In Line with the Dhamma

April 5, 2010

Today’s the eighth anniversary of Ajahn Suet’s passing away. And so it’s a special day of thinking of his teachings. Although the fact of the matter is that every day having this monastery here, is a reminder that Ajahn Suet can’t help but think of him with gratitude. Without his example, without his presence, we wouldn’t have this place here, we wouldn’t have this opportunity to practice. So the best way of showing our gratitude is to dedicate ourselves to the practice even more. In the forest tradition, people come to the Ajahns and occasionally say, “How can I ever repay you for what you’ve taught?” And the response is always by setting your heart on the practice, being really intent. So here’s an opportunity to be fully intent on the practice. You don’t have to mix it with anything else. It’s just you sitting right here with your breath, with your body, to develop the mind. That’s the word bhavana, or citta bhavana. It means just that—developing the mind, developing the heart, developing good qualities in the mind. You want to bring mindfulness and alertness to what you’re doing. For instance, if you’re focusing on the breath, do your best to keep the breath in mind each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, and be alert to watch what’s happening both in the breath and in the mind. If you’re going to use the word bhutto as your meditation object, really be intent on keeping bhutto in mind. Don’t forget it. And being alert to watching to see if the mind is really with your word, or if it’s beginning to wander off, or if it’s getting mechanical. As the Ajahn Suet used to say, “We’re doing this with an attitude of respect, a sense of confidence and inspiration that what we’re doing here is something important.” Because after all, what are you doing here? You’re working directly with your own mind. The awareness that’s right here, right now. And you want to put your mind in a good shape, because after all, the mind is what shapes your life. And if your mind is in bad shape, your life is going to come out in bad shape as well. It’s like a mold for a Buddha image. If the mold is bad, then the image that comes out is going to be bad. So you want to bring good qualities to the practice. Give it your full attention, give it your full respect. Because we’re working here on something that’s worthy of respect, your desire for true happiness. Everybody wants happiness. What’s worthy of respect? It’s the desire for true happiness, that happiness that harms nobody. It doesn’t harm you, it doesn’t harm other people. And at the same time, it stays with you. It doesn’t turn into something else. It doesn’t disappoint you down the line. And where are you going to find it if not in your own mind? You look outside. Sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations. These things all change. And you work hard to carve out some happiness there, and you find it just dissolving away. And often the things you do in order to gain happiness of that sort leave you with some bad karma, some bad memories of things that you did and said that were not the most noble, not the most admirable. So there you are, both with the happiness that disappointed you and with the disappointment of knowing that you did something unskillful to get it to begin with. A double disappointment. So the only real happiness is the happiness that comes from within. Now you look at your own mind and you may wonder how you’re going to find anything lasting in here, because your thought’s even more fleeting than anything you could see in your body. But the mind has a potential that the body doesn’t have. You can hold on to one thing in the mind and stick with it. But it’s a talent, it’s a skill that you have to develop. Now whether it comes easily or it doesn’t come easily, it’s important that you develop it. Because practicing the Dhamma is not like going to school. In school they try to figure out where you’re already talented, where you already have an interest, and they’ll direct you in that direction, steer you in that direction. And as for things you’re not particularly good at, well, they just tend to put those aside. But with the meditation, whether you’re good at it easily or it comes hard, that’s not the issue. You’ve got to work on it. Because if you don’t work on your own mind, who’s going to work on it for you? And if you don’t do it now, when is it going to get done? It doesn’t get easier as you get older. It’s not the case that old people find it easier to practice the Dhamma. They start getting forgetful. They have illnesses in their body, weaknesses in their bodies. So things don’t get easier with the passage of time. So you’ve got to ask yourself, “Are you serious about being happy?” It may sound strange, “serious about being happy.” Serious here doesn’t mean grim. It just means, “Do you really want it with all your heart and all your mind? And are you going to use your intelligence?” So work on this prospect of trying to find true happiness. If you don’t take your happiness seriously, especially true happiness, what are you going to take seriously? And if you don’t devote your energies and attention to this, where are you going to devote them? So this is how you show respect for things that are worthy of respect. And we bow down to the Buddha. This is how he used his life. He had all kinds of opportunities. He was a prince, lots of power, lots of wealth, all the sensual pleasures you could imagine. But he realized that that was not a worthwhile life. How many people do we see nowadays who, in that position, would come to that same conclusion? He was an exceptional person because he had respect for what was worthy of genuine respect. And he was sincere in following it through. Whatever needed to be done in order to find true happiness, he was willing to do it. And he experimented with all kinds of extreme austerities under the impression that that might be the way. Well, it wasn’t the way. And then he had to let go of the pride that came with that kind of practice so he could find another practice. He finally came to the middle way. The Eightfold Path is the middle way between sensual indulgence and self-torment. He found that this really worked. It required developing all kinds of good qualities in the mind—mindfulness, concentration, discernment, the virtue of right speech, right action, right livelihood. In other words, he developed three qualities all in all—wisdom, purity, and compassion. Wisdom in realizing what’s really important, purity in making sure that his actions were not harmful to himself or to anyone else, and compassion in that desire to aim at a happiness that wasn’t harmful. The purity is what, basically, was carrying through that compassionate desire. So these are the qualities we bow down to in the Buddha. And you want to develop them in yourself. Bow down to them in your own mind, bowing down to them in somebody outside. That’s not true respect. True respect is realizing you’ve got to work to develop them in yourself. As the Buddha said, true respect for the Buddha is practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. Whatever’s needed to develop wisdom, whatever’s needed to develop compassion and purity—purity meaning that you look at your actions and see what you actually accomplish with them. Is there anybody you harm? And if you see that there’s any harm, you’ve got to be honest about it. Because all too often we look at our actions and we close our eyes to the harm that we do to ourselves or do to other people. And there’s no way we’re going to learn that way. The Buddha doesn’t expect us to do that. He doesn’t expect us to be perfect. He knows we’re going to make mistakes. He says, “Well, this is how you learn from your mistakes. You look at them, then you make up your mind that you’re not going to repeat them. You go and talk them over with somebody else who’s on the path to get their advice. You don’t have to keep reinventing the Dhamma wheel every time you make a mistake.” In this way, your thoughts, your words, and your deeds get purified. You get more and more skillful in not harming anybody, and at the same time developing a happiness. First the happiness that comes from harmlessness, and then the happiness that goes even deeper as you develop those good qualities in the mind. Then you realize the happiness that comes with being more mindful, being more alert, being more careful in your actions. This is how you show your true respect for the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha, as you try to take their qualities and develop them in your own mind. That way you benefit, which was part of the Buddha’s intention for teaching. He wanted people to benefit from his teachings. He didn’t simply want them to come to him with flowers and incense and say, “Oh, what a wonderful person you are.” He didn’t do anything just for ceremony. It was all genuine. His teachings all came straight from the heart. He wants you to take them to heart. This is how we show our gratitude and respect for him, sitting here practicing. And then we get up from sitting here practicing, continuing to practice as we go through our lives. We try to be careful at all times in what we do, looking at our motivation, making sure our motivation is harmless, looking at what we’re actually doing, and then looking at the results. This is where your attention should be focused. I know some people say, “It’s impossible. How can you look at your motivation all the time?” I had someone just say that this morning. The question is, if you’re not looking at your motivation, what are you looking at? Your motivation, your intentions, those are the things that shape your life. And if you’re not clear about them, how do you know what’s actually shaping your life here? Because there are a lot of intentions that are subterranean. They go below the radar. You need to develop more mindfulness and alertness to bring them up to the light of day. So these are the things that are worthy of respect. Your desire for true happiness, a happiness that doesn’t harm anyone, and a happiness that lasts. We respect the Buddha because he respected that desire in himself to the point where he was able to actually realize it, to realize what true happiness was. This is why Lumpur kept repeating over and over again, “Come to the practice with an attitude of respect, because what we’re doing here is important work. And don’t put it off, because we don’t know how much time we have left.” This is another reason why we commemorate the anniversary of his death. There’s a tradition in Thailand that once somebody has died, you don’t commemorate their birthday anymore, you commemorate their death day. Because that’s one of the lessons of their lives. No matter how good you are, no matter how wonderful you are, you’re going to die at some point, and you don’t know when it’s going to be. We don’t like to think about it because it often gets us depressed, but that’s not why the Buddha had us think about death. He wants us to think about death because it makes us heedful, realizing that we have only a limited amount of time and we don’t know how much time that is. So you make the most of it right now. And making the most of it doesn’t mean you try to stuff it up with a lot of pleasure. It means you try to build the causes for true happiness as much as you can. If death comes, well, you hope that you can pick up the threads the next time, in the next life. But if you don’t create the threads now, there’ll be nothing to pick up. As he said, the basis for all skillfulness is this attitude of heedfulness. So even though it just may be a custom to commemorate a death like this, we want to make the most of the custom as a spur to further heedfulness. That’s how we show our gratitude and respect. For the good people who have gone before us.

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