Magha Puja Showing Respect with the Practice

February 28, 2010

Now that we’ve shown respect with candles, flowers, and incense, let’s show respect with a practice. The Buddha once said this is the true way of showing respect to him, which is to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. In other words, practice training the mind so it gains a state of dispassion for the things that lead to suffering, and finds a true happiness. That’s why the Buddha taught to spend all those years looking for the Dhamma, not only for his own sake, but also so that other people could gain release from suffering as well. So as we practice, we’re following the Dhamma following in line with his intention. Tonight’s Magha Puja is the night of the full moon in late February. Sometimes it’s early March. They say that on this date, in the very first year of his teaching career, 1,250 of his monk disciples all came for a meeting. There hadn’t been any word sent out that they were going to meet, but everybody came spontaneously. On that afternoon, the Buddha taught them what’s called the awadha patimokkha. It was an exhortation on the basic principles of the teaching. Of course, all of his listeners had already attained awakening, so for their own sake there was no need to hear the teaching again. But the Buddha was going to send them out to teach others. In many cases, a lot of these people had had their experience of awakening simply on listening to one Dhamma talk. So he gave a talk on the basic principles, beginning with very simple ones about learning patience, learning endurance, not harming people with your actions, not harming people with your words, all the way up to what the Buddha called being devoted to the heightened mind, in other words, lifting the mind above its surroundings so that it’s not subject to them. It’s not dependent on them. So it has its freedom. And it can find that happiness. It doesn’t have to depend on conditions. So that’s the teaching. That’s the practice that we’re doing right now. The practice of concentration is called heightening the mind. You’re letting go of all your sensual concerns. You’re trying to find a sense of peace, a sense of well-being, that comes simply from having the mind settled inside. Focus on the breath. Know when it’s coming in, know when it’s going out. That’s called focusing on form, in other words, the way you feel the body from within. Allow it to be comfortable, because after all, the mind will not stay if it’s not comfortable. And as you find that you can depend more and more on this sense of feeling centered, it gives you a position where you’re able to look around at your other ways of finding happiness, other ways of looking for happiness, and you’ve got a point of comparison. Are they as good as this? Are they as harmless as this? Or are you taking something from other people? Or is the mind becoming intoxicated? Is that awareness becoming blurred with its happiness? Then you’ve got this clear state of mind in the present moment as your point of comparison. So you can begin to measure which kinds of happiness are worth the struggle and worth the search, and which ones are not. As the Buddha said, if you don’t have a sense of happiness that comes from this centered mind, it’s going to be impossible to really give up your sensual pleasures. You may be able to stay away from them for a while, but you haven’t really cut your attachment to them. Eventually, the mind will find its way back to them. So you’ve got to develop a sense of well-being inside. And you take refuge here. The idea of taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha is not something quaint and ancient. It really refers to our choices. Are you going to look for your happiness in the example of other people? Are you going to look for your happiness in the example of the Buddha and his disciples? Because it does involve making choices. This is something we don’t like to think about. There was an article I read recently that said this is the problem with religion in America nowadays. We want religion without sacrifice. We want to have our cake and eat it, too. But it doesn’t work that way. You look for happiness in one way and you’re missing out on a lot of other forms of happiness. It’s not just that it’s a choice between happiness and suffering. It’s a choice between levels of happiness. And you have to ask yourself, “Who do you depend on? Who do you trust as an example?” And until you’ve found the true happiness that lies inside, there’s going to be an element of uncertainty. You wonder if you’re up to it, or if what the Buddha taught really was true. And so it’s during that period when you really need to take refuge in the example of the Buddha. He gave a noble example, his noble disciples, the monks and the nuns and the laymen and the laywomen who followed his teachings. They become our community. We take refuge in them, that we really can trust them. Because you look at their example, it really is noble. Looking for happiness in a way that is harmless. Looking for happiness in a way that doesn’t go running around, hoping to depend on somebody’s outside help, aside from help in showing you how you can train your own mind. This is where you find your true refuge, in developing their qualities in your mind. The qualities of mindfulness, the qualities of alertness, ardency, patience, endurance, concentration, discernment. As these qualities get stronger and stronger in the mind, you find that you really can take refuge in them. They provide you with a solid foundation. They lift your mind above your ordinary concerns. Lift it above your having to depend on material gain, status, praise, pleasures. The mind attains a state where it’s more and more independent, more and more solid, more and more able to rely on itself. And at this point, not only do you develop a more certain refuge, a more solid refuge inside, but when that refuge gets really solidified to the point where you have no more doubts about it, because your faith and conviction in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha has been confirmed, that these teachings, these practices, really do lead to a deathless suffering, then you become a refuge for others. This is a refuge that keeps gathering more and more people into it. Anyone who sees the need to find a way out of suffering has finally come to the mature realization that you can’t do it by depending on other people. You can learn from them. You can follow their guidance. You can follow their example. But ultimately it comes from sitting down and really taking on your defilements, taking on your weaknesses, taking on your doubts, by strengthening the skillful qualities in your mind. And as those are strengthened, you find you really can depend more and more on them. So the reason we have days like this is to remind ourselves that there are people in the past who followed the Buddha’s teachings and were able to find true happiness. And that’s a continuing line. And John Suwat once said that when people attain to arahantship, they realize that it’s an unbroken line. There have always been arahants in the world, ever since the time of the Buddha. One of the principles that the Buddha teaches is developing a healthy form of conceit, in the sense that realizing that they were human beings, they started out with lots of defilements, just like us. But they were able to overcome those defilements and those weaknesses by developing skillful qualities, which exist in potential form within us as well. As the Buddha said, “They can do it, so can I.” He has you think that thought as a way of strengthening your practice. Once you have doubts about whether you can do this or not, remind yourself of what you need. The mind would talk about this many times. What do you need to practice? You’ve got a breath. You’ve got a body. You’ve got a mind that’s aware. That’s all you need. From that point on, it’s simply learning how to keep your own true best interest in mind and not be a traitor to your desire for true happiness. And so we take comfort, we take refuge in the example of those who’ve gone before us. And as we follow in their footsteps, we become part of that community. First, the community of people who are joined in their respect for these ideals. And ultimately, joining the community of those who’ve found that these ideals are not just empty ideas. There really is something genuine and true here that you can confirm for yourself. So in paying respect to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha in the way that the Buddha recommended, by practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, we’re able to realize that the goal that he had in teaching the Dhamma was that people would benefit from it. People would find that there really is a true happiness. And as we practice, this is one way of keeping this teaching alive in the world.

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