Visakha Puja

May 12, 2006

Focus on your breath. When the breath comes in, know it’s coming in. When it goes out, know it’s going out. All the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. On the night of his awakening, the Buddha watched his breath. So this is one way of remembering his awakening. It’s by focusing on your breath to see what you can see here. He found awakening. He found an end to suffering. He found the deathless here. His breath is the same as your breath. The difference, of course, is the difference in the mind. Tonight’s Visakha Puja is the night that we commemorate three important events in the Buddha’s life, three important events in the history of the world. The first was his birth, which was on the full moon in May. Then his awakening, which was also on the full moon in May, thirty-five years later. Then his passing away, which was on the full moon in May, forty-five years after that. The most important of the events, though, was the awakening. This is what gives meaning to the others. So the question is, why was it that the Buddha was able to attain awakening just by watching his breath? Let’s look at our breaths to see what’s there. Of course, it’s not just the breath. The Buddha brought a lot of qualities of mind to his practice—concentration, ardency, resolution, all of which are related to willpower. But there was also the element of discernment, seeing things in terms of cause and effect, what’s happening right now, the big question he addressed, which is a big question for everybody. Is it possible, through human effort, to attain true happiness? That’s a question that doesn’t depend on anybody’s culture or language. It’s central to every person’s life. Everything we do is for the sake of happiness. But the problem, of course, is that we don’t get the happiness we want. We get little bits and snatches, but it goes away, turns into something else. So the question is, is that all the happiness that we can find as human beings? Putting all this effort into our lives, all this effort into this quest for happiness, and then seeing it slip through our fingers like water. Is that all there is? Young Prince Siddhartha was told that that’s what it was. When he talked about wanting a happiness that didn’t change, a happiness that didn’t fall subject to aging, illness, and death, his friends all said, “Oh, it’s impossible.” All the great people in human history have said that. They finally had to submit to the fact that things change. No happiness is ever really lasting. But the young prince wasn’t satisfied with that. He wanted to find for himself. So he left his home, went out into the wilderness, learned what he could from the teachers in those days, and found that it still wasn’t enough. He went off and practiced austerities for six years. Until he was ready to admit that that, too, wasn’t the way out. So what he found was the middle way, which essentially is composed of three things—virtue, concentration, and discernment. The symbolism of that circumambulation right now relates to that. The incense relates to virtue. There’s a saying that the scent of incense can’t go against the way of virtue. But the fragrance of a person who’s virtuous does go against the wind. In other words, the appeal of a person goes in all directions. No matter what you look like, no matter how young or old you are, if you have virtue, you’re attractive to other people. They can trust you. So incense is a symbol for virtue. The flowers are a symbol for concentration, as the mind blooms by settling down in one object and staying there, allowing itself its range of awareness to expand to fill the body, just as a flower opens. And then the candles, of course, stand for discernment, the light of discernment that drives away the darkness of ignorance, particularly the ignorance that causes us to act in ways that are harmful to ourselves, that actually create suffering even though we want happiness. Those are the symbols. But the symbols have meaning only when they refer to something real. And the reality is the actual practice that we’re doing right here, trying to bring these qualities into the mind. So what are the qualities we’re trying to develop? When you think of the Buddha’s virtues, there were basically three. There was purity, wisdom, and compassion. Wisdom means, as he said, it begins with the question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” With the emphasis on the long-term. I mean, short-term happiness, everybody knows. All you have to do is, if you’re rich, you scratch your itch. If you’re hungry, you find food. If you’re sleepy, you lie down. That’s short-term happiness. Everybody can find it. The long-term, now, that’s a separate issue entirely. Then you consider the fact that you want long-term happiness, and other people want long-term happiness, too. If your happiness depends on their suffering, they’re going to do everything they can to put an end to your happiness. So you can’t think just of your own happiness. You have to take their happiness into consideration as well. This is the beginning of compassion. Finally, there’s purity. Purity here means not only acting in ways that are wise and compassionate, but also integrity. The Buddha says you develop purity by looking at your intentions, before you act. If they seem harmful, you don’t do them. You’re true to yourself in that way. You’re true to your intentions in that way. If they seem harmless, you can act on them. While you’re acting, you have to watch the results that are coming, because sometimes what seems like a good intention may not be a skillful intention, and there’s no way you can know unless you watch what actually comes about as a result. You can’t simply trust, “Well, I have good intentions, and that takes care of everything.” It doesn’t. Your intentions have to be skillful as well, because many times good intentions can be ignorant. So you watch the results of your actions while you do them. If you see harmful things coming up, either harming yourself or other people, you stop. If you don’t see any harm, you can continue. When you’re done with the action, then you look at the long-term results, because sometimes the results of an action don’t come out until quite a while later. If you see long-term harm coming from your action, you go talk it over with someone else who’s also on the path, and then resolve not to make that mistake again. In other words, you don’t let your ego, you don’t let your pride, get in the way of admitting a mistake. You learn from your mistakes. If, on the other hand, you see that what you did was harmless, then you can take joy in the fact that you’re on the path. You’re learning how to create a happiness that really does last for a long time. Notice how these three qualities—wisdom, compassion, and purity—are based on a desire for true happiness. The Buddha doesn’t say that it’s wrong to want to be happy. He doesn’t say that it’s selfish. He says that if you do it wisely, and if you do it with purity and compassion, you find true happiness. At the same time, wisdom, purity, and compassion come from really taking your desire for happiness seriously. So those are the qualities that the Buddha brought to his quest for happiness. That’s how he did it, by looking at his actions, seeing what was skillful and what was unskillful. Not only external actions, but also the actions in the mind. Seeing where his actions were causing harm, even subtle harm in the mind, even a subtle sense of stress, disturbance, a weight in the mind. He saw that as a problem and resolved to solve it. He learned how to develop greater skill by being mindful, by being alert, and by really looking seriously at every little thing that happened in the mind to see what its impact was. When he could see that it caused suffering, then no matter how much he liked doing it, he was willing to stop. He was willing to develop a quality that he called disenchantment, nibbida. Not much. Even in Buddhist circles, people don’t talk about it that much. We want things to be life-affirming. Here the Buddha is saying that he can develop a sense of disenchantment. Disenchantment with all your unskillful ways of thinking, all your unskillful ways of trying to define your idea of who you are. Realize that they’re stressful. They give out a lot of negative energy. They give out a lot of happiness that’s not constant. You can’t really control them. Even strong states of concentration, even great insights, there comes a point where you have to let them go as well. You use them and then you let them go. Without this sense of disenchantment, you won’t let go. You hold on. On the night of his passing away, the Buddha said that the true way of showing respect to him was to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. What does that mean? You practice for the sake of disenchantment. Anything that causes the slightest bit of stress, you try to learn to grow beyond it. In other words, you grow up. It’s like a child growing up. When you’re young, you can play with little toys and you’re thoroughly engrossed in them. But as you grow older, you begin to see there’s really nothing there. You get disenchanted with your toys. You find more satisfying pursuits. It’s the same with the practice. There has to come a point where you get disenchanted with the way you identify with your body, the way you identify with your feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, even your consciousness, your sensory consciousness. Seeing that these things are inconstant, you can’t really depend on them. They’re stressful. They can’t provide the true happiness you want. And they’re not self. They’re not toys. They’re totally in your control. So you look for something better. The Buddha’s not just being negative or aversive. He’s just saying these things are not enough to satisfy the heart, because the heart’s true desire is for happiness that lasts. The basic message of his life is that desire is something worth respecting. He says, “Don’t get disenchanted with that desire. That’s something you want to hold on to until it takes you all the way to true happiness. Allow yourself to get disenchanted with other things. Anything that doesn’t measure up to true happiness, learn how to go beyond it.” And there is a beyond. That’s the other message of his life. If there hadn’t been that message, he would have gone off into the wilderness and never would have been heard from again. But he came back and said, “Look, true happiness is possible. If you develop this path, this middle way of virtue, concentration and discernment, take your desire for happiness seriously, so that it’s not just a selfish thing. It becomes a quality that gives rise to wisdom, compassion, purity. And then you take these qualities and you bring them to the present moment. Look what’s going on in the mind right now. So you can develop disenchantment with its old ways and learn new ways that are more effective, that really do provide the happiness you want.” So, we’ve just finished what they call amissavucca, which is showing homage through material things, the symbolism of the incense, the flowers, and the candles. Now is the time to show homage through the practice, practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. That way, not only do you show homage to the Buddha, remembering the example of his life, but then you apply that example. That’s when you really benefit from the homage. This is how we benefit, by keeping these old traditions alive. They connect us back to a person who found true happiness, even though it was more than 2,500 years ago. We’ve got that connection right here with the breath and the qualities of mind we bring to the breath. These customs remind us of that. They give us energy on the path.

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