

# BODHI DAY:

## Buddhist celebration of enlightenment

**Bodhi Day** is the Buddhist holiday commemorating the day that the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama (Shakyamuni), experienced enlightenment, also known as bodhi in Sanskrit and Pali. According to tradition, Siddhartha had recently forsaken years of extreme ascetic practices and resolved to sit under a peepal tree, also known as a Bodhi tree (*Ficus Religiosa*), and simply meditate until he found the root of suffering, and how to liberate oneself from it.

Traditions vary on what happened. Some say Siddhartha made a great vow to Nirvana and Earth to find the root of suffering, or die trying. In other traditions, while meditating he was harassed and tempted by the god Mara (literally, “Destroyer” in Sanskrit), demon of illusion. Other traditions simply state that he entered deeper and deeper states of meditation, confronting the nature of the self.

In the Pali Canon, there are several discourses said to be by Buddha himself, related to the story. In The Longer Discourse to Saccaka (MN 36), the Buddha describes his Enlightenment in three stages:

*During the first watch of the night, the Buddha discovered all of his past lives in the cycle of rebirth, realizing that he had been born and reborn countless times before.*

*During the second watch, the Buddha discovered the Law of Karma, and the importance of living by the Eightfold Path.*

*During the third watch, the Buddha discovered the Four Noble Truths, finally reaching Nirvana.*

*My heart, thus knowing, thus seeing, was released from the fermentation of sensuality, released from the fermentation of becoming, released from the fermentation of ignorance. With release, there was the knowledge, ‘Released.’ I discerned that ‘Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.’*

As the morning star rose in the sky in the early morning, the third watch of the night, Siddhartha finally found the answers he sought and became Enlightened, and experienced Nirvana. Having done so, Siddhartha now became a Buddha or “Awakened One”.

The **Enlightenment of the Buddha** is yearly celebrated in many countries:





## Bodhi Day

Bodhi Day is observed in many mainstream Mahayana traditions including the traditional Zen and Pureland Buddhist schools of China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

Services and traditions vary amongst Buddhist sects, but all such services commemorate the Buddha's achievement of Nirvana, and what this means for Buddhism today. Individuals may commemorate the event through additional meditation, study of the Dharma, chanting of Buddhist texts (sutras), or performing kind acts

towards other beings. Some Buddhists celebrate with a traditional meal of tea, cake, and readings.

## Rōhatsu

In Japanese Zen, it is known as 臘八, pronounced Rōhatsu or Rōhachi. In Japanese, the word literally means 8th day of the 12th month. It is typical for Zen monks and layperson followers to stay up the entire night before Rōhatsu practicing meditation, and the holiday is often preceded by an intensive sesshin. It is observed on the date of **December 8** as a result of the Westernization of Japan during the Meiji Restoration (1862–1869). In Tendai and other Japanese sects, it is called either Shaka-Jōdōe (釈迦成道会) or simply Jōdō-e (成道会) .

## Laba

The Chinese version of this festival is called Laba (臘八) which means the Eighth Day of the La (or the Twelfth) Month of the Chinese Lunar Calendar. It is most often observed in the first half of January, but it may happen on a date between the Winter Solstice (**December 22**) and the Chinese New Year (**between January 22 and February 21**).

## Vesak Day

Bodhi Day is not as popularly celebrated as Vesak Day, on which the birth, enlightenment (Nirvāna), and passing away (Parinirvāna) of Gautama Buddha are celebrated.

Many Mahayana Buddhists outside of Asia, and who are not accustomed to lunar calendars, are adopting the December 8 date to celebrate Buddha's enlightenment as well.

