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## **Wesak Theravada virtual in Cuba.**

### **Every great tree is born from a small seed.**

by DOUGLAS CALVO GAÍNZA

On May 29, 2021, the first Cuban Wesak Theravada online was celebrated. This was possibly the first time that novice Theravadins in Greater Antilles actively joined this universal holiday.

The event was broadcast via Google Meet from the Toronto Mahavihara temple, where veteran Bhikkhu Mihita hosted, accompanied by other monks, for a handful of members of the emerging community of that archaic Buddhist branch in Cuba. In addition, some people from other Latin American countries such as Argentina and Peru attended the ceremonial act.



*Bhikkhu Mihita guides the Buddhapuja online for participants from Cuba and other nations, during Wesak 2021. Photo courtesy Carmen Quispe.*

This ceremony is in addition to other initiatives by the industrious Canadian Bhante, determined to create a stable and well-established Theravada movement in the Caribbean country. During several visits to the Island, the learned northern monk has conferred at the main local center for higher studies, guided meditation workshops, traveled to various provinces, and initiated various practitioners. And today the venerable Mihita aspires to promote a reactivation of his past achievements in Cuba (almost interrupted by the recent socioeconomic ups and downs in that nation, and by the current global health crisis), aimed at establishing that ancient Buddhism within a scenario as unexpected as the Cuban guy. One, moreover, filled with various challenges for the practice of the Dharma.

Since 2020, the impact of COVID-19 on the economies of the world, the US measures to isolate the socialist government in Havana, and its radical socioeconomic reforms, have come together (whether voluntarily or not) to sink the small island nation in a spiral of vicissitudes, where the generalized insufficiencies of commercial offers and the irrevocable stagnation prevail. A crisis that only has

precedents during the "Special Period" (1990-1994), which followed the disintegration of the USSR and its bloc. The impact on the population has been immeasurable, and the shortages and shortages for Cubans today defy the most encompassing imagination.



*Bhante Mihita (center) next to Ven. Wimalabuddhi and representatives of the University of Havana and the group of first Cuban practitioners (2018).*

A rigorously executed Buddhapuja will always require some preparatory measures at home, such as offerings of food, candles, incense, water ... and in the conditions of social distancing imposed by this prolonged epidemic emergency, adequate connectivity is also required to follow the ceremony. virtual. Well, it is not an exaggeration to assert that, among all these elements, only water is usually within the reach of a Cuban Buddhist today (although more than once, it is also scarce). For example, without going too far into the subject, just a long connection to the INTERNET can be a real odyssey.

However, a positive response was received from several Cuban homes, and, despite the lack of experience, the very short period of time for preparations, and the multiple adverse situations, the local practitioners appealed to that fertile ingenuity of theirs, thanks to which day to day they manage to bring a plate of food to their tables. And they managed to present their humble but significant offerings to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. And it is striking how, thanks to the magic of the networks, even from a town as remote from Havana as the Matanzas city of Colón, two active participants also joined, with great joy, this recent universal festival in honor of the Enlightened One. Siddhartha Gautama.

Well, even if this time the technology did not lavish many favours (as unpredictable or inclement as that ancient Roman goddess of Fortune), and therefore the technical quality of the encounter was far from being optimal, however, despite the obstacles and barriers of all kinds, prevailed camaraderie and brotherhood ... The attendees all left satisfied, with a feeling of rejoicing. A brother from Argentina claimed to have experienced how the Bhante radiated powerful "waves of love" over all the nations represented in the chat, including his gaucho homeland. In particular, each one took from this Wesak the impression of being part of a universal unity among all the Dharma practitioners on the planet; of constituting tiny living cells, loving but useful, within that great world organism that is Buddhism



*Wesak 2021 logo. "Loto Theravada" is the name of the Cuban group. "Latin American-American" refers to the participation of guests from South and North America.*

Time will tell how the Theravada school thrives in this thorny West Indian context. For now, the palms go to Bhante Mihita and the monks of the Toronto temple, for that noble dharmic offer given to various Latin American guests, but especially to Cubans. And, of course, also praise for them, since they have overcome those unflattering and promising circumstances for virtual rituals, with a view to taking part in that millenary tradition, as novice but dynamic Buddhists.

The value of some religious expression is sometimes estimated by its exuberant memberships, its massive pilgrimages, and its highly decorated temples. However, whether it is the magnificent Borobudur shrine with its hundreds of Buddha statues, the colossal Tibetan Potala, or the gigantic Nara Daibutsu, they all had their genesis alike when, sitting in the middle of nature in what is called « "Deer Park " of Benares, a certain young man with a loving gaze, sweet smile, and serene gestures, told for the first time to a small circle of five gaunt Indian hermits what were the foundations of the novel teaching he had discovered meditating under a fig tree. It was an unexpected knowledge that had allowed him to overcome forever the chains of fear, ignorance and existential anguish.

Some casual observer of that placid, almost bucolic scene, and with only six participants, could never have suspected that, two thousand five hundred years later, hundreds of millions of citizens of the entire world would continue to devote themselves to this unprecedented spiritual discovery. Nor today can anyone predict whether or not this Canadian-Cuban Wesak online 2021 will represent a qualitative leap that helps to link the Theravada branch more organically among the religiosities that coexist on the Island.



*Havanan altar for Wesak 2021 Photo courtesy of the author.*

But in any case, the modesty of the restart should not discourage local Theravadins. Well, every great tree is born from a small seed, and also a meeting (apparently inconsequential, but between well-motivated people) can be an incentive for some involved later to pursue, and achieve, a wonderful Awakening. And that can be fulfilled, equally, in the Indian mysticism of the 5th century BC, or in this Cuba of 2021, plagued by COVID and other ailments.



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