All-around Practice

July 15, 2011

Tonight’s the full moon in Assalaha, which was the day on which the Buddha gave his first sermon after gaining awakening. We mark this date every year in the way we did just now. Statements in praise of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha in Assalaha, with flowers, candles, and incense. That’s called a misabhujja, showing homage with material things. And it’s a nice custom. Light up the candles, light up the full moon, light up the flowers, light up the incense, the last light of the sunset off in the west. It makes you think about time. Each year we don’t get younger, we get older. So it’s good to reflect on your life. You realize that you have to do more than just pay homage with material things. The Buddha himself said as much. In the time of his passing, the night he was about to pass away, he commented to the monks that the devas were showing homage with heavenly flowers, and heavenly incense, and heavenly music. He said even that, though, was not the proper way of showing homage to the Buddha. The proper way is to show homage to the practice. After all, that’s why the Buddha found awakening to begin with. That’s why he taught. It wasn’t so he’d get flowers and incense from people. He became awakened because he wanted to find a way out of suffering. He taught people because he wanted to show that way to them, so they could practice and find the way out of suffering as well. So as we’re practicing, we’re actually acting in line with his intention. This is a case where his intention and our best interests come together. And the light of the sunset reminds us that time passes, passes, passes. So we have to practice now. We can’t wait until some further date down the line. Conditions may not be perfect, but we practice as best we can. So it’s good to stop and think about what we’re commemorating today. It’s good to give more energy to our practice. The Buddha had to work on his own to find awakening. He got support from other people, but the path itself was something that was totally uncharted. And through trial and error, he had to find the path on his own. Once he had found it, he had to do it again. In the night of his awakening, he sat for the next seven weeks, experiencing the bliss of release. And if I think about the year we’ve been through, from the time we saw Kapucha, it’s almost two months ago, basically eight weeks ago. So I meant seven weeks he was experiencing the bliss of release. And then he started thinking about whether to teach or not. Then at first he despaired, because the dhamma he had found was so subtle, so hard to find, and it went so much against the grain. The story goes that one of the brahmanas got upset hearing the Buddha might not teach. So he came down and invited him, reminding him that there are those with little dust in their eyes. They will hear the dhamma and they will benefit from it. So the Buddha confirmed that with his knowledge and then decided to teach. That was basically a week ago. Then he surveyed the world and saw that the five brethren whom he had been practicing with were near Benares. So he spent the next week walking there and arrived today. At first they were not inclined to listen to him because, after all, he had left his austerities and had started eating food again. But he kept telling them, “Okay, I found the deathless. I found the way to the deathless. And if you’ll listen to me, you’ll be able to find the deathless as well.” Still, they doubted him until he reminded them, “Have I ever made a claim like this before? I’m not the sort of person who makes empty claims.” They reflected that that was true. So they listened to the dhamma and one of them gained the dhamma-i, in other words, the first taste of the deathless. The talk he gave is called Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion, the concept of the wheel has basically two meanings. One is a symbol of power. They say when a king mounts his wheel, in other words, it means that he’s found power in all directions, can lay claim to power in all directions, asserts his authority in all directions. That’s one of the meanings of the Dhamma Wheel. It’s the authoritative teaching on how to gain awakening. The other meaning of the wheel has to do with the legal and philosophical texts in the time of the Buddha. When you set out a series of variables, say, two terms against three terms or three terms against four terms, and then listed all the permutations of those two sets of variables, that was called a wheel. And there’s a wheel in his Dhamma talk. He starts out first by pointing out that the way he teaches avoids two extremes. The extreme of self. The extreme of torture. And the extreme of sensual indulgence. He uses the term middle path. It’s one of the few places in the whole Kanghara where he actually does use that term. Sometimes it’s misunderstood as meaning something halfway between pleasure and pain, a path that’s okay, not too hard, not too easy, or half pleasure and half pain. That’s not what it really means, though. The path employs a different kind of pleasure from sensual pleasure, the pleasure of concentration. And he uses it as a means to an end. Another factor in the path is right view. In fact, that’s the one factor in the path that he actually explains in the talk, the four noble truths. He lists the four noble truths and the factors of the path, but he doesn’t explain them. The one he does explain is right view. He explains what suffering is, what the cause of suffering is, the fact that you can put an end to it, and then the path of practice that puts an end to it. That’s right view. He’s not saying that life is suffering. Simply, there is suffering, but he has the cure. He’s speaking like a doctor. These are the symptoms, this is the cause. It is possible to put an end to the cause and find health, and the path of practice is the treatment. Then comes the wheel. Each of the four noble truths has three levels of knowledge. The first knowledge is simply knowing what the truth is. The second level is knowing what the duty with regard to the truth is. This is why we have four truths. Because there are four possible duties. The truth of suffering is to be comprehended. The truth of origination is to be abandoned. The truth of cessation is to be realized, and the truth of the path is to be developed. The third level of knowledge is realizing that all those duties have been done. That’s the level of knowledge that comes with awakening. Working on the first two levels. Altogether there are three levels, four noble truths. That means twelve permutations. That’s the wheel. As the Buddha said, once the wheel is complete, you can think of it as all twelve spokes in the wheel are finally in place. That was when he gained true awakening. One of the five brethren, Gondanya, was listening to this and following along. His mind came to concentration. All the factors of the path came together. He gained the first taste of the deathless. It sounds pretty simple, very quick, and we wonder why it was so quick with him and why it was so easy for us. Well, he was ready. All he needed was just a few words to point him in the right direction. It’s like a fruit ripe for the picking. We, however, are not ripe. At least, not as ripe as he was. So we have to work on ripening the qualities that form the path, developing these qualities starting with the right few. You can boil them down to three. There’s virtue, there’s concentration, and there’s discernment. These are the things we have to work on. Notice that the duty with regard to these is to develop them. It’s not that we have to give rise to them out of nothing. We have these qualities to some extent. We have some virtue, some concentration, some discernment. It’s simply a matter of taking the good qualities we have and learning how to foster them so they can strengthen and grow. You look at your precepts. Where are they all around and where are they lacking? One of the four sannyas gives the image of putting a house up and then putting a fence around the house. And if there are big gaping holes in the fence, it’s not going to be able to keep the thieves out. You want a fence that goes all around. So you want your precepts to be all around. You make a promise to yourself. No killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no divisive speech, no harsh speech, no idle chatter. And you try to apply those precepts across the board in every situation. Don’t let them be in any situation in which you’d be willing to break them. That’s when you get the most out of them. Often you’ll hear people trying to find exemptions for this or that and the other one. And if you wanted to, you could find exceptions, but that’s just leaving a big hole in your fence. And often they’ll go to great extremes to say, “Well, there are cases where lying is justified.” They use the extreme cases then to justify lying in less extreme cases. And the same with all the other precepts. It’s not like the Buddha’s laying down a law trying to force you to do this. He’s simply saying, “If you really want to find true happiness, if you really want to put an end to suffering, you have to apply these principles as a promise to yourself across the board.” He’s not forcing it. It’s a cause and effect. It’s going to enforce this. So you look at your precepts, you look at your virtues. Where are they lacking? You try to fill in the lack. Where are they strong? You build on those strengths to fill in the lack. The same principle applies with concentration. We all have concentration to some extent. The concentration needed to read a book, the concentration needed to listen to a talk, the concentration needed to master a skill. But again, our concentration is usually not all around big gaps. For most of us it’s not even a fence, it’s a board here and there. And we’re lucky if the board is standing up. But there’s a quality we do have. So you take the concentration you already have and try to connect it with the next moment of concentration and the next moment of concentration. In the beginning it doesn’t seem like much. You’re here with a breath. And part of the mind says, “So what? Nothing special.” But it’s the continuity that makes it special, the continuity that gives it strength. The connecting of one moment to the next moment, the next moment, the next moment. That’s when you’re pouring water out of a kettle. At first it’s just one little drop, and then another little drop, and then another little drop. But then you tip it over a little bit more, and then it becomes drop, drop, drop, and then it becomes a stream of water. The gaps between the drops disappear. So you’re staying with the breath. Try to stay with the breath all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath, and connect those little spaces between the in-breath and the out-breath. So it’s a continuous stream of awareness, continuous stream of mindfulness. You’re keeping the breath in mind all the time. And that way the little potentials for ease and pleasure and refreshment in the body have a chance to grow. You’re thinking about the breath. You’re evaluating the breath. You’re adjusting it so it feels good all the way in, all the way out. There’s no pinching off the breath energy. There’s no pushing or squeezing. The breath energy can feel full all throughout the body, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. It’s a long stretch of uninterrupted time. That’s what allows it to grow and strengthen. The same with discernment. We have moments of discernment where we see things clearly, and then lots of periods where there’s nothing but darkness. Or so it seems. But again, we can connect the moments of discernment. Look at our actions. That’s how the Buddha has you start. Look at what you’re doing, the results of what you’re doing. Notice whether it’s skillful or not. Does it cause any harm? And there are areas where we’re willing to look at our actions, and other areas where we would rather not. It’s those areas we would rather not. Those are the ones where we have to look. This is one of the reasons why concentration is so important. It gives a sense of well-being, refreshment to the mind. So it’s more willing to look at its weaknesses, more willing to look at the moments when it’s been dishonest with itself. There are areas where it knows something is unskillful, but it likes to do it, so it pretends not to know that it’s unskillful. That’s what you’ve got to learn how to see through, so you don’t keep creating these blind spots. Because when the Buddha talks about ignorance, it’s not just a matter of not knowing many times. It’s willful. You don’t want to know. You’d rather pretend not to know. But fortunately, when you develop a sense of esteem, self-esteem, that comes from virtue and concentration, you feel less threatened by seeing your weaknesses. After a while, you begin to become more and more eager to track them down, because you realize you have the strength to do away with them. It’s in this way that the fence around the house gets totally closed off. Your property is totally protected. The qualities of the path are all around. And it’s in this way that you too have the possibility of gaining that Dhamma-i, the same one that Venerable Gandhanya earned on that first night, attained on that first night. And at the same time, you do true homage to the Buddha. So this is what we’re working on right here, taking these qualities of the mind and making them all around, learning how to recognize what’s of value in the mind. So we’re showing homage not only to the Buddha, but also to our desire for true happiness. We’re paying homage to our skillful qualities, giving them room, encouraging them. We’re believing in them. This is one of the reasons why we pay homage to the Buddha. He has us respect the things within ourselves that are worthy of respect. It’s something we should always keep in mind.

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