Heightened Mind

March 4, 2015

Tonight’s Magha Puja. Magha is the name of this month in Pali. Puja means homage. We’re paying homage to an event that happened on the full moon of this month, the first year of the Buddha’s teaching career after he gained awakening. It was on the afternoon of this full moon day in basically February, March. The 1,250 of the Buddha’s arhant disciples all came spontaneously, without having been invited. The Buddha gave them a long talk on the basic principles of the teaching. You’d wonder why he would have to give it to them. After all, they were all arhants. But many of them gained their awakening simply in hearing one or maybe two of the Buddha’s teachings, and he was going to send them out to teach. He wanted them to have a full command of what the teaching was all about, from the most basic to the highest principles of the teaching. It’s called the Ovadapadimokkha. So it’s become traditional to commemorate this event, paying homage to the Buddha and to his arhant disciples. There are two ways of paying homage. One is what we did just now with material things—flowers, candles, incense—showing respect by the way we walked around. In the old days, that was how you showed respect to someone. When you greeted them and when you left them, you circled them three times, keeping them to your right. When he paid his final homage to the Buddha, right before the Buddha’s commission, that’s what he did. He circumambulated the Buddha three times. This is called amisapujja, homage with material things. But the Buddha said, if you really want to pay homage to him, you pay homage to the practice, practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, as he said. So that’s what we’re doing now, trying to bring our minds in line with the Dhamma. What does the Dhamma teach? One of the principles of the Ovadapadimokkha is what the Buddha called devotion to the heightened mind. The heightened mind is the mind in concentration, the mind that’s lifted above its ordinary preoccupations, the preoccupations of the world, gain and loss, status, loss of status, praise and criticism, pleasure and pain. You lift your mind above that. You focus it on a single object that’s devoid of any unskillful qualities. This, the Buddha said, was the heart of the path. Now, the path, of course, has more to it than just concentration. There are eight factors altogether. The other seven factors, he said, are requisites for the right concentration, beginning with right view all the way up through right mindfulness. These are the things you need to develop to bring the mind into concentration in the right way, because there are wrong kinds of concentration. You can be really focused on sensual desire or really focused on anger, really focused on an infatuation of one kind or another, but that doesn’t count as a right concentration. Right concentration has to be devoid of any unskillful qualities and secluded, as the Buddha said, from sensuality. In other words, your thoughts and plans about the sensual pleasure you’d like to have. You’re going to find pleasure of a different sort, what he calls pleasure of form. This is what raises the mind above its ordinary level, because this kind of pleasure doesn’t have the drawbacks of sensual pleasures. You’re not harming anyone, and you’re not clouding the mind with a fog of sensual desire. You’re clearing those fogs and clouds away. You’re simply inhabiting your body. The pleasure here is called the pleasure of form, how you sense the body from within. This may be very intense at times, the pleasure that comes from this, but it’s not regarded as sensual pleasure. It’s a higher level of pleasure, because the mind can see itself a lot more clearly while it’s enjoying this pleasure. So try to work with the breath right now. Breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of well-being inside. Learn to receive the breath as something that’s not just air coming in and out of the lungs, but we’re talking about the whole energy flow in the body, part of which allows the air to come in and out of the lungs, part of which is related to the movement of the blood through the blood vessels, the energy that goes through the nerves and the muscles, all the way out to the pores of the skin. Try to inhabit that as much as you can. As you get into the body in this way, you’re raising the mind up above its ordinary preoccupations. This is one aspect of the heightened mind, getting the mind in a concentration. The next aspect is to use that in order to understand even more deeply what’s going on in the mind and where there’s stress still in the mind, even in a concentrated mind. Watch for it to come, watch for it to go. And when it comes and goes, it doesn’t just come and go. It’s not just arising and passing away. That’s what the Buddha calls “origination” going on. In other words, there’s a cause. And the cause is the way you cling to certain things, what you’ll be especially sensitive to as you’re sitting here inhabiting the body, all the way down to the tips of the toes, all the way up to the top of the head. You’ll be very sensitive to feeling and perception—the feelings of pleasure, the feelings of not so much pleasure. There may be pains in different parts of the body. And the pictures that you hold in mind about what’s going on as you’re breathing, where your focus is, what is this breath that you’re focusing on? Those are the basic feelings and perceptions. And there are other ones that are more vagrant. One of your first duties as you’re getting your mind into concentration is to try to get rid of any vagrant perceptions that are not related to breath. Just let them go, let them go. If you don’t give them any attention, it’s like animals that come around your house. If they’re not going to get any food, they don’t keep coming around. As long as you’re leaving food out for them, they’re going to keep coming. When you pay attention to these vagrant perceptions, it’s like feeding them. They’re going to come back again. So you have to learn how not to feed them. That’s what the Buddha calls putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, your desires about the way you want things to be out in the world. And then your feeling of dissatisfaction when they’re not going that way. These are things that can consume the mind if we’re not careful. So learn to view them with reference to the world. Some of the issues you’ve been over many, many times before are just not all that important. If these thoughts were bones, it’s like a dog chewing on a bone. There’s nothing left of any meat on the bone. It’s just the old, worn out bone. There’s no real nourishment there. Learn to apply whatever perceptions you can. So you can have a sense of disinterest in the things that the mind normally likes to feed on. Because you’re trying to give it something better to feed on here, trying to raise the level of the mind. So as the world spins around, the mind doesn’t have to spin around with it. As events happen in the body, the mind doesn’t have to spin around with those either. You only get the mind so it’s more and more clearly focused, right here, right here, so it gets a clearer sense of itself. In other words, there’s awareness and there are these objects of awareness—the breath, the body. And when things get very still, they separate out. And there’s just a strong sense of awareness. And here the heightened mind gets even higher because you’re beginning to gain some sense of your awareness and how it’s distinct from a lot of things that you used to clob together with it. The perceptions are one thing, the breath is another thing. You want to see these things as separate. Because that way you can live in the body, which is not always pleasant. There are times when it is pleasant, other times when it’s not. You can try to make it as pleasant as possible with the way you breathe and the way you think of the breath energy and spread the breath energy through the body. But there’ll be times when you just come up with the fact that the body is malfunctioning. It’s going to be doing this more and more as you get older. So you’ve got to be prepared to be aware of these things and yet not try to gobble them down. This is right there with the gobbling down. That’s where the suffering comes from. The word upadana, which is normally translated as clinging, can also mean the act of taking awareness from something. In other words, you’re gobbling it down. Something comes along and you want to make it yours. You want to identify with it as you. You take it in, like a child that doesn’t have any clear sense of what’s food and what’s not food, or what’s poisonous and what’s not poisonous. Everything that comes by just goes right in the mouth. So you’re learning how to train yourself to grow up, to have a sense of what’s good to eat and what’s not good to eat. The pleasure of jhana for the time being is something you want to feed on. Eventually you find that this food, too, has its drawbacks. When the mind is strong enough, you can get so that it doesn’t have to feed on anything at all. But in the meantime, as long as the mind has the need to feed, give it something good to feed on, a sense of well-being that comes from having this pleasure of form, putting the mind in a heightened state. This will bring you to bear all the mindfulness you can, looking at things in what the Buddha calls appropriate attention, i.e., applying the Right View, the Four Noble Truths, to what’s going on. The Four Noble Truths are not just four interesting facts about something out there, or four interesting facts about stress. They’re ways you can divide up your experience. Where is the stress right now? What events in the mind are causing the stress? When you divide the mind up this way, your experience up this way, then you can know how to apply the duties. Stress is something you want to comprehend. Most often we don’t want to comprehend it. We want to run away from it. But the Buddha says if you really want to get past it, first you’ve got to comprehend it. So you say, “Look, where’s the clinging?” Then if you can see any cravings that’s driving the clinging, that’s something you want to abandon. That’s your duty with regard to the origination of stress. As for the cessation of stress, that’s something you want to be able to realize. And you do that by developing the factors of the path. So it keeps coming back to this heightened mind, the mind in right concentration, supported by all the other factors of the path. There was another important event that happened on the full moon of Dhammakaya, and that was three months before the Buddha passed away. He decided that that was the point where he was not going to be living any longer. Sometimes they say he abandoned the fabrications of his lifespan. And that evening he called the monks together and taught them. He said, “I want you to remember the basic teachings,” and he went down through the wings to awakening, ending again with the Eightfold Path. This is an important night for two reasons. We pay homage to both events in the same way—practicing the factors of the path centered on right concentration. This is as John Lee pointed out. We pay homage to the Buddha in this way. It’s pleasing to the Buddha, and at the same time we benefit. It’s another sign of his compassion. He wanted us to pay homage to him in a way that is to our benefit. He doesn’t need our candles, incense, and flowers. But if he were alive, he’d be happy to see that people are still practicing the skill that he discovered and the skill that he taught. So pay homage to your own desire for true happiness, too, because it all comes together right here. here.

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