhamma Saṅgāyanā*)
- Establishment of rules for the *vassa* period

Retreat vassa (*vassāna*)

The *vassa* retreat, which begins with *Esala poya*, continues during *Nikiṇi poya*. The month of *Esala* falls before *Nikiṇi poya*. It begins with the rainy season or *vassa* season. *Vassa* is a period of approximately three months when all Buddhist monks and nuns avoid outdoor activities and spend their days in intense spiritual effort. The traditional *vassa* retreat is done in two ways. *Bhikkhus* who are unable to observe *vassa* on the previous day of *poya* do so on the day of *Nikiṇi poya* and is known as '*Pasu vassa*'. A monk who is in the *vassa* order cannot leave the place where he stays for the entire *vassa* period. However, the Buddha allowed to leave if the monk can return within a week. This was ordained at *Nikiṇi poya*.



“Monks, I hereby request both of you (*bhikkhu* and *bhikkhunī*) and allow you to observe *vassa* (seclusion) during the *vassana* period. However, if a monk wishes to leave his abode for a particular reason during this period, he has special permission to leave, but should return to the same place without exceeding seven days or within seven days (*satthahakaraṇa*).”

In the Buddha's lifetime, the monks used to go to houses and beg for alms (*piṇḍapāta*). When they practiced this during the rainy season, it was inconvenient for the laity. In Buddhist teaching, the principle of not being a nuisance to others applies. After the Buddha received the information that begging for alms in the rainy season was difficult



for lay people, he instructed the monastic *Saṅgha* not to go for alms and not to conduct any discourses on the Dhamma, but to stay in their abodes during the rainy season and devote themselves to their own practice. It was then that the custom of looking after the monks, offering them food lodging, robes and dwellings arose.

The period of incipient *vassana* is an eventful time of great trust that creates a special spiritual awakening among followers, which has a tremendous impact on their moral life. *Vassa* remains very important for lay Buddhist practitioners who wait for the *vassa* period to begin to engage in spiritual activities and gain merit through nurturing the monastic *Saṅgha*. They invited the *Mahā Saṅgha* to observe *vassa* through *vassa aradhana piṅkama*. It is the duty of the *dāyaka sabhāva* (lay confidant) to see to it that he complies with the *Saṅgha* and their requirements.

The greatest female follower, *Visākhā*, attained *‘sotāpanna’*- entering the stream, the first of the four stages to realize liberation leading to *arahatship*, at the early age of seven. *Visākhā mahā upāsikā*, with the permission of the Exalted One, provided *bhikkhus* robes during the *vassa* period. Other followers also offered alms and tended to the needs of the *bhikkhus*. This also took place during the *Nikiṇī* period.

The First Dhamma saṅgāyanā (Saṅgha Council)

The most significant event related to the *Nikiṇī poya* day was the first Dhamma *saṅgāyanā* (assembly) held at the *Sattapanni* cave in *Rājagahanuwara* many centuries ago. At that time, three months had passed since the Buddha's *parinibbāna*, and the elder disciples of the Exalted One felt the need to enforce certain principles and rules regarding the conduct of the *Mahā Saṅgha*.

It was found that a certain monk was behaving in a manner unbecoming of a *Mahā Saṅgha*, and therefore this assembly was held, with Mahākassapa thera presiding over it. This event also marked



the attainment of *arahathood* by the Buddha's chief disciple *Ānanda thera*. The latter was the Buddha's chief attendant and was considered second only to the Exalted One in terms of discretion, intelligence, and wisdom, yet he did not attain *arahathood* during his lifetime, for this could only have occurred after the Buddha's *parinibbāna*. The *Dhamma saṅgāyanā* began with 499 *bhikkhus*, and *Ānanda thera*, who became an *arahat* on the eve of this event, increased the total number of congregations to 500.

The picture shows one of the 7 caves of *Sattapanni* where the first Buddhist council was held ~483 BC. A huge wooden hall was built in front of the cave where 500 *arahats* gathered. It was built by King Ajatasattu, who was trying to do some good after killing his father, the good King Bimbisāra, King of Magadha.

Nikiṇi poya in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, Buddhists celebrate *Nikiṇi poya* on a large scale. They visit monasteries with floral offerings and use the festival for religious activities. This day has special significance because the annual Kandy *Esala Perahera* ends with a daily *perahera* (ceremonial procession) on the day of *Nikiṇi poya* under the full moon. The *Esala Perahera* is a testament to the enduring traditions of the island nation and attracts crowds from all over the world who come to see this spectacular show. It is a celebration of Sri Lankan identity, a coming together of different communities to honour the sacred relic of the tooth of Buddha, which is enshrined in the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy. This famous *perahera*, as anyone who has had the opportunity to see it will tell you, is truly an experience in itself and should not be missed.



Bhikkhunī Visuddhi

Source: Duruthu pohoya, Soma Jayakody