The Dhamma Eye

July 11, 2014

Tonight’s Asalaha Puja. Asalaha is the Pali name for this month. Puja means to pay homage. And we pay homage to the Buddha on the night of this month, the full moon night of this month, because it was on the full moon night that he gave his first sermon, gained his first noble disciple. Eight weeks earlier, he had gained awakening on the full moon night in Visakha in the month of May and spent seven weeks experiencing the bliss of release. Then he decided he should teach. So a week later he met up with some of his old students, and at first they resisted the idea of listening to him because they felt he had gone back to a life of luxury prior to that time. For six years, he’d been undergoing austerities, depriving himself of food, forcing himself not to breathe for long periods of time until he passed out. When he realized that that wasn’t the way, he asked himself, “Is there another way?” He’d tried sensual pleasures that hadn’t worked. He’d tried self-torment, self-torture that hadn’t worked. What could be the way to awakening? He had, as a child, very naturally just fallen into a state of concentration. Then he asked himself, “Was that the way?” He didn’t realize that it could be the way, but he realized that in order to attain that level of concentration, he was going to have to start eating food again. So that’s why the students had left him. Now he caught up with them, and after their initial resistance, he asked them, “I say that I’ve attained awakening. Have I ever made a claim like that before?” He put his truthfulness as his proof. So they admitted that he hadn’t made that claim before, so they were willing to listen. He basically taught them the Eightfold Noble Path and especially explained the first factor of the path, explaining it as a middle way between the two extremes of sensual indulgence and self-torment. Then he explained the Four Noble Truths as the first factor of the path. And it was just after the explanation of those four truths that Gondanya, who was the eldest of the five, gained the Dhamma-I, the experience, the deathless, and saw that everything else rose and passed away, but the deathless didn’t. That was his first taste of awakening. The Buddha didn’t find awakening himself, but he could formulate the Dhamma in a way so that other people could attain awakening too. That’s a momentous event, which is why we honor it once a year, every year, on this full moon day. So what’s the best way to honor it? As the Buddha once said, you could pay homage to him with candles and incense and flowers and music, but that wouldn’t be genuine homage. The true homage is to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. So that’s what we do now. We’ve done the candles and the incense. We’ve walked around. In the old days, when you greeted someone that you greatly respected or you took your leave of them, you would circle them three times to the right, as we did just now. And the candles and flowers and incense are symbolic. Incense stands for the love of virtue. Flowers stand for concentration, when the mind blossoms in concentration. And, of course, the light of the candles is symbolic of the light of discernment. That’s all on the symbolic level. Now we’re going to do the actual practice, sitting here meditating, because concentration is one of the factors of the path. Right concentration, which involves right effort, trying to abandon unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones. Right mindfulness, keeping the proper object in mind. In this case, we’re focusing on the breath. Be mindful of the breath. In other words, keep the breath in mind. Be alert to it, what’s happening, and be ardent in trying to stay settled with it, concentrated on it. It’s this combination of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency that brings the mind into concentration. Right concentration enables you to see things clearly, gives the mind some rest, allows the mind to be stable. Because it’s only when the mind is really stable that it can see things clearly for what they are. The more quiet the mind, the more subtle things you’re able to see happening in the mind. You begin to understand the way in which the mind begins to deceive itself, because that is the big problem in life. The Four Noble Truths are all about the fact that we want happiness, but the things we do in order to find happiness lead to suffering. Why is that? Because of our craving and ignorance. But we don’t see our craving and ignorance. Ignorance, by definition, doesn’t see that it’s ignorant. It thinks it knows. Which is why it’s so important to have someone who can teach the Dhamma. If the Buddha hadn’t been able to teach the Dhamma, who knows where we’d be right now, totally lost. But he saw from his experience what led to true happiness and what led to false happiness. And that’s why he formulated the Four Truths, understanding that suffering is clinging. Clinging to the body, clinging to our feelings, clinging to our emotions, clinging to our perceptions of things, clinging to the way the mind fabricates and puts together its experience, and even clinging to our awareness of things. That’s what suffering is. It’s not an intuitive definition. It starts out by talking about the suffering of aging, illness, and death, of separation from those you love, of having to be with things you don’t like, of not getting what you want out of life—all of which we know. We’ve either experienced them directly or at second hand. But he talks about the suffering of clinging. That’s where he’s going into new territory, asking us to look at our suffering in a different way from what we normally do. Because the things we cling to are the things that we tend to see as either us or ours. And our fear is that if we let go of them, we’d be lost or we’d suffer even more. So we cling even more and cause even more suffering. So he’s asking us not to follow our feelings about things and not to follow our normal way of looking at ourselves, but to step back a bit. To do that, you need both the concentration and you need the instructions, because the mind doesn’t naturally go in this direction. As Ajahn Suwatman said, we tend to see our craving and clinging as the cause of suffering. We tend to see these things as our friends. And the suffering that comes, we tend to see as an enemy. But he wants us to look at the suffering, to comprehend it, to realize that we can learn from it. In other words, to that extent, the suffering is a friend. We can learn from these things if we look at our suffering simply as the way we cling to things, with the purpose of figuring out how to stop. After we do that, we need to develop the whole path. That’s why the path was the Buddha’s first teaching. It started with the right view about what suffering is and where it comes from, all the way to the duties with regard to all the four noble truths—to comprehend suffering, understand the cause, develop the path so we can realize the cessation of suffering. From that, we develop right resolve, determination that we’re going to not act on unskillful intentions and we’re going to act on skillful ones instead. That goes into right speech, right action, right livelihood. Right speech means no lying, no divisive speech, no harsh speech, no idle chatter. Right action is no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex. Right livelihood means not making your livelihood in any way that’s going to be harmful to others or to yourself. It’s based on that that you can develop the path. Develop the mind through right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This is the path to happiness, and these are qualities we should develop within ourselves. When we take refuge in the Dhamma, this is what we take refuge in, realizing that to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma means that we have to take these qualities as our guides. When the Buddha sets out, say, the precepts against lying or killing, he’s not talking about some impossible ideal. He’s giving very precise instructions. If you want to be happy, this is what you’ve got to do. Whether you feel like it or not, this is the way true happiness is found. So we can’t take our feelings as our guides, because our feelings have led us to all kinds of suffering in the past. Once you realize that, that’s when you begin to say, “Well, maybe I should take refuge in the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma and not in accordance with my preferences.” It requires a sacrifice. But what are you sacrificing? You’re sacrificing your old unskillful ways. So we can learn how to live your life in accordance with these principles. Then the mind can settle down in a way that really does lead to discernment. It is possible to get the mind concentrated without virtue, but it’s not an honest, honest concentration. If the concentration is not honest, the discernment is not going to be honest, and if it’s not honest, it’s not going to lead to any kind of release. This is why when the Buddha first taught the Dhamma to his son, he started out with two principles. One, don’t lie, either to yourself or to other people. You have to be truthful. You have to be really willing to observe what’s actually going on in your mind—your thoughts, your words, your deeds—so you can catch any mistakes. And then you look at what you’re doing. If you see that what you’re going to do is going to lead to suffering, you don’t do it. If, while you’re doing something, you find it actually is causing harm, you stop. Or if you’ve done something and only realize later that it caused harm, that’s when you want to go and talk it over with someone who’s more advanced in the practice so you can learn from them. It’s all very simple and all very basic. It comes down to two main qualities, that you’re truthful and observant. And the two go together. The more truthful you are, the more you’ll be able to see things clearly. The more observant you are, the more you truly will be able to follow the path. But it does require a willingness to put your preferences aside. There’s a statement in one of the Buddhist traditions that the Great Way is not difficult with no preferences. What this means, of course, is that you put your preferences aside when you follow the path. You do prefer to put an end to suffering as opposed to just continuing to suffer. But when you realize that something is the path, then regardless of whether you like it or not, you give it a try. You give it a sincere try. This is what Anjan Gondanya did. He gave the name Anjana because he gained knowledge before anyone else after the Buddha. And that was why he was able to see the Dhamma. We talk about reading the Dhamma and practicing the Dhamma, but it’s only when the Dhamma leads to the realization of the deathless that you really see it. That’s when you know for sure that what the Buddha taught was true. Up until that point, you’re still going to have your doubts. There’s still going to be uncertainty. But you look at the example of the Buddha, you look at the example of his noble disciples. It’s an inspiring example. The analogy the Buddha gives is of an elephant hunter going into the forest. He sees big tracks. It looks promising, but he doesn’t come immediately to the conclusion that this must be the big bull elephant he’s looking for. After all, there are dwarf elephants with big feet. But he follows the tracks because they look promising. He sees scratch marks up in the trees. Those look promising, too, but he still doesn’t come to the conclusion that he’s found a bull elephant. After all, he needs a big bull elephant for the work. But there are female elephants with tusks, and they’re tall. They can make those scratch marks, too. He finally gets to a clearing and there’s the big bull elephant. That’s when he knows. So the tracks, the Buddha said, are like the practice of concentration. You get the mind settled. You still haven’t gotten your proof that the Buddha was truly awakened, that he really knew what he was talking about. You see scratch marks. That stands for the psychic powers that can come from concentration in some cases. It’s only when you’ve gained your own vision, your own realization of the deathless, that’s when you’ve really found the bull elephant and you know that the Buddha knew what he was talking about. So that’s what tonight is all about, the arising of the Dhamma-I that comes from practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. It’s something we can all do. As I said, it’s not a set of impossible ideals or a nice set of ideals to think about, maybe, but only for people who are living away in the monastery. It’s a set of ideals for everybody. It’s a very precise set of instructions. This is how you find true happiness. As I said, it was a momentous event. See if you can give rise to a momentous event in your own life as well of the same sort. Whether other people know about it or pay homage in the future, that doesn’t matter. What matters is that you’ve given the Dhamma a genuine test, an honest test, and gained the happiness of the Buddha. would have promised.

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