The Triple Gem Complete

August 2, 2012

Focus on your breath. Take a few long, deep in-and-out breaths and allow your mind to stay there with the breath. You don’t have to think about anything else right now. Just be here with the breathing. Even the sound of the Dhamma talk, you don’t have to listen to it. Let it be in the background. A fence. In case you leave the breath, you run into the fence around you, directing you back. This is called homage to the practice, patipatipuja. The kind of homage to the Dhamma, the Sangha, that the Buddha said was the highest form. We’ve already done amisabhuja, which is homage to the material things—flowers, candles, incense—following an etiquette that goes way back, circling the Buddha three times. They said the devas, when they visited the Buddha, would do this every time. They’d approach him, circle him three times, and then disappear. So it’s a very old custom we’re following here. But an even more important custom is the custom of the practice. Tonight’s asalabhuja. Two thousand six hundred years ago, the Buddha gave his first sermon. Of the five brethren listening to the sermon, one of them gained the Dhamma I. He was the first noble disciple in the Buddhist teachings. That, as he said, was the beginning of the Sangha as a refuge, the Sangha as a gem. This is where the triple gem became complete. The Buddha had already been Buddha for two months. The Dhamma, of course, has always been there. In terms of the teaching, it too started two thousand six hundred years ago. The Dhamma as a natural principle or as natural principles has always been there. But the formulation, putting it into words so that other people could listen, comprehend, put it into practice, that started with this first sermon. So it’s a special night, a special event that we’re commemorating. What we want to do is give rise to all of those qualities of the triple gem within ourselves—the qualities of the Buddha, wisdom, purity, compassion. We want to give rise to those within ourselves, the qualities of the Dhamma, timeless, to be known by the observant for themselves. We want to make ourselves observant so we can know these qualities ourselves. And the qualities of the Sangha—practicing well, practicing straightforwardly—we want to give rise to those too. So this is why we’re here meditating, putting aside all the other concerns of the mind and focusing on the issue that the Buddha raised as his first issue in his first sermon. The word dukkha can mean pain, suffering, stress, dis-ease. And he spoke about it because he had a cure. He’s like a doctor who wants to tell you about the disease you have, because he has a cure for it. The doctors who can’t cure your disease don’t want to talk about that disease. They pretend that it’s something else. But the Buddha said, “I saw that the disease that comes from craving and clinging to the mind is something that can be cured.” That’s why we have four Noble Truths. There’s the cause for the disease. There are the symptoms of the disease. Those are two of the truths. On the other side, there’s the path to the cessation of the disease, and there’s the cessation of it. These are four Noble Truths. Sometimes people believe that the Buddha taught that life is suffering. That’s not the case. There are four truths in life. There’s suffering, but there’s also the end of suffering. And it’s something we can do ourselves. We don’t have to depend on some higher power to come do it for us. We have the potentials within ourselves to develop those qualities of wisdom, purity, and compassion so that we too can end our suffering. We’re relieving many of the burdens that we place on other people. Because not only do we suffer, but we suffer because of our unskillful habits of greed, aversion, and delusion. And we’re not the only ones who are victims of our greed, aversion, and delusion. The people around us are as well. So putting an end to this suffering is an important issue. That’s why the Buddha made it the important issue of his teachings. And we have to see its importance as well. With each of these truths, he said there’s a duty. If you see the world simply as you versus the world, then your duty is, of course, to grab as much happiness out of the world as you can. But with the four truths, he taught us to divide things up differently. There’s stress and suffering. That should be comprehended. There’s the cause, which should be abandoned. And the cessation should be realized. And the way to realize the cessation is by abandoning the cause, through developing the path. That’s what we’re doing here right now. Developing the path, trying to give rise to concentration, which is the heart of the path. It’s the first of the factors of the path that the Buddha discovered. Remember that before his awakening, he had gone through all sorts of self-torments. And finally he realized that that was not the path. So the question was, what would be the path? He remembered a time when his mind had entered concentration naturally, when he was much younger. A sense of ease, well-being, a rapture that comes from having the mind secluded from unskillful qualities. And the realization came to him that this would be the path, because it was a harmless pleasure. He’d been afraid of pleasure for six years, forcing himself not even to breathe, denying himself food, for fear that his mind would be affected by pleasure. But then he realized that the pleasure of a concentrated mind, properly concentrated, was a blameless pleasure. That was how he got on the right path. And then, with practice, he discovered that there were more factors to the path. That’s why the path has eight factors. We call it the eightfold path. The concentration is the heart. The other factors are its requisites or its aids. This is what we’re practicing right now, the heart of the path. And in practicing this, we do develop those qualities of wisdom, purity, and compassion. Wisdom, because we realize that if we’re going to find happiness, reliable happiness, it’s going to have to come from our own actions. And we want happiness that’s long-lasting. And where do our actions come from? They come from our mind. The mind needs to be trained. And so we sit here, training the mind. This is how we develop purity, noticing when the mind is staying with the training and when it’s wandering off, bringing it back when it’s wandered off. So we really do keep our actions in line with our intention. And this intention is a compassionate one. We’re looking for happiness that harms no one. That’s why we show compassion to ourselves and compassion to everybody around us. So this is how we reach the triple gem and how we make the triple gem complete within ourselves. The fact that it’s been complete in the world now for 2,600 years is something we hear. And we may have a belief that that’s true, but to prove it to ourselves, we have to bring the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha within our own minds to see if they really do give rise to the release that the Buddha said was part of his awakening. So here we’re celebrating the triple gem, celebrating the news of the triple gem. And through our practice, we hope to be able to celebrate the triple gem as it appears within us. That’s the kind of homage that the Buddha wanted, that he praised.

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