Ullambana is a popular Buddhist festival observed in some Asian countries. The festival is held to please the deceased ancestors by making offerings to their spirits. The festival is celebrated on 15th day of the seventh month or the monkey month as per the traditional Chinese Lunisolar calendar.

It is also called the Ghost Festival or the Hungry Ghost festival, because of the ritual of making offerings to the spirits of ancestors or to any other wandering spirit, for that matter. The name Ullambana has been derived from a Sanskrit word meaning “to rescue from being hanging upside down”, or to rescue from great suffering.

**ULLAMBANA 2019**

This year Ullambana will be celebrated on Thursday, 15th August 2019.

**WHEN IS ULLAMBANA CELEBRATED?**

Ullambana is celebrated on 15th day of the seventh month as per the Chinese lunisolar calendar. The date of observance of the festival varies each year.

**Ullambana Nomenclature**

According to the ancient Buddhist scriptures, the word Ullambana has been derived by combining two Sanskrit words – Ullam and Bana. In Sanskrit “Ullam” means to hang upside down and Bana means “to rescue”. Ullambana therefore means to rescue form being hanged upside down or a great suffering. In present context it is a festival to rescue one’s ancestors from hell and liberate their souls.

**LEGEND OF ULLAMBANA**

The legend of the Ghost Festival is associated with Gautam Buddha and one of his closest disciples, Maudgalyayana. The latter was a Brahmin youth from India who later became one of Buddha’s chief disciples. When Maudgalyayana attained higher knowledge, including extra sensory abilities; he started searching for his deceased parents.

Finally he found his mother in Preta world. As per Buddhist mythology “Preta” is a ghost world, where hungry ghosts reside in an environment of extreme hunger, thirst and suffering.

Saddened by seeing his mother in a wasted condition, Maudgalyayana offered her a bowl of rice. Unfortunately, his mother was unable to eat, as she was a ghost and rice turned into coal. Maudgalyayana seek the help of Gautam Buddha, who suggests making offerings to the deceased parents on a particular day.

Gautam Buddha further insisted that if food is offered to the monastic community during Pravarana, at the end of monsoon, one his able to assist his deceased parents of not only this life, but also of past seven lives.

**ULLAMBANA – HISTORY AND INFLUENCE**

Ullambana Festival is one of the oldest rituals of Buddhism, being observed since 6th or 7th century AD. One of the chief disciples of Gautam Buddha – Maudgalyayana, to whom the evolution of Ullambana is associated, was from Brahmin community, belonging to India, who later accepted Buddhism under Buddha. Thus, giving credence to the fact that, the festival first originated in India and later spread to other countries, becoming a major Buddhist annual observance.

The Ghost festival is explained in a Chinese Festival guide, Jingchu Suishiji, and has also influenced an ancient Japanese festival, called the Bon festival. Bon is an ancient Japanese festival celebrated since five hundred years, to honor the spirits of deceased ancestors. People visited their ancestral homes and cleaned them, remembering their deceased ancestors.

Ancient Buddhist texts provide evidence of ancient kings like the king Bimbisara of India, performing the rituals of Ullambana festival to liberate the souls of their ancestors from sufferings. Historical records indicate that emperor Liang of Wu was the first to hold Ullambana assembly. Getting Emperor’s support, the observance was accepted by people and the ritual became more significant during Tang dynasty (618 – 907).

**Ullambana Evolution**

There is one more legend associated with the evolution of Ullambana Festival, which is also associated with Gautam Buddha.  In ancient Buddhism a tradition was followed by the Buddhist Monks, in which they cultivated together during the rainy season, and the ritual was called “summer retreat”.

Due to the climatic changes between India and China, Chinese Buddhists postponed the date of summer retreat from 15th April to 15th July. When the results of three month of cultivation were reported to Gautam Buddha, he was delighted. Therefore, July 15th is called the day of Buddha’s delight. Thus Buddhists make offerings to their ancestors on this day, to liberate their souls. The ritual is based on the concept of offering three jewels of Buddhism – Buddha, Dharma and Sangha to the wandering souls and liberates them.

**ULLAMBANA OBSERVANCE**

The Ullambana festival is observed with highest degree of devotion and reverence to one’s parents and ancestors. The festival is celebrated for fifteen days in the seventh month of traditional Buddhist calendar. The first day of the festival or the fifteenth day of the month is called the Ghost Day. It is observed in many countries including India, Japan, China, Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia.

Buddhists believe that the gates of hell are opened during the month, for the ancestors to descend and accept the offerings from their successors. Family members gather together and offer prayers to their deceased ancestors and relatives. There is a custom of burning hell bank notes, a kind of fake currency, during the rituals. The custom has evolved with time, and today houses, cars etc, made of paper and burned. The hell bank notes are burnt superstitiously to resolve the financial problems of the ancestors.

A grand feast is organized on the 14th day of the festival, for the spirits of ancestors. Live performances of opera and dramas are also organized in some East Asian countries. Interestingly, the first few rows for the viewers are kept vacant to accommodate the spirits of the ancestors. It is believed that the spirits of ancestors descend to earth to witness the events.

Altars are constructed at places of religious significance, for the Buddhist Monks and other religious gurus perform rituals by offering rice and food into the fire. This custom is believed to open the gates of heaven for the ancestors, liberating them.

Incense in China is considered a symbol of prosperity. Therefore, during evening incense is burnt at the house’s entrance. Altars are constructed in the middle of the streets, with offerings for the wandering spirits.

One of the major attractions of Ullambana is the lotus shaped lanterns. Thousands of lanterns are lit and sailed off in rivers, symbolic to guiding the wandering souls into the afterlife. Lanterns could also be seen burning outside the houses. It is believed that when the lamps go off, it indicate that the souls have found their way to liberation.

**SIGNIFICANCE OF ULLAMBANA**

Ullambana is observed with higher degree of respect to one’s ancestors and living parents as well. People not only pay reverence to their deceased ancestors but also their living parents and elders. This ritual reinforces the Buddhist philosophy of respecting one’s parents and ancestors.

People take time from their busy schedules, to pray and venerate their ancestors, performing ages old rituals, to liberate the suffering souls of their deceased ancestors. The observance reaffirms Buddhist belief in respecting elders.

Ullambana rituals are believed to liberate the souls of one’s ancestors/parents not only of present life, but also of the past seven lives. Gautam Buddha has himself narrated that by observing the rituals of Ullambana, devotees bestow their present living parents with hundred years of life without illness, worries and sufferings. Also, the liberated souls of the ancestors bless the performers with health, happiness and prosperity.