The Heart of the Buddha’s Teachings

February 21, 2008

Tonight’s Maka Bhujah. Maka is the name of this month in Pali. Bhujah means homage. We’re not paying homage to the month. We’re paying homage to an event that happened on the full moon of this month. Seven months after the Buddha had started his teaching career, nine months after his awakening, on the afternoon of that full moon, 1,250 of his Arahant disciples, his fully awakened disciples, came to meet him. It hadn’t been announced, it hadn’t been agreed upon that there would be such a meeting, but they all came. The Buddha gave a discourse on the topic of his teaching. We don’t have a record of the words of the discourse, but we do have a record of the summary with which he ended it. Basically, what he was doing was giving a full sketch of the Dhamma to his students so they could go out and teach it. Some of them had gained awakening simply on hearing one teaching or a few scattered teachings. He wanted to give them a sense of the breadth of the teaching so that when they went out, they’d be able to articulate it in a detailed way. It’s a part of that summary that we have. There’s a set of verses that are called the heart of the Buddhist teachings. They’re simple and short. “Not doing any evil,” or “the non-doing of any evil,” “the perfection of what is skillful,” and “the purification of the mind.” These are the Buddhist teachings. The path, the things that we do, are the principles that we follow. They’re not really separate principles. As you get more and more precise in avoiding all evil, you find that your actions become more and more skillful. You bring skillfulness to completion. This is based on training the mind, because unskillful behavior, unskillful intentions are a mind that’s not pure, a mind that’s afflicted with greed, anger, and delusion. This is what we’re working on here as we meditate. We’re working on all three qualities. In doing this, we’re paying homage to the Buddha as well. As he said on the night of his passing away, “True respect for the Buddha lies in actually following his teachings in line with the Dhamma.” In other words, not in line with what your preferences are, but with what has to be done to train the mind, to purify it, to avoid unskillful behavior. The word “skillful” is important here. When we talk about skillful intentions, it’s not just good intentions, because a good intention may be deluded. You may mean well, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that following through with that intention is going to lead to good results. As the old saying goes, “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Good, but not skillful. For an intention to be skillful, it also has to take into consideration what the results of that action are going to be. This is something you learn through trial and error. As the Buddha once taught his son, this is how you purify your thoughts, your words, and your deeds, by looking at your intentions before you act, and deciding not to act on any unskillful ones. Then, looking at the results of your actions while you’re doing the action and after it’s done. If, while you’re doing the action, you see that it’s actually leading to bad results, you stop. If, after it’s done, you see that it was unskillful, you resolve never to repeat that mistake. And if necessary, you go talk it over with someone else you respect. On the other hand, if you saw that the action led to happiness and was skillful, you remember it and take joy in the fact that you’ve acted in a skillful way, because the mind needs this. Many times, if you find that you’ve got an unskillful habit and you happen to act in a skillful way one day, it’s very easy for the mind to say, “Well, it was just once. It doesn’t really count.” That makes it harder to make the decision to act skillfully again the next time. So if you see that you’ve acted in a skillful way, congratulate yourself. Take joy in that fact and resolve to keep on acting as skillfully as you can. So it’s not simply a matter of holding to the fact that you wish well or you mean well. You actually want to see what are the results of the different kinds of actions that you have. And then wisdom builds on that, not only seeing the results of actions and resolving to act only in skillful ways, but also having the strategic wisdom that’s needed. If there’s something you like to do but it’s going to lead to unskillful or unfortunate results, how do you talk yourself out of doing it? Or if it’s something you don’t like to do but it leads to good results, how do you talk yourself into doing it? That’s part of wisdom, too. It’s not just knowing things or having an abstract theoretical knowledge. It means having a strategic knowledge as well. Again, this is something you develop through trial and error, learning from your mistakes and learning to value the times when you really have acted skillfully. All of this requires that the mind is in a good, solid position to see these things. This is where the purification of the mind comes in. Through mindfulness, alertness, concentration, and discernment. This is an activity you do while your eyes are closed, when you’re sitting here, and also in your day-to-day affairs. There’s a very strong misunderstanding that meditation is simply something you do when you’re off alone on retreat or when you’re sitting quietly. But the Buddha’s word for meditation, bhavana, means to develop, i.e., to develop good qualities, to develop skillful qualities in the mind. And that’s something you can do at any time, if you’re mindful, if you’re alert, if you have a good center for the mind inside. So that’s what you want to develop, so you can keep that sense of being well-centered in a way that’s solid, not easily shaken, no matter what the circumstances are. Of course, it is wise to follow the Buddha’s fine, quiet circumstances to get started on this path, so you can give your full attention to what’s going on in the mind and not be distracted by outside affairs. But in learning how to overcome greed, anger, and delusion, it’s not helpful just to be able to do it only when you’re sitting with your eyes closed in a quiet place. You want to be able to overcome these things wherever they appear. That’s why, when you focus on the breath, and you get so the mind can stay with the breath as you’re sitting here quietly, you want to take that same ability into your daily affairs. And then notice when the mind gets knocked off, its center. See what are the things that distract you, and then ask yourself, “Why do you let them distract you?” Because the sense of having a centered mind, where you can see the mind clearly and work on purifying the mind, should be your top priority in life. This is the most valuable possession you have, because it helps to guarantee that what you do and say and think is going to be skillful. You’re going to be able to avoid evil. And that ability is one of the most valuable things you can develop. So it’s important that you have a sense of priorities as you go through the day, trying to maintain whatever sense of center, whatever sense of mindfulness and concentration and alertness that you can develop in the meditation. Try to maintain that as long and as consistently as you can. This is where you’re paying homage not only to the Buddha, but also to your desire for true happiness. You don’t let the little pleasures of the world distract you, or the frustrations of the world distract you. Because true happiness is something that’s worth holding to as your ultimate ideal, your ultimate goal. And it’s a very basic principle that if you see a larger happiness that comes from abandoning smaller happinesses, you should be willing to abandon the smaller ones. At least not get distracted by them, at least not get waylaid by them. So even though you may have a busy life, the busyness doesn’t have to go all the way through into the mind. There should be a quiet center inside, where you’re coming from a position of strength. It’s in this way that your behavior embodies the heart of the Buddha. The Buddha’s teachings, you take them to your heart, and your heart benefits. The people around you benefit. You’re not doing any evil. You’re learning to make your behavior more and more skillful. And you’re not the only one who benefits when your mind is pure.

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