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MC/MXY/13/79 (Istana)

12 MAY 1979

SPEECH BY PRESIDENT SHEARES AT THE BUDDHIST VESAK DAY
CELEBRATIONS AT THE NATIONAL THEATRE ON THURSDAY,
10 MAY 79 AT 7.30 PM

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Freedom of worship is a significant factor in the cohesion of Singapore's creed; it has become one of the focal points of our way of life. A religious festival such as Vesak Day provides an appropriate occasion to remind ourselves that in Singapore freedom of worship is enshrined in the constitution. Its practice is the cornerstone of our multi-racial society.

It is to the credit of the Buddhists, who have a large following in our Republic, that they have not claimed a "First Among Equals" status. This attitude stresses the basic foundation of a truly democratic society. This is not surprising, as tolerance and true equality among men are two pillars of Buddhism. Singapore's experience has demonstrated that its very diversity of religions, far from being a hindrance, has made for religious toleration.

Gautama Buddha did not recognise any essential differences among men. The differences, in his view, derive solely from their diverse moral and karmic maturity - in short, the human being is a free moral agent and his spiritual salvation depends on the deeds and endeavours of his earthly existence. This simple karmic philosophy was one of the vital factors which helped spread Gautama Buddha's teachings far and wide - first in India, and later in other societies in East and Southeast Asia. Buddhism has endured because the moral instruction inherent in its tenets is still relevant today.

Singapore cherishes a national culture that respects equality of all religions, each tolerating the other. We are fortunate that, Buddhism, one of the great world religions and philosophical systems, which engendered a great culture with its characteristic art, architecture, sculpture and literature in many languages is part of our heritage.

My wife and I are happy to join you in celebrating Vesak Day.
