Visakha Puja

May, 2001

Tonight is Visakha Bhuja. Visakha is the name of a month in the Pali language, basically the month of May. This is the full moon of Visakha. The word bhuja means homage. Basically, the deities had decided to pay homage to the Buddha because he was born on the full moon in Visakha, 34 years ago. Forty-five years later, he gained awakening on the full moon in Visakha, or May. Forty-five years after that, he passed away into total nirvana on the full moon in Visakha. So we’re commemorating three events tonight. The night he passed away, he talked about homage. The story goes that the devas, as they saw that he was passing away, were paying homage. There were deva songs and deva flowers and deva incense pouring out of the sky. The Buddha said, “That’s not how you show homage to a Buddha. The way you show homage to a Buddha is to practice the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma.” So there are two kinds of homage. One is homage with material things like the flowers, candles, and incense that we carried around the building just now. And then there’s a higher form of homage, which is homage through the practice, but not just any practice. It’s practicing the Dharma in accordance with the Dharma. In other words, not practicing in line with our preferences, but practicing in line with what really has to be done to attain true happiness. Whatever is required by the Dharma, that’s how we practice. So there’s virtue, there’s concentration, and there’s discernment. That’s the essence of the practice. We’re sitting here practicing concentration, trying to develop both concentration and discernment right now. So in practicing the Dharma, we’re showing homage to the Buddha. We’re also showing respect for ourselves, because we realize that our happiness depends on the qualities we develop in the mind. The Buddha’s last words before he passed away were focusing on heedfulness. He said, “All things that arise pass away.” So develop the good qualities of your mind with heedfulness. Heedfulness means being aware of the dangers of what happens if you don’t develop good qualities in the mind, realizing that your happiness and your sorrow, your ability to attain the highest goal of a human being, or the prospect of just going through endless round after round after round of rebirth, all depends on the qualities you develop in the mind. Whether they’re good qualities or bad qualities, skillful qualities or unskillful qualities, these are the ones that determine how life goes. These are the ones that determine the course of the mind’s experience. So you can’t be heedless. You’ve got to develop the good qualities of your mind, because the sufferings that come if you don’t are just endless. He one time picked up a bit of dirt under his fingernail and said, “Which is more, the dirt under my fingernail or all the dirt in the world?” He said, “Well, the dirt under your fingernail is tiny compared to all the dirt in the world.” He said, “It’s the same with the sufferings of those who have attained the first glimpse of awakening as opposed to the sufferings remaining for those who haven’t.” Once you’ve attained your first glimpse of awakening, there’s a little bit of suffering left. For those who haven’t, there’s just an immense amount. So the stakes are high. We have to respect the good qualities of our mind. The reason for that respect is because they’re so easy to miss. Mindfulness arises, and it seems so weak and so tender and doesn’t seem to have much to offer. Concentration arises in the mind, and all seems so ordinary when it first arises. It’s like a tiny plant growing on a path. There are all kinds of plants growing on a path. There are weeds, but there are also good plants—fruit trees, oak trees, pine trees—trees that actually serve a purpose. And if you don’t pay careful attention as you walk down the path, you step on everything. But if you begin to realize that certain of those little plants could be very valuable, you search them out. Once you search them out, you take good care of them. You help them to grow. You let go of everything that’s not helpful. You get rid of the weeds and focus on watering and helping the good plants. Eventually, you’ll have plants that can give you fruit, give you shade, provide timber, whatever you need, all from these little tiny sprouts on the path. And it’s the same with these good qualities in the mind, things like mindfulness and concentration. When they start out, they seem so ordinary that you hardly notice them at all. But if you pay them careful attention, focusing your mindfulness on the breath, trying to be alert to the breath, until you find that you can stay concentrated on the breath and then maintain that concentration so that it gets stronger, let go of everything else that would interfere with that concentration, and develop the qualities of mind—the mindfulness, the alertness, the directed thought and evaluation—that can bring the mind into a state of good, strong concentration, you find that you can build a good state for the mind, a good place for the mind, out of hardly anything at all, just breath coming in and going out, the flow of the energy in the body. And these little qualities of the mind that you work at to develop over and over again until they become strong, in the same way that you develop strength for the body. You exercise the body, and what starts out as very weak muscles can become strong muscles. It’s the same with the good qualities of the mind. As you exercise them, as you keep bringing them into play, not only will you be sitting here and meditating, but at all times throughout the day, they get stronger and stronger and stronger through use. Meditation isn’t just about letting go. It’s also about developing. The Buddha said that’s what the practice is, taking delight in developing, taking delight in letting go, and knowing what to let go of and what to develop. It’s an important distinction in the path. The good qualities we develop, we show respect for them, we care for them, we look after them. And if we show them respect, then they repay us. This is what the Buddha talked about, someone who is ardent with respect for concentration, like in the chant we just chanted just now. Concentration, when it starts out, seems so ordinary. It’s something everybody has. All the basic qualities that form the path are things that we already have. We all have virtue to some extent. We all have concentration to some extent. We have discernment to some extent. But they’re not all around. When they’re not all around, we don’t really know what kind of protection they can give for us. But if we develop them so that virtue is always there in our thoughts, words, and deeds, concentration is always forming a basis for the mind, and we apply our discernment to everything that comes up. No matter how attached we may be to it, we look at whatever comes up to see, “Is this really skillful or not? If it’s not, let’s let it go. If it’s skillful, let’s foster it. See how far it can go. How far can it heal? How far can a human being go?” That’s a lot of what the Buddha’s path is all about. When he was young, he was told to accept that what you’ve got as a prince is the best thing a human being can have. Sensual pleasures, power, wealth. The Buddha said, “No, that’s not it. There’s got to be something better. Human beings must have a higher capability than this.” The only way we can find out about that capability is to follow his path, to work on developing the skillful qualities of the mind and see how far they go. Use your discernment to ferret out every little bit of suffering that the mind causes itself. As your discernment gets developed through use like this, it gets more and more subtle, more and more precise. It goes deeper and deeper into the causes for suffering in the mind until finally it uproots them all. All this comes from showing respect for these little skillful qualities as they arise in the mind, learning how to care for them, learning how to look after them, not getting bored, not getting impatient, just sticking with the work. It’s not that the only payoff is at the end of the path all along the way. There’s a sense of ease that develops as the mind settles down in concentration, a sense of well-being, even a sense of rapture, a sense of fullness that comes when you really settle into the present moment. Then you use that rapture, use the pleasure to develop further insights into the mind, to get even more solidly in the present moment and see things even more clearly. This is why the quality of heedfulness is so important. If you’re really heedful of the good things in your mind, if you’re really alert to the dangers posed by the unskillful qualities of the mind, it can make all the difference in the world. In fact, the difference is so great that once you arrive at the end, there’s no world left. Just the well-being and the happiness of a mind is totally free. So this evening, as we’re paying homage to the Buddha through the practice, we’re also paying respect to the good qualities of our mind, to our potential as human beings, to see how far that potential can go. If you don’t show it respectfully, if you don’t care for it, then it just gets weak. It really doesn’t produce much of anything at all. But the respect you show for your good qualities, if it’s continuous, they have an opportunity to grow continually until they can take you all the way to true freedom. When the Buddha himself gained awakening, he said afterwards that the person who lives in suffering should show respect and deference for at least somebody or something. He was in a position where he didn’t see anybody that he could show respect or deference to anymore. So he showed respect and deference to the Dhamma he discovered, both the Dhamma of the path and the Dhamma of fruition, the Dhamma of attainment. So as we practice here, we’re showing respect in just the same way. And if we keep at it, someday we too will find the same results in terms of purity, in terms of freedom, that the Buddha found on this full moon night in May.

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