Visakha Puja - True Homage

May 31, 2007

It was on a night like this, more than two thousand six hundred years ago, the full moon rising in the east, that the Buddha was born. It was on a night like this, thirty-five years later, again the full moon rising in the east in the month of May, or what they call vissaka in Pali, that he gained awakening. And it was on a night like this, two thousand five hundred fifty years ago, that he passed away. We commemorate these events every year, thinking about where this practice that we’re doing came from, the sort of person who found it, established it, established it so well that the practice is still alive, even here on the other side of the moon. The side of the earth from where he found it. They say that on the night of his passing away, the devas were showering him with flowers and incense, paying homage to him with song. He happened to mention to the monks that that’s not the true way to pay homage to the Buddha. The true way is to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. This is not to say that we shouldn’t pay homage with candles, incense, and flowers. We realize that the candles, incense, and flowers are just symbolic of what the true homage is. There’s one tradition that the incense stands for virtue, because the scent of virtue, as I say, even goes against the wind. Even the scent of incense goes with the wind. The scent of virtue, the attraction that comes when you see a virtuous person, goes against the wind. The flowers stand for concentration as the mind blooms. The candles stand for discernment that throws light on our actions, that throws light on the way we cause suffering and shows how we can learn how not to cause suffering. So those are the symbols. We don’t just want the symbols. We want the reality. Meditate. Focus on your breath. Know when the breath is coming in, know when it’s going out. They say that the Buddha, on the night of his awakening, was focusing on his breath as well. So what’s the difference between his breath and ours? He was able to gain awakening. Where are we? Well, the difference doesn’t lie in the breath. It lies in the qualities of mind that we bring to it. But these are qualities we can all develop. As the Buddha himself said, it wasn’t because he was somebody special. It wasn’t that he had powers that nobody else could attain. He said it was through being resolute, ardent, and heedful that he was able to develop the powers of concentration and discernment that led to his awakening. These are all qualities that we can develop, too. So let’s work on that. Be very heedful of the mind as it might want to wander away from the breath. Be ardent. Really paying very close attention to what you’re doing. And be resolute. Once you’ve got the mind firmly planted in the breath, keep it there. This way we’re practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. This is an important phrase. Throughout the forest tradition, they talk of how Ajahn Mun would take this as one of his two most favorite topics for giving Dhamma talks. The other one is the customs of the noble ones. And the two principles come down together. Realizing that we’re here practicing the Dhamma, the Dhamma is bigger than we are. We don’t want to practice the Dhamma in line with our own defilements. In other words, we don’t want to change it in line with our likes and dislikes. We have to change ourselves in line with the principles that the Dhamma sets out. Because, after all, these are principles that are true across time. Right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, right view. The rightness of these things doesn’t change. And the rightness is right because it works. So as we choose to make the Dhamma larger than ourselves, we’re making it possible for us to practice in a path that really does work, that really does lead to the end of suffering. It’s good that we have events like this every now and then. It reminds us that the Dhamma is bigger than we are. Many times when you’re meditating, it’s easy just to get caught up in your own stuff or to think of the meditation simply as a way of dealing with your own personal problems. And it does help with personal problems. But it’s good to get a larger perspective every now and then. When you see all these people gathered here, it reminds you that the practice of the Dhamma is a group activity. We depend on each other for support, for guidance. This is something that the monks are reminded every day when you go out for alms. You realize that your practice is dependent on the generosity of other people. When you eat the food that they give, it’s incumbent on you to practice well. The Buddha says that one of the motivations for a person to practice, especially for a monk who’s practicing, is that by attaining the noble attainments, you make it so that when people give you gifts, they get great rewards from those gifts because of your attainment. So your attainment is not just your own personal issue. It spreads out and benefits other people as well. So it’s a group effort we’re involved in here. The Buddha often talks about the advantages of taking the larger view of your own life. You may know that chant that we often recite. We’re subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation, and we’re the owners of our actions, the heir to our actions. When you think of this just with regard to yourself, this principle applies to you. The Buddha says it helps keep you very careful about what you do and say and think, because you realize it has consequences. In other words, you abandon unskillful behavior. He says it’s also good to reflect on the fact that these principles apply to everybody across the board. Not just you. Every man, woman, child, ordained and non-ordained, devas, human beings, people in all the realms of existence. These principles apply to everybody. When you think in these larger terms, you develop a sense of saṃvega. That sense of saṃvega, he says, gets you on the actual path to the end of suffering. In other words, you get out of your own personal narrative and you realize that larger principles are at work here. The Dhamma is something large as well, something that’s been passed on all these years. So in your practice, it’s not simply that you benefit. You’re benefiting from the practice of the people who’ve gone before, and you have the opportunity to pass it on to the next generation by practicing the Dhamma as well. Try to keep this larger perspective as you practice. It’s not just you. I’ve noticed occasionally, sometimes, we’ve had refugees from Zen centers coming here. They’re told that they’re supposed to practice without any sense of hoping to gain for anything at all. It drives them crazy. So they come here and they think, “Well, at least with Theravada we can be selfish and just practice for ourselves.” It doesn’t work here either. But we do gain. But other people gain as well. It’s good to see that larger perspective, to hold that larger perspective in mind. It’s not just a practice of meditating, but generosity and virtue are all part of the practice. Generosity is what enlarges your heart. It helps you to look around and see all that we have in common in terms of the fact that we’re suffering, that we all have needs. And if you have the ability to help other people, you do. Because that willingness to help, that willingness to give, is what allows you to practice the precepts with a lot more integrity. In other words, there will be times when, holding to the precepts, you have to sacrifice some of your material comfort or material advantage. But you take it as a gift that you can give to others, that you’re going to maintain your principles and let go of the things that could have come to you if you sacrificed your principles. In the same way, your meditation is a gift. You yourself suffer less from your own greed, anger, and delusion. The people around you also suffer less from your greed, anger, and delusion. So everybody benefits. This way, as you make the Dhamma larger than yourself, it’s not that you make it larger. You admit that the Dhamma is larger than you are. It’s something you can really give your life to. You can sacrifice your own preferences, sacrifice your own likes and dislikes. But you find that the rewards are more than many. So this is how we show our gratitude to the Buddha and all the people who’ve kept the teachings alive, who’ve kept the practice alive, all these many centuries, by paying homage to the practice. And not just any old practice, but practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. You’re willing to learn what the Dhamma teaches and willing to submit to the training. Because the Dhamma is not just something you read about or talk about. It’s a training. It’s that chant we had this evening. If you have respect for the training, then it puts you right in the presence of Nirvana. you

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