



Remembering My Mother on Wesak Day: Reflections on Science, Impermanence, and the Meaning of a Life in Research

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Abstract

Wesak Day commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and passing of Gautama Buddha, representing one of the most spiritually significant occasions in the Buddhist calendar. For me, however, Wesak Day has acquired an additional personal meaning since the passing of my mother on 12 June 2025. During the three-day funeral ceremony, the images of the Buddha, Kwan Yin Bodhisattva, and Da Shi Zhi Bodhisattva stood prominently before us, creating an atmosphere of solemnity, compassion, and transcendence. One year later, the observance of Wesak Day evokes not only religious remembrance but also profound reflections on mortality, scientific inquiry, family values, and the purpose of an academic life. This reflective commentary explores how personal loss intersects with scientific scholarship, environmental research, teaching, and Buddhist understandings of impermanence. Drawing upon personal experiences accumulated through nearly three decades of ecological and ecotoxicological research, this article argues that the ultimate value of scientific work lies not merely in publications or citations but in the cultivation of wisdom, compassion, and service to future generations.

Keywords: Wesak Day; Buddhism; Reflection; Ecology; Research Ethics; Impermanence

Introduction

Every year, Wesak Day commemorates the three most significant events in the life of Buddha: his birth, enlightenment beneath the Bodhi tree, and final passing into Parinirvana [1]. For millions of Buddhists worldwide, the occasion serves as a reminder of compassion, wisdom, mindfulness, and the impermanent nature of existence [6].

For me, however, today's Wesak Day (31 May 2026) now carries an additional layer of meaning. Since the passing of my mother on 12 June 2025, this sacred occasion has become inseparable from memories of family, gratitude, loss, and spiritual reflection. During the funeral ceremony, the presence of Buddhist iconography, the chanting of sutras, and the gathering of relatives created an atmosphere that was difficult to describe using ordinary language. Although I have spent much of my professional life relying on empirical observations, measurements, statistical analyses, and scientific evidence, there are moments in life that transcend numerical quantification. The passing of a parent is one such moment.

In a recent personal reflection, I described how bereavement became not merely an experience of sorrow but also a pathway toward deeper self-understanding, gratitude, Buddhist contemplation, and appreciation of genuine human relationships [7]. The loss of a loved one often forces individuals to confront questions that scientific inquiry alone cannot fully answer. Such experiences encourage reflection on the meaning of existence, the value of compassion, and the interconnectedness between human beings. Rather than viewing grief solely as emotional suffering, it may also become a catalyst for personal awakening and renewed appreciation of life's impermanent nature.

As an ecotoxicologist and environmental scientist, I have devoted nearly three decades to studying coastal ecosystems, biomonitoring heavy metal pollution, and understanding environmental change. Yet, the death of a loved one reminds us that human life itself is part of a larger ecological cycle. Birth, growth, decline, and death occur not only in ecosystems but also within every human life.

This reflection explores the intersection between Buddhist philosophy, personal bereavement,

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scientific inquiry, environmental scholarship, and academic service.

A Mother's Legacy

My mother's passing marked the conclusion of a life chapter that had shaped my own existence from the very beginning. Like many children, I often assumed that parents would always remain present somewhere in the background of life. Their presence becomes so familiar that its significance can easily be overlooked.

Only after her passing did I begin to appreciate more deeply the countless sacrifices that had made my own academic journey possible. Every achievement, every publication, every conference presentation, and every successful student carried traces of support that originated long before I entered a university laboratory.

Modern psychology recognises that parental influences contribute significantly to resilience, perseverance, emotional development, and lifelong achievement [3]. Looking back, I recognise that many qualities essential to scientific work, including patience, discipline, persistence, and responsibility, were cultivated long before I learned experimental design or statistical analysis.

Her life reminds me that behind every researcher stands an invisible network of support consisting of parents, family members, teachers, mentors, colleagues, and students. Academic success is rarely an individual accomplishment. It emerges from communities of care that sustain human development across generations.

Lessons from Ecology and Impermanence

Throughout my career, I have studied ecosystems characterised by continuous change. Coastal waters fluctuate with tides. Mangroves expand and retreat. Mussel populations respond to environmental conditions. Pollutants accumulate and dissipate over time.

Ecology teaches us that stability is often an illusion. Natural systems are dynamic rather than static [4]. In many ways, this scientific understanding parallels Buddhist teachings concerning impermanence, which describe all conditioned phenomena as transient and constantly changing [6].

When I first began collecting *Perna viridis* samples in 1998, I never imagined that the study organism would remain connected to my life for nearly three decades. Many sampling locations have changed dramatically since then. Some coastlines have been altered by development, while others have experienced ecological degradation or restoration.

Similarly, human lives evolve through stages that often remain unnoticed until viewed retrospectively. The younger version of myself standing in coastal waters collecting mussels could not foresee the future. He could not foresee the publications, students, awards, challenges, disappointments, or personal losses that would follow.

The ecological principle of continual change therefore serves as a powerful reminder of impermanence. Nothing remains fixed forever, including scientific careers, institutions, ecosystems, and human lives.

Beyond Publications and Metrics

Contemporary academia increasingly emphasises measurable indicators such as citation counts, impact factors, rankings, grants, and performance metrics [2]. These measures undoubtedly have value, but they represent only part of the academic mission. As I reflected upon my mother's passing, I found myself questioning

the ultimate significance of many professional accomplishments. Scientific publications remain important contributions to knowledge, but they cannot substitute for human relationships.

A researcher may publish hundreds of papers, yet the impact of kindness toward students may endure far longer than citation statistics. Similarly, mentorship often leaves a deeper legacy than numerical performance indicators. Throughout my academic career, some of my most meaningful experiences have involved supervising students, introducing them to field research, and witnessing their intellectual development. Education remains fundamentally a human endeavour rather than merely a technical process [5].

The true measure of an academic life may therefore extend beyond bibliometric indicators. It may reside in the lives influenced, the curiosity inspired, and the ethical values transmitted to future generations.

Wesak Day and the Search for Meaning

The Buddha's enlightenment is often interpreted as the culmination of a search for wisdom concerning suffering, attachment, and liberation [1]. Although scientific inquiry and spiritual inquiry employ different methodologies, both seek deeper understanding. Science asks how natural systems function. Spiritual reflection asks why human beings suffer and how wisdom may be cultivated. Neither perspective alone provides complete answers to the complexities of human existence. Together, however, they offer complementary insights.

My years in ecology have strengthened my appreciation of interconnectedness. Environmental problems rarely exist in isolation. Human health, ecosystem health, biodiversity conservation, and societal well-being are deeply connected. Similar principles of interconnectedness are found throughout Buddhist philosophy. The passing of my mother has reinforced another lesson. Life's most profound experiences often arise not from professional accomplishments but from relationships, gratitude, compassion, and memory.

Conclusion

This year's Wesak Day has become both a religious observance and a personal remembrance. It reminds me simultaneously of the Buddha's teachings and of my mother's life. As a scientist, I continue to value evidence, observation, and rigorous inquiry. As a son, I recognise that some aspects of life transcend quantitative measurement. Love, gratitude, loss, and remembrance cannot be fully expressed through datasets or statistical models. My mother's passing has encouraged me to reconsider what truly matters in an academic life. Publications, citations, and achievements remain important, but they are not ultimate goals. Rather, they are tools through which knowledge may serve society. The deeper purpose of scholarship may lie in cultivating wisdom, integrity, compassion, and service. In this sense, the lessons of ecology, the teachings of Buddhism, and the memory of my mother converge toward a common message: all things are impermanent, yet the positive influence we leave upon others can continue long after we ourselves have gone.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The author declares that generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a supportive capacity during the preparation of this

manuscript. These tools assisted with language refinement, structural organisation, and stylistic clarity of the text. All ideas, interpretations, reflections, and conclusions presented in this paper are the author's own and are grounded in personal experience and scholarly judgment. The author retains full responsibility for the content, accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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