Asalha Puja - Completeness

July 10, 2006

Tonight’s the full moon in July, which in Pali is called the month of Asalahat. And each year on this day we commemorate an event. The Buddha, who had gained awakening two months before, gave his first dharma talk, gave his first glimpse of the Deathless after hearing the Buddha’s talk. It’s completed its cycle. It’s now a full moon. And the fact that the Buddha was able to teach so that someone else gained awakening that completed his career as a Buddha at least showed that he was a full Buddha, not just one who could gain awakening on his own, but also one who could teach other people to gain awakening as well. And as a result, we had the first member of the noble sangha. So the triple gem became complete. Up to that point, there was just the Buddha and the dharma. Now there was the sangha as well. So tonight’s a symbol of completeness. So the next step is to make sure it’s not just a symbol, but to try to find some completeness in your own practice as well. The gist of that talk that the Buddha gave in that night started out with the fact that there are two ways that people strive to find happiness. One is through sensual indulgence, trying to find all the sensual pleasures they can, and the other is through self-mortification, thinking that somehow if you deny yourself everything that the mind will get purified and find a different kind of happiness. But the Buddha pointed out that neither way succeeds in finding a true happiness. He said the true path was a middle way between these two extremes, starting with right view all the way through right concentration. Then he explained right view in terms of the Four Noble Truths, suffering, its cause, the end of suffering, and the path to the end of suffering, like a doctor’s diagnosis. This is the disease, this is the cause of the disease. It’s possible to gain freedom from the disease, it’s possible to be cured, and this is the path. This is the practice you do to attack the cause of the disease and cure it. Then he went on to point out that simply knowing these Four Noble Truths is enough, that there is a duty with regard to each. Suffering should be comprehended, its cause should be understood, and abandoned. Cessation should be realized, and the path to cessation developed. That’s the second level of knowledge, knowing the task with regard to each of the truths. Finally, there’s the third level of knowledge, knowing that you’ve completed all the tasks. The Buddha went on to say that it wasn’t until he realized that he had completed these tasks and that his knowledge was complete. In three rounds of knowledge about the Four Noble Truths, in other words, twelve factors to this knowledge, it wasn’t until then that he claimed to be fully awakened. So that’s the completeness. That’s why the Dharma Wheel up here is a symbol of the Buddha’s teaching. It also has twelve spokes, three times four. It was at some point in this explanation that Gondanya, following the gist of what the Buddha said, looked inside his own mind and let go of the cause of suffering enough so that at least he got a glimpse of the deathless. So in his case, it wasn’t quite complete. It was a few days later that he gained complete awakening. At the very least, he knew that what the Buddha said was true, that there really is a deathless happiness. This is the way to true happiness, this eightfold path that he recommended. So this is what we’re practicing right now, working on right mindfulness, right effort, right concentration. This is how we can bring some completeness to our minds as well. Jaya Mahaprabhu once said, “The fact that we’re suffering shows that there’s a lack someplace in our understanding, in our concentration, in our mindfulness.” So what we do as we practice is try to make up for that lack. Take the qualities of the path, which boil down to virtue, concentration, and discernment, and try to make them complete, because these are qualities that all of us have to some extent. The Buddha made this point over and over again. The fact that he gained awakening wasn’t because he was some sort of special being who could do things and develop things in his mind that other people couldn’t. He said that it all comes from qualities that we all have, to some extent at least. We all have some virtue, we all have some concentration, some discernment. If we didn’t have these things, we wouldn’t be here as human beings. The question is simply making them complete. In other words, abstaining from harmful behavior in all situations. Developing skillful behavior in all situations. Trying to keep the mind pure in all situations. In other words, mindful, concentrated. And very clear in its knowledge of what it’s doing. One of the Buddha’s main insights on the night of his awakening was that the mind is always doing something, and its actions have results, based on the quality of the intention. It’s not just the results of past actions that we’re experiencing right now. There are also present actions. Without the present actions, we wouldn’t experience the present moment at all. There’s an element of fabrication, an element of intention in everything we experience. So the Four Noble Truths are applied to this. Look at your intention in the present moment to see if it’s causing suffering or it’s leading to the end of suffering. This comes down to the quality of the intention, the quality of the desire behind the intention. The cause of suffering, the Buddha said, is three kinds of craving. There’s sensual craving, craving to be this or that, or, once you become this or that, craving to get rid of that, craving to demolish it. This is the way most people’s minds work. But the Buddha said there’s another kind of desire, another way of understanding desire, which is actually part of the path. It comes under right effort. The desire to abandon unskillful things and the desire to develop skillful qualities in the mind. This, he said, makes all the difference. There’s realizing that you’ve got to sort through your desires. You can’t identify with every desire that comes up in the mind. You’ve got to figure out which ones are skillful and which ones are not. You look at them in terms of what stress, suffering, pain they cause to the mind. Focus right here. This is the important place. This is why we meditate, focusing on the breath and here in the present moment. The breath is about as close to the mind as you’re going to get until you can look at the mind directly. It’s a good place to bring your attention because the breath is very sensitive to what’s going on in the mind. Fear arises in the mind and it’s going to affect the breath. Anger arises. Lust arises. There’s going to be a change in your breathing. Try to get sensitive to this level of the mind. Try to get sensitive to this level of your awareness. The way to get more sensitive is to try to be as attentive as possible to the question of how comfortable your breathing is. How does it feel right now? Does it feel easy? Does it feel refreshing coming in? If not, see what would be more refreshing. The greater sense of ease and refreshment you get from the breath, the more you become sensitive to the slightest. Dis-ease in the breathing. Things that you used to take for granted as this is the way the breath has to be, well, you begin to realize it doesn’t have to be that way. This way you sensitize yourself to what’s going on in the present moment. So we develop mindfulness, we develop concentration around these issues. To sensitize ourselves not only to the movement of the breath, but eventually to the movements of the mind as well. So you can really look at the desires, the intentions that are shaping the present moment and realize you have a choice. No matter how much our past karma may weigh on us, our past actions, we always have the choice to do the skillful thing in the present moment. First, of course, that requires getting more sensitive to what the skillful thing would be. But then once we see it, making the choice, “Okay, I’m going to go for what’s skillful, regardless of what you might want to do or what you’re habituated to doing.” If you see a situation calls for a certain kind of action that will help alleviate suffering in the mind, okay, you go in that direction. That’s how you achieve completeness in the mind. Otherwise, the mind is always going to be lacking, it’s always going to be hungry. When the mind is hungry, you can’t trust it. It’s going to grab after this, grab after that. Sometimes it grabs after good moods, sometimes it grabs after bad ones, grabs after good intentions, sometimes it grabs after harmful ones. Things will harm not only itself, but also other people. Because when the mind is hungry, it’s going to take what it can get. And the hungrier it is, the less it wants to hear about what it should be doing. So this is why, as we practice meditation, it’s not just a question of being mindful and alert. It also means developing a sense of ease in the present moment. The realization you could just sit here and breathe, and you can have a strong sense of ease, refreshment, rapture, even, in the present moment. This nourishes the mind. When the mind is nourished, it can look at the situation with a lot more equanimity, a lot more objectivity, whatever the situation, and see what needs to be done, what would be the skillful thing, the harmless thing to do right now. So this is how the mind achieves completion, fullness, by developing a sense of fullness in the present moment, in the breath, and then working on that to develop fullness of understanding, fullness of discernment. Ultimately, you can make yourself part of that noble sangha as well. Because this is the other part of the teaching that’s always relevant. The teachings are not there just to say there were wonderful people in the past, people that we want to honor. We honor them because they show us the way that we can define completeness in our lives as well. So take their lesson to heart.

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