Asalha Puja

July 26, 2010

What we did just now is called amissa bhujah, paying homage with material things, like candles, incense, flowers, which symbolize important parts of the Buddha’s teaching. The incense symbolizes virtue, the flowers, concentration, and the light of the candle. The candle symbolizes discernment. We carry them as we walk around in a circle, keeping our right side to the Buddha image. That’s a traditional attitude of respect. It’s a lovely gesture, but as the Buddha said, true respect for him, or true homage to the Buddha, is in the practice, when you practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. So that’s the next step. Instead of just holding the flowers, representing concentration, we actually try to develop concentration in the mind. Instead of just holding the candles, we try to develop discernment in the mind. This is the kind of homage the Buddha wanted. After all, he spent all those many, many aeons developing the perfections to become a Buddha, and it wasn’t because he wanted flowers and incense and candles. He wanted to develop the skill that could lead beyond all stress and suffering, so that not only he could benefit from it, but other people could benefit as well. And so, as we practice, we’re acting in line with his intention. It’s simply a matter of trying to bring our practice in line with the Dhamma, the truth of the path. Working on qualities, we’re developing qualities of mind that allow us to understand why there is suffering and what can be done to put an end to it. That is what he announced on the evening of his first Dhamma talk, “Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion.” This was the main topic he talked about. The path that leads to the end of suffering. He said sensual indulgence doesn’t lead that way. Self-torment doesn’t lead that way. Both of them lead to more suffering, actually. It’s the middle way. Middle not in the sense that it’s halfway between them, but it lies outside of the continuum. It’s not a middling, kind of neutral place. It’s a place where we’re not working directly for the sake of sensual happiness, and we’re not working to torment ourselves as much as possible. We’re trying to use stress and suffering so that we can understand it. We’re trying to use the pleasure of a concentrated mind so that it helps us to understand stress and suffering even more. People have said that the Buddha’s emphasis on stress and suffering is pessimistic, but that’s not the case. He focused on these things because he had a cure, and he talked openly about them because he had a cure. He’s like a doctor who knows that he has a cure for cancer, so he’s going to talk very openly about cancer. There’s nothing pessimistic about his teachings at all. He’s saying that through human effort, you can put an end to suffering. As the Buddha said, before he had found this path, he looked around and looked at the world, and all he could see was like a puddle, he said, where the water was drying up and there were just lots of fish left in there struggling, fighting with one another to get what little water’s left, but the water’s going to dry away. He said it looked hopeless, it looked dismaying. But then he looked inside and he said, “Well, the real arrow here, the real cause of suffering, is right there in the heart.” So this is where his teachings focus, in the heart, because that’s where the cause is, and also the potential. The potential for putting an end to the cause of suffering is right here in the heart as well. And so it’s looking by inward that the Buddha found the way out. So as you look into the mind, realize that there’s something in here that is a passageway out of suffering. Your mind may seem like a turmoil, not willing to settle down, thinking about all kinds of things. But the Buddha said, “Don’t get discouraged. Look inside. Look deeper.” See those events in the mind simply as events. Don’t get pulled off into thinking that you’re thinking about something important. It’s just a thought. Whatever the distractions, it’s just a thought. And stay with the breath, because regardless of where you are, regardless of how much thinking is going on in the mind, the breath is always here. Thinking doesn’t do away with the breath. In fact, if the breath stopped, you wouldn’t have any thinking at all. So the fact that there’s thinking going on means there’s a breath in here someplace. So keep looking deeper and deeper inside. Then your intention to look deeper becomes part of the path. When the Buddha had been practicing, he was not yet Buddha. He was still just the Bodhisatta. After all those many years of self-torment, he realized finally that that was not the way. He tried every other way that was available to him at the time. So he thought, “Well, might there be something else?” He was ready to think outside the box at this point. And he remembered that time when he was a young man, or probably a child. He knows how old he was, but when he was younger and his father was plowing and he was sitting under a tree. His mind entered the first jhana, and the question came to him, “Could this be the way out?” And the consciousness arose in the mind, “Yes, this is the way out.” “So why am I afraid of that pleasure, the pleasure of concentration? Is there anything blameworthy about it?” “No.” “Anything unskillful?” “No. There’s nothing to be afraid of.” And so he devoted himself to testing that possibility. He would notice that he was suffering, that things were not working out in his life, so he would stop and ask, “What’s wrong? What am I doing that’s creating this problem?” Then he would come up with an idea, come up with a possibility, and then he would test it. He would really test it. He was sincere and earnest in his test. Or, as he would say, “I don’t know what I’m doing. I’m ardent, resolute, and heedful,” in really putting this possibility to the test. It was that way that he found it. He ran into many blind alleys all those years spent with the self-torment, for a hard-earned lesson that that was not the way. But it was in sincerity, it was quest. That eventually led him to the way out. But it’s important to notice that the first factor of the path that he discovered was what’s usually listed as the last, right concentration. That’s the heart of the path. As the Buddha said, the other factors are its requisites, things that help it along. So as we’re focusing on getting the mind concentrated right here, we’re working at the heart of the path. At the moment our speech is quiet, so we’re not engaging in wrong speech. Our actions are quiet, our livelihood is quiet. It’s just a matter of focusing on the mind. So if you want to pay homage to the Buddha, or the Dhamma, or the Sangha, focus your efforts right here. If you want to test the Buddha’s teachings, you focus your efforts right here. It’s not a matter of listening to them and saying, “Gee, that sounds nice,” or going by your gut reaction. Because when we’re seeing them, we let our gut take over. It can cause a lot of problems. If you sincerely want to put the Buddha’s teachings to a test, this is what you’re doing. You try to develop as much concentration and mindfulness as possible. It’s not the case that if it for some reason works out but the Buddha’s teachings don’t work, that you’ve lost anything. By developing mindfulness and concentration, you’ve developed some very important skills. We have the guarantee from all the members of the Sangha, from the very first member, Anjan Gondalya, on this night, many, many years back. He became the Buddha’s first witness that, yes, this path does work, does lead to the deathless, the ultimate happiness. So we have his word for it as well. But you want to add your word, too. So stay focused right here, right at the breath, right where the body and mind meet at the breath. You’re paying homage not only to the Buddha, but also to your own desire for true happiness. This is why we bow down to the Buddha, because he has us respect things within ourselves that are really worthy of respect. Because in the pursuit of true happiness, you develop good qualities of mind, honorable qualities of mind. The pursuit of happiness doesn’t simply mean hedonism or running after sensual pleasures. True happiness requires that you develop compassion, wisdom, purity. All the good qualities of mind come together right here. So this is why they say that the Buddha’s teaching is not only good in the end, but it’s good in the beginning, good in the middle, all the way through. So even if you’ve just started on the path or are struggling to stay on the path, you’re engaged in something that’s really good and worthy of respect.

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