Magha Puja

February 22, 2016

Tonight we’re commemorating Magha Puja, a date that marks two main events in the Buddha’s life. They both took place on the full moon of the month of Magha, which corresponds to late February, early March. The first was in the first year after the Buddha gained awakening, on the afternoon of that full moon day. One thousand two hundred and fifty of his disciples gathered without having been told of a meeting, but they all gathered spontaneously. The Buddha gave them a sermon called the Avada Patimokkha. Many of them had attained arahantship simply by listening to the Dhamma once or twice. He was going to be sending them out to teach the Dhamma to a wider range of people, so he wanted to make sure that they had a general knowledge of what he wanted them to teach. We don’t have the text of the sermon. All we have is the verse at the end which summarizes the main points. It’s considered one of the basic teachings in the Buddhist Dharma. The other event also happened on the full moon of Magha. It was the day when the Buddha relinquished his desire to live further. This was the last year of his life, three months before he was to pass away. After relinquishing the will to live, he called the monks together and summarized the main points of his teaching. Again, this time it was the seven wings to awakening, or the seven sets that comprise the wings to awakening. So we’re commemorating both of these events tonight. And of course, the best way to commemorate events like this is to practice the Dhamma, what’s called paying homage through the practice. What we did just now with the circumambulation with the candles and flowers and incense, that’s called amissabhucha, when you pay homage with material things. But as the Buddha said, the true way to pay homage to him is to practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma that we’re doing right now. So that’s what we’re doing right now. Close your eyes, focus on your breath. Try to develop qualities of mindfulness and concentration by staying with the breath as consistently as you can. Allow the mind to settle in with the breath and see if you can find a way of breathing that feels really good so that your concentration can have a good, firm foundation. And then stay with it. Any little thing that comes up, you’re not going to go with it. This is in line with one of the verses in that summary at the end of the Uvada Padimukha. Not doing any evil, developing skillfulness until it’s consummate, and purifying the mind. These are the main principles that are the teachings not only of our Buddha, but also of all Buddhas. So as you’re sitting here thinking about something else, you may not think that it’s evil. But you’re asking yourself, what kind of qualities of the mind are you developing? Because the mind tends to bend in line with the thoughts that you tend to think. And it’s very easy to do the actions of the things that you tend to think. And if the mind is out of control, even with doing something as simple as this, staying with the breath, how are you going to control it in other areas of your life? It’s through developing your powers of mindfulness and alertness that you can gain some control over what the mind is thinking. That’s how you gain some control over what you do, because it comes from the mind. Everything you say or think or speak comes out of the mind. So you want to make sure that the mind is in good shape. And you really do become scrupulous. That’s the point of never doing any evil. There are a lot of evils out there that we would never do, but there are some that we think are okay, they don’t really matter. You think. Little tiny things. But as the Buddha says, little tiny things add up. So to be really scrupulous in what you do and say and think, you’ve got to be scrupulous about your mind. So start right here. The mind slips off, you bring it right back. The mind slips off again, you bring it back again. Five times, ten times, a hundred times, then you bring it back. Five times, ten times, a hundred times. You don’t give in. Each time you come back, you reward yourself with a refreshing breath, something that feels really gratifying inside. You can think of the breathing as a whole body process. Not only your lungs, but all your muscles, all your nerves, all your blood vessels, every part of the body is involved with the breathing. You’re breathing in one way or another, either on a blatant level or a subtle level. And so if you can catch sight of some of those subtleties, then you can make the breath really comfortable. Because it’s not so much the in-and-out breath that’s comfortable, it’s the way the energy flows in the body as you breathe in and breathe out. And if that feels constricted, if it feels tense, tight, then the breathing is not going to be pleasant, no matter what rhythm you choose. But if you think of everything opening up, opening up through all the breath channels in the body, then the in-and-out breathing is going to find its own rhythm, and find a rhythm that feels good, that corresponds to the ease that you feel in the rest of the body. We tend to go around carrying a lot of tension in the body, just as we carry a lot of unskilled thoughts in the mind. We don’t think of any alternative. We think, “This is just the way things are. This is the way I’ve got to think. This is the way my body’s got to be.” And you just let it be that way. And you put up with a lot of things you really don’t have to, to try to sensitize yourself to what would feel good throughout the body right now. How is the energy flow in the body? You may not think of an energy flow, but pose that possibility in your mind. If what you were feeling in your body was an energy flow, what kind of flow would it be? Would it be a constricted flow, a blocked flow, or something that flows smoothly? And then relax any muscles that seem to be getting in the way. This makes it easier to be more scrupulous about not doing any little thing, not carrying any unnecessary burden around. A lot of the evil we do in life is because we’ve got so many preoccupations. We’re weighing ourselves down unnecessarily to begin with, and then other things come in. It’s all too tempting just to take the easy way out, because you already feel burdened. But if you can lighten the burdens you feel inside, then it’s a lot easier to see and to recognize an unskillful choice and to be able to avoid it. So the principle of not doing any evil comes from being scrupulous in how you look after yourself. Similarly, by the principle of developing skillfulness until it’s consummate. There are some areas in our life where we’re skillful, and others where we’re not so skillful. But the Buddha is saying, “Try to be skillful in all your thoughts, all your words, all your deeds.” Skillful in the sense of you’re not doing anybody any harm, yourself or anyone else. You’re actually making a positive contribution to the state of your mind and, if possible, to the lives of other people. As the Buddha said, the secret to his awakening was that he never rested content with his level of skillfulness until it got to the ultimate level. So you ask yourself, the way you speak, the way you think, the way you act in life, is it as skillful as it could be? There are some areas where you’re lacking. Here, the concentration helps give you the strength to do what you know needs to be done. Because again, that’s often a problem when we’re weighing ourselves down with a sense of dis-ease inside. There’s something good that needs to be done, but we know it’s going to require that we put ourselves out. The mind can very easily find excuses for not doing it. “You’re too tired. It’s just too much to ask.” And as a result, we limit ourselves and the goodness that we can get out of life, because we limit the amount of goodness we put in. So if you can develop a strength of concentration, the strength of mindfulness, you’ll find that your mind is more up for developing all the forms of skillfulness. So when greed comes up, you realize, “Okay, this is a root of unskillfulness. You can’t go with it.” When anger comes up, even though part of us like to be angry, we say, “Nope, I don’t need that. I’ve got something better.” In this way, the level of skillfulness in your life does become more and more consummate. Then finally, purifying the mind, you realize these three principles are not all that distinct. Even minor forms of evil and to develop goodness until it’s strong, it really depends on the purity of the mind. Purity meaning both your intentions and how you carry out those intentions. The intention to be harmless and then actually carrying through with that. See, anything that comes up in the mind that disturbs the stillness and peace of the mind, take that as a warning sign. “This could be a problem.” Look into it. What would be the results of acting on that thought? And to what extent can you allow that thought to move in and take up residence in your mind? Because if you’re not careful, all kinds of things can come into your house and take up residence. You leave the windows and doors open. You leave the cellar open. Things come up from underground. Things come in from outside. Not just people, but all kinds of animals and things. This is the way it is with our mind if we’re not careful. We pick up all kinds of attitudes from other people. And, of course, things that come welling up within us. We’re here on the human realm because of our desires. There’s a lot of greed that goes into wanting to become human to begin with. So these are qualities we all have, we all bring with us, but we don’t have to act on them. We don’t have to keep feeding them. We can leave them out in the cold if we see that they’re causing harm. So getting the mind concentrated with a breath like this is an important first step in purifying the mind while you’re here with a breath like this. Make up your mind that anything else that comes into the mind that’s not related to the breath, you’re just going to let it go. And often you’ll be surprised to see what comes up. But for the time being, no matter how interesting or how amazing or how peculiar or strange the thoughts that come up in your mind, you just let them go, let them go. You’ve got something better to do here. You’ve got to develop the mind so that it’s scrupulous. You’ve got to develop the mind so that it’s got a high standard for what it wants out of itself. And when it establishes a really good set of standards, it sticks with them. That’s what these principles are. Be scrupulous, hold yourself to a high standard, and then develop the mind so that it can reach that high standard. That’s the message that the Buddha has for us. He had conveyed to his disciples, and he wanted them to convey it to other people. This is why we have these teachings nowadays. Once they had benefited from the teaching, they were happy to spread it to others. So the teachings have come down to us now. And it’s good for us to follow their example, practice these teachings so that we gain the benefits, and then it’ll be very easy to offer them to others. Both through our words and through our example. So take this time to pay homage to the Buddha and all those who brought the teachings down to us by putting the teachings into practice and gaining the benefits that they were intended to give. That’s how we show our gratitude. Gratitude and respect for our opportunity to follow this really fine and noble path.

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