The Dhamma in Line with the Dhamma

June 4, 2012

Tonight’s Visakha Puja. There’s not a night like this, a full moon in the month of Visakha. The Buddha was born thirty-five years later, and apparently exactly 2,600 years ago he gained awakening. And then, forty-five years after that, he passed away in a nirvana, again on the night of Visakha. So we’re commemorating all three events. And each event is something to celebrate. There’s a person born into the world who found a way to put an end to suffering, who was able to teach that to others, and then entered into a total nirvana, again as an example to all of us, showing that this is where true happiness lies, this is where true goodness lies. So tonight we’re commemorating that event, all three of those events. And as the Buddha said on the night of his passing away, when he was telling the monks that the devas were scattering flowers and singing songs and scattering incense in honor of him, he said, “This isn’t how you honor the Tathagata. You honor the Tathagata by practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma.” That’s called homage through the practice. So we’ve already done the candles and incense and flowers. So let’s do the practice. Bring your mind to the present moment and make an intention that you’re going to stay right here with the breath for the rest of the hour. This is the beginning of practicing the Dhamma. You’re trying to train the mind, because the mind ordinarily goes out and looks for its nourishment in things outside—sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations—in terms of wealth, in terms of status, in terms of praise. But it doesn’t get really good nourishment this way, and it tends to do a lot of damage both to itself and to people around. If that’s the way the mind is feeling, it’s feeding. The phrase “practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma” means by learning to view these things with a sense of disenchantment. In other words, it’s like eating junk food and then suddenly realizing it’s junk food. It’s not nourishing, it’s bad for you. You’d be better off eating food that’s a lot healthier. In the beginning, it’s hard to pry yourself away from your old habits. You like your Fritos, you like your Cheetos, you like your potato chips. But when it goes straight to the heart that you really are damaging yourself in this way, then you start looking for something better. And you’re not going to believe there’s something better until you see it. So that’s why we try to develop a sense of well-being. As you focus on the breath, try to be attentive to where the breath feels good. There’s part of every in-breath and every out-breath where the breathing feels good. Otherwise, we wouldn’t keep it up. So try to notice where that is and what’s the quality of that breathing that feels good. There should be a sense of openness, a sense of spaciousness, energizing when you need energy, relaxing when you need to be relaxed. Look for that part of the breath cycle and focus there. And then adjust the way you breathe so as to maintain that sense of fullness even as you breathe out. A sense of spaciousness even as you breathe in. Otherwise, you don’t tighten up or tense up as you breathe in. You don’t try to force things out as you breathe out. Allow there to be a sense of fullness in the body throughout the breath cycle. And so you give yourself some better food, something the mind can feed on. Have a sense of well-being. Not feel so frazzled, not feel so put upon all the time. If you can’t get a sense of well-being to fill the whole body, focus on at least the areas where you can maintain that sense of well-being so the mind can calm down. And then do your best to maintain that sense of well-being as much as you can. Because it’s from this perspective you can begin to look at the other ways the mind has been feeding. Because there will be other thoughts coming up, other intentions coming up. And our usual tendency is to go running with them because we’re feeling a sense of lack. We want some entertainment. We want something out of these things. So we go running with them. It becomes a habit. So even without thinking, as soon as there’s something new coming by, you just run with it. But here we’re creating a sense of fullness in the present. So you realize you don’t have to run with these things. In the beginning there will be the temptation to keep running as you have in the past, hoping that by running out someplace you can pick up a few scraps to feed on. You say, “No, there’s much better food right here, a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness right here. Focus on this.” And when you begin to gain a sense of how refreshing it really is to stay here, then you can look at your other temptations, your other intentions, to go running out someplace else and realize that there’s nothing really satisfying there, nothing that you could really gain right there. This makes it a lot easier to stay here and to develop that sense of disenchantment. Because again, as I said, that’s what is meant by practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. It’s developing that sense of disenchantment for things that you’re used to like, things that you used to go foraging in. When you realize there’s really nothing much there, or if there is something there, it’s actually harmful. You don’t want it anymore. You’ve got something better. Ultimately, you’ll find that even the concentration is not totally satisfying. That’s when you look for something better than that. But in the meantime, work on the concentration. This is what keeps the practice alive. When the Buddha talked about how his teaching would survive, one of the things he said was necessary, that people have respect for concentration. In other words, realize that this is the heart of the path and that you want to maintain the heart. Without the heart’s beating, then everything else becomes dead. It’s the heart that keeps the nourishment going, gives you a perspective, gives you a place from which you can look at your other intentions and realize them for what they are. Otherwise, your views are just that. They’re just views. And even though you may read lots of texts, still, if it doesn’t go straight to the heart, it’s just one more coating on the mind, a coating that you could wash off at any time and replace it with something else because it hasn’t seeped deep inside. It’s only when the heart is still, when the mind is still like this, that the truth of the teachings can begin to seep within. This is why the Ajahns are always saying, “Let this teaching go straight to the heart,” which means you have to open up your heart, which means you have to get the heart still. There’s this paradoxical quality about a still mind. John Surwatt would talk about this often. That on the one hand, it’s tough. In other words, it stays solidly here and is not about to be budged by anything else. But on the other hand, it’s very tender. There’s a sense of allowing the teaching to go deep inside. So you’re very sensitive to the slightest bit of stress, the slightest bit of good or bad in the mind. It’s that sensitivity that allows you to really gauge what’s important in life and what’s not. So work on letting the mind be still right here. This is how you pay homage to the Buddha and this is how you pay homage to your desire for true happiness. Because it’s only when the mind is still that you can begin to see things clearly. As the Buddha said, there are four steps leading up to practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. The first is to associate with good people. They give you a good example as to what the values of a truly happy life are like. You listen to the Dhamma. Think about it. And as the Buddha said, the third step is to develop appropriate attention, is to see how the Dhamma shows where you are creating unnecessary suffering and how you can put an end to it. In other words, you look at your experience as to where the problem is. And the problem is always in terms of craving ignorance. Even though people may be doing horrible things to you outside, that’s not the real problem. The real problem is how you let that have inroads on the mind. Because if we wait until the world is perfect, we’ll never get anything done in the practice. We have to live in an imperfect world, surrounded by imperfect people. And imperfect just doesn’t mean a few flaws here and there. Sometimes they can be really cruel, really harsh. But you have to accept that that’s the way the world is and you have to practice in a world like that. So you look to see where the problem is. You take the unfortunate things of the world and bring them in to burn your own mind, to damage your own mind. That’s what it means to have appropriate attention, to see how you are adding unnecessarily to the suffering of the mind. And when you realize that your suffering comes from holding on to things that are really damaging, feeding off things that are really damaging, that’s when you start practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma for the sake of disenchantment. So try to develop this sense of stillness and protect it as much as you can. And this is why we have the practice of restraint. Because if you let all sorts of thoughts and sights and smells and tastes and tactile sensations come running into the mind all the time, it’s like a bus station. Anybody can come in the bus station any time at all. It’s not a pleasant place to be because there’s no sense of safety, there’s no sense of security. You’re trying to make a home for the mind here, which means you have to close off the windows and doors and be very selective about who you allow in and who you allow out. That’s how you protect your concentration and that’s how you maintain this sense of sensitivity inside that allows you to sense where there’s the least little bit of added stress. So you can pick up on it quickly and turn around and notice where are you adding that? What actions in the mind, what thoughts, what perceptions are adding that unnecessary element of suffering? How can you stop doing that? It’s in this way that we take the Buddha’s life as our template for what a truly good life would be. We too want to know the kind of happiness he found. We’re not going to find all the many powers of the Buddha in our practice, but we can find that purity that comes when we realize that we’ve been adding unnecessarily to our suffering and we know how to put an end to it. This is what the Buddha really wanted. He didn’t want us to carry around candles and incense and sing in his praise all the time or chant in his praise all the time. He wanted us to take his teachings and put them to work so that we too could taste the same freedom that he found. The same freedom from suffering, the same freedom from limitations of every kind. So this is why he said that this kind of practice was the true homage to him. Because this would satisfy the desire he had when he first wanted to gain awakening. It wasn’t just for his own sake. It was for the sake of finding a path that other people could follow too. This way, when we follow through, we’re in line with his intention. And of course, we can do nothing but benefit from this. It’s another sign of his true compassion, that the homage he wanted was something to be good for us. This is how we commemorate his life and all the important events of his life, by taking his teachings on the nature of true happiness and trying to put them into practice in our own lives so that they become a reality in our lives. That those events 2,600 years ago are not just the historical curiosity. They inform everything we do, every breath, as we go through our lives right now.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2012/120604_The_Dhamma_in_Line_with_the_Dhamma.mp3>