Completing the Refuge

July 17, 2008

Tonight is Asalha Puja, the full moon in July. It’s the night when we remember the Buddha’s first sermon, which was also given on the full moon in July, two months after his awakening. It’s called “Setting the Wheel of Dharma in Motion.” The Wheel of Dharma is part of the sermon where he talks about four noble truths and the three knowledges for each of the truths. Back in India, where you had two sets of variables like this and you ran through the variables, they would call it a wheel. So this is the Dhamma Wheel. It’s the truth of suffering or stress, the truth of its cause, the truth of its cessation, and the truth of the path to its cessation. Each of those has three knowledges appropriate to it. The first is to know what the truth is. The second is to know what duty is appropriate to the truth, and the third is to know that the duty has been completed. When you have all twelve of those together, that’s awakening. That’s the Dhamma Wheel. As I said, when the Buddha set the Dhamma Wheel in motion, the devas cried out that no one can stop this once it’s been set in motion like this. The Dhamma Wheel has moved throughout Asia and now it’s coming to America. It all started on that one night. Of course, what happened on that one night was dependent on what had happened two months before the Buddha’s awakening. But what was special about this night was that it added a couple of things to the Buddha’s awakening. One, it showed for sure that he was a fully awakened Buddha, not just a private Buddha. Private Buddhas can awaken, but they can’t teach the Dhamma. But in this case, the Buddha did. Not only that, but when it was his listeners, he became a stream-enterer. He gained the Dhamma-I and became the first member of the noble Sangha, which proved that the Dhamma was well taught. The Buddha really was awakened and his Dhamma was well taught. He could teach it in such a way that it would lead people to the same awakening he had had. So they say this is the night when the triple gem became complete. There had been the gem of the Buddha and the Dhamma prior to that. But there’s a case of the first two people to pay homage to the Buddha, a couple of merchants who met him not long after his awakening, and they gave him some grass to use as his seat. They took refuge in the Buddha and his Dhamma. But the refuge of the Buddha and the Dhamma weren’t really tested until the night of his first sermon. So not only did we gain the Sangha as the third refuge, but we also proved that the Buddha and the Dhamma were true refuges. So it’s the night when the triple refuge became complete in several ways. So that was over 2,500 years ago. What’s relevant tonight, of course, is how is the Dhamma wheel in your heart? And how is the triple refuge in your heart? Because in taking refuge, it’s not simply a matter of thinking about the Buddha all those many years ago, or looking at the Dhamma in the texts, or thinking about all the noble disciples the Buddha’s had. You try to internalize these qualities, and you do that through the practice. That’s what they call homage through the practice. There’s homage through material things, like what we did just now. We lit candles, lit incense, gave flowers. That’s a material way of showing homage to the Buddha. But the genuine homage is to practice his teaching and to give rise to the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha inside. What are the qualities of the Sangha? We chant every night, Supatipanno, someone who practices rightly; Ujjupatipanno, someone who practices straightforwardly; Jayapatipanno, someone who practices—this can be translated two ways, one either systematically or for the sake of knowledge; and then fourth, Samicipatipanno, someone who practices masterfully. The word samici actually means “owner.” You become an owner of the Dhamma when you practice in those other three ways. In other words, whatever the Dhamma is, you practice it. That’s right practice, good practice, practice that doesn’t harm anyone, practicing straightforwardly and systematically. What it comes down to is that you don’t take your practice preferences and make them the determining factor in how you’re going to practice. There are parts of the practice we don’t like and parts of the practice we do like. But you can’t pick and choose, because sometimes your defilements get in the way. It’s your defilements that are picking and choosing. It’s what they call the four akati, or the four forms of bias—biased because of things you like, biased because of things you dislike or you feel irritated by. Or verse two, the bias when you put your delusion ahead of everything else or the bias when you put your fears ahead of everything else. You’ve got to put all those things aside. Just look at your heart and see what needs to be trained. Be as objective as possible about it. So when the Buddha says that our duty is to comprehend suffering, how much of your suffering have you comprehended? How much of the cause have you abandoned? These are the duties appropriate to those two truths. Most of us don’t comprehend suffering. We sense it a little bit and we try to push it away. Or we try to run away from it. But that doesn’t solve the problem. Pushing it away is like having a problem child at home. Push the child out of the house. That’s not going to solve the problem. Or if you run away, it’s like being a child with a problem at home, and you run away from home. That doesn’t solve the problem either. You’ve got to figure out what the problem is and search for its cause. When you find the cause, then you can let go of the cause, and that’s the end of the problem. Now, to do this, you can’t just sit down and face off with suffering, face off with stress. Unless you’ve developed strong powers of concentration, of mindfulness, because otherwise there’s a feeling of being threatened by the stress, threatened by the pain. And all you can think about is what to do to get rid of it before you’ve understood it. And that’s not going to work. So this is why it’s important that you develop the qualities of the path. You may say, “I prefer to go straight for wisdom. I don’t want to bother with this virtue and concentration stuff.” But it doesn’t work that way. For wisdom to cleanse the mind of its defilements, it has to be based on good, solid concentration. For concentration to lead to wisdom, it has to be based on the precepts, on virtue. So when you accept that fact and practice in line with it, that’s when you’re practicing rightly, practicing well, when you’re practicing straightforwardly. So as you’re sitting here focused on the breath, you may have an urge to think about something else. But you realize that urge is not going to put an end to suffering, and it’s not going to develop the qualities you need to develop. You’ve got to get your duties straight here. You’re trying to develop mindfulness, develop concentration. There’s a story they tell of a famous meditation monk in Bangkok, Chokhun Noh. One night he was doing walking meditation outside of his hut, and this young monk in the monastery was troubled with worries. He came running up to Chokhun Noh and said, “I can’t stop. My mind is just worried. I’m worried. I’m worried.” Chokhun Noh took one look at him and said, “Well, you’re doing the wrong duty.” He turned around and walked into his hut. Fortunately, the young monk had studied the Four Noble Truths and studied the duties. So when he heard the word “duty,” he immediately realized that he’s been developing his defilements, developing the cause of suffering. That’s not what you do with it. You’re supposed to let that go. What you develop is your mindfulness and concentration. Realize that even though there may be worries in your mind, there are also good qualities in the mind as well. You want to ferret those out and develop those. Because when the Buddha taught, the path is not the sort of thing where you have to start from scratch. It’s not like we don’t have any wisdom or any virtue or any concentration. We have these things to some extent. It’s simply a case of bringing them out and making them stronger, honoring them, respecting them. But these are good, useful qualities in the mind. They’re Noble Truths. So that’s still part of the mind that’s not involved in other things. Even though there may be worries going on, there will be part of your mind that’s not involved. It simply knows. You want to ferret that out and then give it a good, solid place to stay. We focus on the breath because the breath is always there. As long as you’re alive and have a body, there’s going to be a breath. The breath is what helps anchor you in the present moment. When you’re with the breath, you know you’re in the present because you’re not watching a past breath and you’re not watching a future breath. You’re watching the breath right now. That helps to strengthen the qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and concentration. It puts the mind in a position where it can see things clearly for what they are so that you can perform all the other duties of the path, the Four Noble Truths. In other words, once your mind is solid enough, you can actually look at stress and suffering for the purpose of understanding them, because you don’t feel threatened by them. You know you have a safe place to stand. You can watch them and you can understand how the mind misunderstands things so that it gets overwhelmed by the pain, overwhelmed by the suffering. But it doesn’t have to be that way, because you see that it comes from a cause, and the cause is arbitrary. It’s something that can arise, but it’s also something that doesn’t have to arise. So you attack the problem at the cause, when you see the craving, when you see the ignorance creating the stress and suffering, you’ve got to let it go. This is going to mean letting go of a lot of things you’ve been holding to very dearly, things that you’ve identified with. In other words, your sense of who you are is going to have to change. You’re going to have to let go of burdens you’ve been carrying. It’s like a person who’s carrying a sack of rice around. He’s got so used to the sack being there that it’s his sack. It’s part of him. But he doesn’t realize the reason his back is bent and the reason his back hurts is because he’s got the sack of rice on top of it. He’s got to stop and look at it and realize, “Oh, this sack is not me. It’s not necessarily mine. I don’t have to carry it around.” And when you realize you don’t have to carry it around, why would you carry it around? You drop it. Put it down. It becomes a different person. This is how you become an owner of the Dhamma. In other words, that samicchipanno, when you practice as an owner, to own the Dhamma, to have it as yours, you have to become a different person. But it’s largely a question of letting go, developing the good qualities in the mind and letting go of the unskillful ones. Often it’s best not to think about who you are, but simply if this particular quality is developed, where is it going to lead? The ones that lead to more mindfulness and concentration, those are the qualities you want to develop. When greed, anger, and delusion come up, no matter how much you may like them or regard them as your friends, you’ve got to realize, “These things are going to harm me. They’re going to cause harm down the line, so you let them come.” This is how you change. You don’t think about, “I’ve got to change myself.” You take things apart in terms of this quality appearing in the mind right now. What should be done with it? It’s not a matter simply of noting, noting, noting, or whatever. You’ve got to figure out which category it belongs to in terms of the four noble truths, and then you can figure out the duty appropriate to it. So this is how you make the triple journey. You make the gem complete in your heart. You develop the qualities of the Buddha—wisdom, compassion, purity. You follow his Dhamma and you develop the qualities of the Sangha in your heart as well, practicing well and rightly, practicing straightforwardly, systematically, for the sake of knowledge, and practicing as an owner of the Dhamma masterfully. It was on this night over 2,500 years ago that the triple gem became complete on the outer level, and it’s up to each of us to practice so that it can become complete within us as well. Other people may not know about that, but you know, and that’s important. It’s in this way that you also become part of a refuge for other people. You become part of the noble Sangha. How many times do you hear Theravada being criticized for being selfish, just practicing for yourself? But you don’t. As you practice, you become part of the noble Sangha, and you’re a refuge for others as well. It keeps the refuge alive in the world. As the Buddha once said, “As long as the monks practice rightly, the world will be not empty of our odds.” You form a refuge for the world. So whether you’re a monk or not, as long as you’re practicing rightly, you keep the possibility of refuge alive. That’s what helps keep the wheel of Dhamma continuing to move.

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