Magha Puja

February 23, 2005

Tonight’s Makkha Puja commemorates a day during the first year of the Buddha’s teaching career. After he converted the thousand fire-worshipping ascetics with a fire sermon, Sariputta, Moggallana, and the 250 followers they had. It was on the afternoon of the full-moon day in the month of Makkha, which corresponds to February, that 1,250 arhants all assembled without any previous invitation. And the Buddha gave them a discourse. It’s called the Uvatapadimokkha. It’s one of the few discourses we don’t have any record of exactly what he said. There’s a summary which we chanted just now, which covers the main points. And basically, the main points of the sermon are the main points of the Buddha’s teaching. His listeners were all arhants. They didn’t need to hear the Dhamma in order to gain awakening, but they were about to begin teaching themselves. So the Buddha gave a summary of the main points. The first point is that khanti, patience, endurance, and the foremost energy of the practice, the word they used, tapas, means the kind of fire that you create through your meditation. There are old stories about people meditating really hard, and the fire of their meditation gets so hot that it warms the seat of Indra or Brahma, and they have to come down and check out what this person is meditating for. And if the person is meditating for something good, Indra or Brahma would then grant a boon. If it was for something bad, they would do what they could to thwart this person. In our practice, tapas is the power of the meditation to burn through our defilements, and it’s patience and endurance that are the main power. So keep this in mind as you’re meditating. When things get tough, when there’s pain, whether it’s physical pain or mental discouragement, learn just to sit through it. That’s the beginning. You don’t want to stop just there. We’re not here just for patience and endurance, but our underlying ability to see things you otherwise would back away from. One of the reasons we don’t go beyond pain in our practice is because we back away from it. And when we back away from it, we can’t see it for what it is. We can’t gain any insight. Sometimes you may think, “Well, just sitting there in pain isn’t doing anything at all.” It’s an important perfection of the character to be able to sit with things, to endure things. Without it, you keep running into barriers. The more it becomes habitual to back off, back off, back off, the more difficult it is to actually see anything for what it is. So when things get tough, don’t get discouraged. When nothing seems to be happening in the meditation, just stick with it. Watch. Because many times it’s in the midst of a dry patch like that that something finally becomes clear, when you least expect it. So learn to develop your powers of endurance. Learn how to stick with things no matter what’s happening. You do your best. You do your best to alleviate whatever pain there may be, through the breath, through the way you focus on things. But many times there’ll come a point where nothing you can figure out with the breath helps, and nothing you can figure out with the way you focus the mind will help. So you’ve just got to watch so you can learn something new. The second point of the teaching was about nirvana. This was the utmost of the Buddha’s teachings. He said, “All the Buddhas say this. There’s nothing higher.” It’s the end of all desires, in both senses of the term. In other words, it’s the ultimate object of desire, and once it’s attained, there’s no need to desire anything anymore. It’s not that when you reach it you have to desire, “Well, do I really like this or not?” It obliterates any need for desire, period, which is why it’s foremost. We often hear that the Buddha taught acceptance and equanimity. Learn how to accept whatever comes up. That is part of endurance. But that’s not the goal. It’s simply one of the steps in the path. You admit what’s happening. You’re clear about what’s happening. But you also want to see, where is there a lack? Where is there still suffering in what’s happening? What can you do to overcome it so there’s no lack at all, no limit to suffering? No limitation at all in the mind. That sense of lack and limitation is what gives rise to desire. What you want to learn how to do is use your power of desire skillfully so it actually does lead to the happiness that you want. And if you can’t go all the way to nirvana, at least focus your desires on the path. Desire for right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, all the way down the line. Desires for these things are fruitful. We sometimes think the Buddha gave only one role for desire, and that’s as the cause of suffering. But that’s not true. Unskillful desire is the cause of suffering. Skillful desire forms the path. It energizes the path. You have to, as the Buddha says, generate desire, arouse your persistence, uphold and exert your intent. All these things build on desire for what’s right, for true happiness. And when all the elements of the path come together, it leads to a glimpse of nirvana. And you see then, even though you haven’t gone all the way in the practice, that when you have that first glimpse, you realize that this is the end of all desire. That’s why the Buddha said it’s foremost. Another important part of the Uvada Padimokkha is a passage that’s many times called the heart of the Buddha’s teaching. In other words, not doing any evil, becoming consummate in what’s skillful, and purifying the mind. What this comes down to is virtue, concentration, and insight. Virtually you avoid whatever is harmful to yourself or to other people. In the most skillful state of mind, as the Buddha said, the most skillful thing that you can resolve on, that you can aim for, is bringing the mind to concentration, like we’re doing right now. It’s based on the resolve to bring the mind above sensual passion. This is why it’s also called the heightened mind, because all too often our mind is a slave to sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, this thing and the other. We tend to place ourselves below our everyday concerns. What the Buddha is asking you to do is to lift your mind above those concerns. Your main concern in life should be to do the skillful thing, to be willing to learn what the skillful thing to do may be in any situation. You may not get there, but always try to hold to that intention to want to learn. So the intentions of the mind are always above your day-to-day concerns. This desire to be skillful is what leads the mind to concentration. Then it goes beyond that. You begin purifying the mind. In other words, you gain insight into the ways the mind creates suffering for itself, and you learn to let go. You do this bit by bit by bit, even as you’re practicing the precepts, developing the mind in concentration. But when there’s real discernment, real insight into seeing the mind as it’s creating unnecessary suffering for itself right then and there, seeing that it’s suffering, seeing that it’s unnecessary, that’s all you really need. You let go. This is how you purify the mind. You see where you’re causing unnecessary stress, as the Buddha told Rahula. You have to look at what you’re doing, both in physical action and in word, and especially in the mind, seeing where you’re causing harm by the way you think. That’s how the mind gets purified. And you can see that kind of thing only when the mind is really still. But once you see it and you realize it’s unnecessary, you’re automatically going to let go. That’s what cleanses the mind. That’s what purifies the mind, makes it bright. Otherwise, we’re filled with all kinds of ignorance, which darkens our awareness. And there’s nobody else who darkens it. Sometimes we pick up strange ideas from other people, but if the mind didn’t have that problem of ignorance, it wouldn’t pick up those strange ideas. Nobody could fool it. But the fact that it’s always ready to be fooled, that’s why we pick up wrong views from the people around us. So the fact that we’re ignorant is our responsibility. But fortunately, we also have good qualities of mind so that we can erase that ignorance, just by bringing light into our intentions, being clear about what we’re doing, being clear about the results of our actions on every level—physical action, verbal action, mental action. That’s where we have to be clear. Once we’re clear of that, it brightens the mind. And once you bring brightness to the mind, as Ajahn Suwat used to say, you don’t have to go tearing apart the darkness. The brightness itself, that moment of insight, that makes all the difference right there, clears everything up. These are some of the teachings that the Buddha gave that day. For us Arahant disciples, it was just a way of reminding them, showing them some of the implications of their experience. Because some of them hadn’t heard that much of his teaching, and they’d already gained awakening. So the teaching had to be fleshed out, put into words, so they could pass it on to other people. But for us, the teachings show the way to practice, the basic principles we should always keep in mind, so that we can someday see what they saw. And in the meantime, learn how to create less and less suffering for ourselves and the people around us.

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