True to the Teachings

July 21, 2005

Tonight’s Asalha Puja. Asalha refers to the month, the full moon in July. Puja means to pay respect, to worship, to honor. What we’re worshiping and honoring tonight is the remembrance of the Buddha’s first sermon. The story goes that after experiencing the bliss of awakening for seven weeks, he reflected on who he should teach. He thought first of his teachers, the people who had first taught him meditation years back, and he realized that they’d passed away. Then he thought of the five monks who had been his attendants throughout his many years of austerities, and who had left him when he started eating food again. He realized that they were off near Benares, and so he walked the distance. It took him about a week. He overcame their doubts about him and taught them the Noble Eightfold Path, the Four Noble Truths. One of the results of this sermon was that one of the five brethren attained the Dhamma-I, had his first glimpse of the Deathless. In that glimpse of the Deathless, he realized that this was something that didn’t arise and pass away. Everything else arises and passes away, but the Deathless doesn’t. So he asked to be ordained as a monk, and he was the first monk that the Buddha ordained. As I said in the passage we just read, the triple gem became complete that night. Prior to that time, there was just the Buddha and the Dhamma, and now there was the Sangha as well. So we’re commemorating the Buddha and the Dhamma doing several things tonight. One, the truth that the Buddha awakened to, and his truth in attaining that awakening. And the truth of Anya Gondanya, who, in listening, didn’t just listen, but he actually took the Buddha’s teachings to heart. When the Buddha talked about suffering, he looked at the suffering in his own mind. When he talked about the cause of suffering, he looked at the suffering in his own mind. When the Buddha talked about the fact that it’s possible to put an end to that, then Anya Gondanya followed the path of practice. In his particular case, he had already developed strong powers of concentration, so he worked mainly on discernment, seeing how his own cravings were the cause of suffering and how he put a stop to those cravings. There are several levels of truth going on here. One, the Four Noble Truths, the truths that were in the Buddha’s words. But then there was the truth and the truth of the experience on which those words were based. That’s the attainment. And then there was the truth of the practice that Anya Gondanya followed that evening. He took what the Buddha taught him and put it into practice right then and there. So these three levels of truth all came together in the year since people talk about the three levels of dharma. There’s the Padiyatthi dharma, which is the dharma that we read and memorize. There’s Patipatti dharma, the dharma of practice. And then there’s the dharma of attainment. They all came together that night. So that’s what we’re paying homage to. There are two ways of paying homage. You pay homage with material things, like we did just now, with the flowers and the candles and the incense. The Pali term for that is amitabhuja. But another time in his life, towards the end of his life, the Buddha said, “That’s not the true way of paying homage. The true way of paying homage is homage to the practice.” In other words, you take the truths that he taught and you put them into practice. You put them into practice in your own mind, in your own words, in your own deeds. So that’s what we’re doing now. We’re trying to bring the mind to concentration. When the mind is concentrated, we’re trying to balance that concentration to make sure that it’s not just a dull stillness, that the mind is mindful and alert. So you can actually start looking into your own mind to see where there’s still any falseness in your mind. In other words, the way the mind tends to lie to itself, not really looking at its own actions. Because it’s when you look at the actions of the mind that’s when you begin to see, “Oh, this action is actually causing suffering. This action is putting an end to suffering. These actions are displaying their truths at all times.” As the Buddha once said, “His truth is timeless.” We don’t look. And so when we don’t look there, we don’t see what’s going on right there. And we miss a very important lesson—seeing how we create all sorts of unnecessary suffering for ourselves and how we can learn not to. When you do this, that’s called homage to the Buddha through the practice. That’s true homage. After all, the Buddha didn’t practice all those many aeons of developing his perfections simply so that people could light candles in his honor and light incense in his honor and pile up the flowers in front of his statue. That wasn’t his motivation. He really wanted to put an end to suffering in his own heart, and he wanted to help other people be able to do that in theirs as well. The Buddha wasn’t one for ceremony. When he gave Dharma talks, he wasn’t giving them just for ceremony. He wanted the people listening to him not to listen just in ceremony. He wanted them to really listen, take what he taught them and put it to practice. So this is the sort of thing that would give him satisfaction, particularly the kind of practice where you not just practice, but you also gain some understanding, you gain some realization, you gain some freedom from the mind. So see what you do tonight to bring some freedom into your mind. Try to look and see where you’re causing yourself unnecessary suffering, either in just letting the mind wander around at will or thinking about things that actually burden the heart. Try to realize that you have the choice not to think about those things, not to go there. Instead of focusing on the breath, you’re giving yourself another place to stay. You’ve always got that other place to stay. Learn how to make the most of it. If you catch yourself wandering off, you can let go. Think of that as dropping one more burden from the mind. And you find yourself picking up the burden again. Drop it again. Get good at dropping things. Get good at letting them go. No matter how entangling a thought may seem, it doesn’t have your hands tied, it doesn’t have your feet tied, it doesn’t necessarily have your mind tied. There’s that old story of the Gordian Knot, this very complex knot that nobody could untie. Then Alexander the Great went in and just gave it one chop with a sword, and that was the end of the Gordian Knot. A lot of our thoughts are that way. They seem so entangled. We’ve got to think about this, you’ve got to think about that, and you really have to worry about this. You don’t have to. Just drop the thought. Give the mind a better place to stay as you work with the breath. That may not be the ultimate type of release that the Buddha was talking about, but its true release lies in that direction. Catching yourself in the midst of activities based on craving that could lead to suffering. Catching yourself and learning how to let go. Seeing that you have the choice and making the most of that choice. In other words, you disband the clouds of falseness, the clouds of ignorance in the mind, and really being true with yourself. Admitting, “Okay, I’m doing this, I’m doing that, and it’s causing this and that suffering, and I made the choice.” Now, if you make a choice, that means you have the choice not to do those things as well. Once you’re open and honest about this, once you’re true to yourself in this way, new levels of truth are going to appear in the mind. This is why we say, in the night when the Buddha gave his first sermon, several levels of truth all came together. There was the truth of his teaching, and there was the truth behind the teaching on which it was based, and then there was the truth of the listener, who was willing to open himself up and really look in terms of the teaching that the Buddha gave. The truth of the Buddha is already there. The truth of his teaching is there. Now the question is, how much truth can you bring to bear in your own mind? That’s a question only you can answer for yourself, but the conditions are all ripe. This is how we pay homage to the Buddha, by being true to ourselves.

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