The Middle Way

July 7, 2009

Tonight’s the Sangha Bhuja, the night where we pay homage to the Buddha in commemoration of what happened on the full moon in July, two months after he gained awakening. For the first seven weeks after his awakening, he sat under the Bodhichitta tree or stayed in the area of the Bodhi tree, experiencing the bliss of release. He thought about teaching, and the story goes that at first he was discouraged, seeing how subtle and difficult the attainment he attained was, how difficult it would be to teach it to others. Then the Brahma Sampadhi, fearing that the Buddha would not teach, appeared before him and got down on one knee and asked him to teach, saying that there are those with little dust in their eyes. So the Buddha surveyed the world with his Buddha, and he saw that that was true. The next question was, who would he teach first? He thought first of the two teachers he had studied with, but then he realized that they had recently died. Then he thought of the five brethren who had attended to him. During his period of austerities, they were now in Issipatana, which is now the city of Benares. So he walked all the way from Bodhgaya to Benares. It’s quite a ways. When he arrived, he told them that he’d found the Deathless, he’d found the happiness he’d been looking for. At first, they didn’t believe him because they had seen him give up his austerities and begin to eat food again. They thought he had fallen back into self-indulgence, but he said, “No, that’s not the case.” He repeated his claim that he’d found the Deathless. He would teach it to them, and if they practiced and learned what he taught, they could find it too. Still, they didn’t believe him until finally he said, “Look, have you ever heard me make this claim before?” Then they realized that he’d been a very honest and straightforward person. So they were more inclined to listen to him. So he sat down and he taught them. He started by talking about the middle way between two extremes, the extremes of self-indulgence and the extremes of self-torment. In other words, taking sensual pleasure as a good in and of itself, or taking pain as a good in and of itself. These are the two extremes by which most people live. For most of us, the pain is not a good in and of itself. But there are times when, after we’ve been going overboard in sensual pleasures, we decide to purge ourselves by inflicting pain on ourselves. You see, people who starve themselves undergo all sorts of austerities in hopes that they can cleanse themselves of that sense of being befouled by their sensual pleasures. But the Buddha said both extremes are non-noble. The noble path lies in the middle way. Now, the middle way is not sort of halfway between indulgence and torture, in other words, a kind of middling level of pain and pleasure. It lies outside them. It’s able to see pain and pleasure, and it’s able to see them as tools, not as ends in and of themselves, but as something you can use. Or you can think of it as the hub of a wheel, and the mind tends to circle around, first pleasure, then pain, first going for pleasure, then going for pain. And the middle way lies right at that still point in the middle of the hub that doesn’t cycle around after these things. In other words, we use pleasure, not the pleasure of sensuality, but the pleasure of the concentrated mind. And then we investigate pain from that perspective so that we can understand it. It’s only when you understand it that you see what causes it. This is an important aspect of insight. It’s not just seeing that there’s pain. You have to see where the cause is. What are you doing that’s creating unnecessary suffering right now? You see that there are movements in the mind, decisions you’re making right now, that take the raw material of the present moment and turn it into pain, turn it into suffering. So then you look to see how you can stop doing that. All this comes under right view, which is the first factor of the path. And this is the factor that the Buddha explained most completely that night, after going through a list of the different factors of this middle way. Right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. He focused on right view, explaining exactly what is the concentration of the mind. What kind of suffering is he talking about here? Specifically, he was talking about the suffering that comes from craving, from clinging to the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness. All the different kinds of suffering in the world that really weigh on the mind come from clinging to any one of these five aggregates or any combination of them. So when you see the suffering simply as that, an example of clinging, an example of the aggregates, it takes away a lot of the appeal. Because there is an appeal in suffering. We tend to sometimes romanticize our sufferings, cling to them as part of our identity. For a lot of people, the way they suffer is who they are. And when you can see it however the aggregates of the suffering is just a heap of these things and it’s your clinging, it’s not something that has unjustly been imposed on you from outside, it loses a lot of its appeal. Then you’re more inclined to be willing to let go. You want to see, well, how do you let go? You look and see what’s causing it. There’s ignorance and there’s craving. That’s when the suffering loses its appeal. When the objects that cause suffering lose their appeal, then it’s a lot easier to let go of the craving. But you’ve got to put the mind in the right place to see this. That’s what the path is all about. It starts with the right view, but it doesn’t just end with the right view. You see that your actions play a huge role in giving rise to suffering, and so you have to resolve to act in ways that are skillful. Then you actually follow through in terms of your speech, your action, your livelihood. Then you start focusing more directly on the mind, because the mind is where all these actions come from. You look at the qualities of the mind. You see if there are any unskillful qualities, you generate the desire to get rid of them. As for skillful qualities, you generate the desire to give rise to them. Once they’re there, you try to develop them. So this gets you more firmly focused on the mind. What’s happening right here, right now? You realize it’s what you’re doing right here, right now, that takes the raw material of the senses and turns it into suffering. So you try to anchor your mind right here, right now. This is why the Buddha has you develop mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind states, or mental qualities in and of themselves as they’re present, so you can watch them. But it’s also about getting the mind still. In some places, it’s taught that by simply observing the body and observing the mind, there’s insight in and of itself. Well, to begin with, there has to be concentration. These frames of reference, or the establishings of mindfulness, are the topics, or the themes, of concentration. You’ve got to get the mind anchored so it can watch things consistently. It’s only when you watch things consistently that you can see where the causes are connected to the effects. If you stay focused skillfully, then it gives rise to a sense of ease, well-being, fullness, that you’re not pushing things in one direction or squeezing things in another. You just want to be right there. You want to be secluded from unskillful qualities with a sense of ease and refreshment. That’s the beginning of right concentration. It gives you the energy you need. It gives you the nourishment you need in order to look at things more carefully. Because a lot of the lessons of discernment are to see how you’ve been foolish, how you’ve been unskillful, things we don’t like to see. All too often, we want to push the responsibility for our sufferings off on somebody else. It’s because of this person or that person or this group or that group. But as the Buddha points out, the ignorance and the craving, where do they come from? They come from within your own mind. You can’t blame anybody else. But it’s not a question of blame; it’s simply noticing where the responsibility lies and learning how to be more skillful. But to accept that responsibility requires that the mind be in a state of well-being, nourishment, stability, and not feeling threatened by these lessons. As Ajahn Suwat would often point out, once the mind really gets stable, still with that sense of well-being, then the idea of running after the kind of pleasures you used to get out of greed, aversion, and delusion just loses their appeal. You can see that it’s a pointless effort. It just puts you in the right frame of mind to look in to see exactly where the clean comes from, how it starts, and how you can let it go. How you are attached to your cravings, how you’re attached to all these other things that lead to suffering. And as they begin to lose their appeal, there’s a strong sense of dispassion that leads to no longer wanting to create that stress, that suffering. Because, you see, that’s what it is. You saw it as something else. You saw it as attractive. You saw it as appealing. You identified with it. This was your identity or something that belonged to you that you really held on to. But once it loses its appeal, you no longer hold on to it. You no longer give rise to that suffering that leads to sensation and so on, to release. These are the factors of the path that the Buddha taught that night. So tonight, as we gather here, we pay homage to the fact that the Buddha, through this teaching, was able to lead others to awakening. Gondanya, one of the five brethren, gained the Dhamma by seeing that all that is subject to origination is subject to cessation. It’s not just seeing that whatever arises passes away. Whatever has a cause, whatever arises based on a cause, when you remove the cause, it ceases. So it’s not just seeing arising and passing away. It’s seeing the causal connection, and then getting the mind to a place that lies outside of those causal connections. That’s the only place where this Dhamma-I would see things in those terms. As I say, someone who is reached the stream, as Gondanya did that night, has also seen the deathless. And it’s from that perspective that you look back and say, “Everything else arises and passes away. Everything else is caused, and anything that’s caused ceases.” Because you’ve seen its cessation. That’s the only way you’re going to reach the deathless, realize the deathless. This event is what proved that the Buddha was not just a private Buddha awakening for himself, but that he could actually formulate the Dhamma in such a way that other people could gain awakening as well. It was a momentous night. It’s said that there was an earthquake that went from the earth all the way up to the Brahma worlds. So tonight, we honor that night. We honor that event through our homage. As the Buddha said, there are two kinds of homage. There’s homage of material things, as we did with the flowers, candles, and incense just now, walking around, keeping our right to the Buddha image as a way of showing respect, the incense representing virtue, the flowers, concentration, and the candles, discernment. As you may have noticed, it was a breeze tonight, and the candles could blow out very easily. Our discernment has a way of blowing out very easily, too, as the winds of the world keep buffeting it. So every night, the full moon night of July, every time this night comes around, we try to remind ourselves. So we have to maintain that candle of discernment, that light of discernment, in spite of the winds of the world. We don’t remind ourselves of this. It blows out and it stays out. So that’s the symbolism of homage through material things. But then there’s homage through the practice, like we’re doing right now, concentrating the mind on the breath, trying to give rise to right mindfulness and right concentration. This, the Buddha said, is genuine homage. This is why he taught to begin with. He didn’t want candles and incense. He wanted to lead others to the same Dhamma that he had realized as well. So, as we practice, we’re showing respect for his intentions. One way of thinking about this night is to say that this is the night when Buddhism began as a religion. Before, there was the Dhamma, but there was no religion. But when the Buddha opened his mouth and started teaching the Dhamma, that was the beginning of the Dhamma as a religion. So as we practice, we keep that religion alive. The Dhamma will always be here in the world, but it takes people to practice in order to keep the teaching alive so that we can benefit from it and others can see us benefiting and they’ll want to practice as well. This is how that Dhamma wheel keeps rolling.

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