Visakha Puja

May 13, 2014

Tonight’s Visakha Puja. Visakha is the name of this month in the Pali calendar. It corresponds roughly to May and June. Puja means to pay homage. We’re not paying homage to the month; we’re paying homage to some events that happened in this month. The first was that the prince who later became the Buddha was born on the full-moon day of this month. Thirty-five years later, on the full-moon day of this month, he came to awakening and became the Buddha. And then forty-five years after that, again on this full-moon day of this month, he entered total nibbana. These are important events. After all, the Buddha was able to find true happiness. He was able to find a deathless happiness, something that even the death of the body can’t affect, through his own efforts. When we talk about conviction in the Buddhist teachings, it’s actually conviction in his awakening, the fact that he did awaken through his own efforts by developing qualities that are available to any human being to develop. That, of course, has an impact on our lives as well. It makes us look at our lives and the kind of happiness we’re looking for. What do you want to make you happy? That’s the Buddha’s question. And how does your happiness compare with the happiness that even the death of the body can affect? Every other thing you could think about that would make you happy, you have to give up when you die, when the body dies. Either you go first or it goes first. But the Buddha said, “If you work on developing your mind, you can find a happiness that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, doesn’t die.” And it’s within your power to do so. The qualities of the Buddha that led to his awakening are qualities that you have, at least to some extent. They simply need to be developed. The Buddha’s discovery is so important that we pay homage to it. We show it our respect. There are two ways. One is like we did just now, walking around with candles, flowers, and incense. They have a different traditional meaning. The incense represents virtue, because, as I say, the aroma of virtue is something that’s special. In fact, it even goes against the wind. Most aromas follow the wind, but this goes against the wind. In other words, you see someone behave in a virtuous way, and it’s very attractive. So the incense stands for virtue. The flowers stand for concentration, because the wind blooms in concentration. And the candles stand for discernment. So those are symbols. But as the Buddha said, genuine homage is when you actually take his teachings and put them into practice. In other words, you really do develop virtue, you do develop concentration, and you do develop discernment in your own mind, in your own actions, in your own words. Now let’s do some actual homage, what’s called practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. In other words, it’s not in line with our own preferences. We practice for the sake of bringing ourselves up to the level of the Dhamma. So close your eyes and focus on the breath. It was on his breath that the Buddha was focusing on the night of his awakening, so we can focus on that, too. We have a breath just like his. What’s different is the qualities we bring. Try to bring some mindfulness to this. In other words, try to keep this in mind. You’re going to stay with the breath, each breath coming in and going out. You’ll try not to forget. If you do forget and suddenly find yourself thinking about something else, you drop whatever that something else is and you come back to the breath. That’s mindfulness. Try to develop alertness. In other words, watch the breath, watch your mind, see what they’re doing. So if you can catch the mind wandering off before it’s gone far, okay, just bring it right back. While you’re with the breath, try to be as sensitive as possible to where you feel it. When you breathe in, where do you feel the process of breathing in? Is it in your chest? Is it in your shoulders? Is it in your stomach? Your abdomen? Do you feel the breath going through your body? Is it going through your head? Where do you notice the breath? Try to keep your attention right there. Notice what kind of breathing feels good. You can take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths to see how that feels. And if long breathing feels good, stick with it. If not, you can change. You can shorten the in-breath or shorten the out-breath or shorten both and make the breath heavier, lighter, faster, slower. Experiment. This shades into a third quality you want to bring, which is ardency. You want to do this well. Try to do it skillfully so that when you catch yourself wandering off, you come back right away. You don’t wait and explore that distracting thought. No matter how interesting it may seem for the time being, you let it go because you’ve got more important work to do. You’ve got to train the mind. Even ordinary, everyday happiness requires that the mind be trained to say nothing of the kind of happiness the Buddha found. If your mind isn’t trained, you can gain all kinds of wealth and status and praise from other people and all kinds of sensual pleasures and still be miserable. You can use those things to make yourself miserable. You can use those things to create a lot of harm if you’re not trained. If the mind is well-trained, though, then you can live in a world where you’re experiencing loss, loss of status, criticism from other people, and you can experience pain. And yet the mind is not going to be affected by that. It can maintain its equilibrium. It can maintain its sense of well-being. That’s if it’s well-trained. So real happiness doesn’t depend on things outside. It depends on the qualities you’re developing right here, right now. So the work you’re doing here is more important than anything else you could be thinking about right now. And at the same time, it’s your way of showing some gratitude to the Buddha for having found this path. He almost lost his life many times in the search of this true happiness. And when he found it, he didn’t try to sell it or copyright it. He gave it freely. That’s something we should be grateful for. And so we show him our respect by doing this well. In the course of being ardent about doing this well, that’s when you develop your discernment. Because the mind is going to come up with all kinds of reasons why it should think about other things right now. You’ve got this whole hour. You can think about all kinds of stuff, but you say, “No, I’ve got more important work to do. I’m offering my mind this evening to the Buddha.” And give it some value. The mind is really one. There’s a sense of well-being inside. You’re not jumping around all the time. It’s like fruit in the market. If there’s one mango in the market, that mango is going to have a lot of value. If there’s mangoes all over the place, they don’t have much value. Throw them away. So if your mind has lots of thoughts, they don’t increase its value, they actually decrease its value. You want to have the one thought that you’re going to stay with the breath. Stick with that one thought. So let your mindfulness, alertness, and ardency all gather right here. Give the mind some value. Then it’s something you’re proud to offer. After all, the Buddha spent all those many aeons trying to find this deathless happiness, and he didn’t do it just so we could give him flowers or incense. His motives really were compassionate. He wanted to see other people find that happiness, too. So here’s our way of honoring his intention. We’re sitting here. We’re not breaking any of the precepts. We have the opportunity for the mind to settle down and be one. And if you see anything the mind is doing that’s unskillful, you can drop it. That’s how you begin to develop your discernment. So here it is, virtue, concentration, discernment. They’re all right here. Stick with them and they’ll develop. And then you’ll be able to prove for yourself if what the Buddha found was really true. That’s when you reach that happiness. That’s when you know that the Buddha knew what he was talking about. It really is something that lies beyond space, it lies beyond time. And because it’s beyond space and time, it’s not going to be affected by any changes in the body. It’s always there. It’s simply that we keep covering it up with all our other intentions. When you strip them away, you find that what you taught really was true. And as we chant, it’s akaliko. It’s not something that was true only back in India two thousand some years ago. It’s true now for anyone who takes the time and the effort and the care to practice. So tonight we have this opportunity. Make the most of it. Show some respect, not only for the Buddha, but also for your own desire for true happiness. Work on developing this skill and see how far you can go.

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