A Mountain Made of Discernment

February 25, 2013

Okay, close your eyes and let’s sit in meditation. Watch your breath coming in, watch your breath going out. Try to stay concentrated on the breath. In other words, keep your focus right here. Don’t let it wander off someplace else. If it does wander off, just bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Try to breathe comfortably so it’s pleasant to stay with the breath. You feel like you can be at home right here. This is called developing the heightened mind. In other words, a mind that doesn’t run after just everything that comes its way, that it lifts itself above. The canon is of a person who’s up on top of a mountain looking down on the people below. What’s the mountain made of? The mountain is made of discernment, and the discernment has to be based on concentration. This is what heightens your mind so you don’t have to be running around with greed, aversion, and delusion of the affairs of the world. Today is Makha Puja. Makha is the name of this month in Pali. Puja means to pay homage. We’re not paying homage to the month. We’re paying homage to some events that happened on the full moon day of this month, like today’s full moon day. It’s the first year of the Buddha’s teaching career. He’s been teaching for seven or eight months. Now it’s time to send his students to the mountains. He sent his students off to teach in addition to him, as he said, for the well-being of many. On the afternoon of that day, 1,250 arahants all assembled. There hadn’t been any invitation. There hadn’t been any schedule laid out. It was just that they all came. And the Buddha taught them some of the basic principles of the teaching. After all, some of them had gained awakening after listening to the Dhamma only once or twice from him. So they had a broader knowledge of what to teach. And so he gave us a talk called the Avada Patimokkha. All we have nowadays is just the verses that he used to summarize the main points at the end. And the talk begins in an interesting way. It talks about patient endurance as being the foremost austerity. Now, the word for austerity means something that burns things up. In other words, it burns away the defilements, burns away the darkness of the mind. And it’s through patience that you can learn things, endurance that you learn things. Years later, when the Buddha was teaching his own son meditation, he started by telling him, “Make your mind like earth.” People throw pleasant things and unpleasant things on the earth, and the earth doesn’t react. Make your mind like water. People use water to wash away unpleasant things, but the water doesn’t recoil. Make your mind like fire. People use fire to burn garbage, but the fire doesn’t care in the least. Make your mind like wind. The wind blows things around, pleasant and unpleasant, and it doesn’t react with like or dislike. This is the basic principle for learning how to meditate. Now, meditation doesn’t stop just by being very still and enduring. The Buddha went on to teach breath meditation. In which you actively adjust the breath and you actively try to breathe in certain ways and develop certain qualities of mind, become sensitive to certain qualities of the mind, and highlight them. So it’s not just sitting there with whatever comes up. But in order to see what’s skillful and what’s not, what’s working and what’s not, you have to have endurance. You can’t just run away from things you don’t like or run toward things you do like, because that way you never understand anything. And particularly if we’re going to understand the big issue in the Buddha’s teachings, which is why is there pain and suffering, you can’t just run away from the pain because you can’t stand it. If you want to understand it, you have to sit with it. Now, the clue to how to develop the endurance that allows you to sit with it comes in the last phrase of the Buddha’s concluding verses, and that is developing the heightened mind, like we’re trying to do right now. Because the best way to endure pain is to find there must be some pleasure in here someplace. Use that as your focus. Use that as your foundation. And from that foundation of well-being, then you can look at the pain and really understand it. And it’s only when you understand it that you can see what’s causing it. And it’s only when you see what’s causing it that you can let go of the cause. And that’s what puts an end to the pain. So we develop endurance. Not by just sitting here and gritting our teeth, but by raising the level of the mind. Raising the level of our concentration, raising the level of our discernment. So when the mind is solid and secure and not threatened by the pain, then you can probe into the pain and understand, well, why is there this problem with this sensation? What is it about this sensation that’s so hard to bear? Is it the sensation itself, or is it something that the mind is doing with it? Because after all, the mind is not just passively receiving things. The mind is active. It goes out looking for things. And once it finds something, it’ll label it and decide whether it’s something it wants or something it doesn’t want. So is there something wrong with the labels? Is there something wrong with the stories and the plans the mind makes? This is what you want to look into. Because if the problem were not with the mind, then you’d just simply have to suffer and that would be it. But the problem is with the mind, the activities of the mind. We’re not just passively receiving things. We’re reflecting on them. We’re making stories. We’re trying to feed on things. And it’s because of that that we swallow a lot of unpleasant things and create a lot of suffering for ourselves. And it’s because the mind is the problem. The problem can be solved. So we work on training the mind, raising the level of the mind. So the affairs of what people say and what people think, the affairs of having a body, these don’t weigh the mind down. Because you lift the mind so that it’s above them, you develop some dispassion for the old ways you had of interacting with the world. And you begin to see where it was skillful, where your ways were skillful, where your ways were not skillful. And when the mind is raised to a higher level like this, it’s not so tied with its old habits. Because all too often people don’t want to change their habits because they’re not familiar with other ways of doing things. And it’s a common problem. This is what addictions are all about. People know that the addiction is bad, but they can’t really imagine doing something else. They don’t have the skills for dealing with the problems they have. They don’t have other skills. And so they just stick with what’s familiar. It’s by raising the mind that you begin to see that you don’t have to stick with what’s familiar. You can try new ways of relating to yourself, new ways of relating to the world. In doing this, you’re taking advantage of that talk that the Buddha gave 2,600 years ago. It’s good to remember that. As you’re sitting here meditating, it’s not just you. You’re part of a long tradition. You’re benefiting from many, many people, starting with the Buddha, generation after generation, leading up to today. And you want to show your gratitude, you want to show your respect for that tradition. That’s why we have days like this. As the Buddha said on the night of his total nibbana, there are two ways of showing respect to him. One is with flowers, candles, and incense, which is what we did just now. And the other is practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. That means practicing the Dhamma for its true purpose. So we’ve developed this passion for our old ways of causing suffering and learned how to rise above them so we can bring suffering to an end. So when we make the mind still like this, it’s not just to rest or for a little bit of respite. It’s to put our minds in a position where it can look at their old habits and develop some dispassion for anything they realize, anything the mind realizes has been unskillful. That’s what it means to practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. It’s for the sake of disenchantment. It’s for the sake of dispassion that leads to release. So it starts with simple qualities of mind, like patience and endurance. And it’s augmented by the skills we develop as we try to bring the mind to concentration, all of which so we can see things, so we can bring the mind up to that high mountain where it can look down on the world, look down in its old ways and see, “Oh, that’s where I made my mistake with this, this is where I’ve been unskillful.” And all those mistakes and all that unskillful behavior is totally unnecessary. When you abandon your old unskillful habits, that’s when you can be free. That’s the only thing that’s keeping you weighed down, that’s the only thing that’s keeping you trapped. The mind is the sort of thing that can’t be trapped by prisons and it can’t be trapped by chains, but it’s trapped by its habits. And what the Buddha’s offering and what the tradition that’s been passed down from the time of the Buddha has brought to us is a path of skills, it’s a path of strategy, so we can free ourselves from those habits. And in doing so, we help the tradition to continue on to the next generation. We provide living examples that these teachings are not empty. They really do give results to the people who really apply them. They apply themselves to them. So take this opportunity to show some respect for the tradition, show some respect for your own desire for true happiness, and put those teachings into practice. Learn how to develop more patience, more endurance, for raising the level of your mind. You can raise it either through what’s called composure. In other words, even though you may not have the powers of concentration yet, at least you know that by taming the mind and being willing to put up with some things that before you said you couldn’t stand, you were always running away from, if you learn how to stop and look at them, you can begin to see through them. And even more so when the mind attains good power as a concentration, it can see things a lot more clearly than it could otherwise. And it’s put itself in a position where it’s not suffering from these things. It can look at them without any sense of being threatened. It can see them for what they are. So these teachings that we remember, they’re not just relics from the past or historical curiosities. They’re advice from people who’ve found that these things really work, and it’s important enough to pass it along. It’s important enough to have the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. And all the efforts of all the generations that have brought these teachings to us. Because they’re what brings the brightness to life. And John Fuang once told me that this is what he owed to a John Lee, that John Lee showed him the brightness of life. This is what I owe to a John Fuang. This is what we all owe to the Buddha and the noble disciples. These teachings allow us to free ourselves from suffering and stress, and to touch that dimension where the mind is totally free.

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