Visakha Puja

May 20, 2016

What we did just now is called a misabhujja, paying homage with material things. They say that on the night of the Buddha’s passing away, the devas were sprinkling heavenly flowers, heavenly incense, singing heavenly songs in honor of the Blessed One. They mentioned one of the monks, and he said, “That’s not the way to pay homage to the Buddha. The better way to pay homage is through patipati bhuja, homage to the practice, when you practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. That’s when you show genuine respect for the Buddha. So tonight’s visakha bhuja, the night when we commemorate the Buddha’s birth, and then thirty-five years later his awakening, and then forty-five years after that his passing into total nirvana, is the night when we stop to pay special homage to the Buddha in recognition for all that he’s done for us. So close your eyes. Focus on your breath. The Buddha gained awakening, they say. He started out with breath meditation. So focus on your own breath. See what you can find here. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing. Let your attention settle there. See if you can keep it anchored there. Any other thoughts that come up in the mind that aren’t related to the breath? You can just let them go. You can think about the breath, though. Think about whether it’s comfortable or not, or how it might be more comfortable. What parts of the body could use some extra breath energy? Let them have that. Take an interest in the present moment. But guess where everything is happening? All your important decisions in life happen in the present moment. And yet all too often you’re not there. Part of you is there and part of you is off thinking about something else. And this is a shame, because it’s our decisions that shape our life, the message of the Buddha’s awakening. You look at the three knowledges that he gained in that night. He’d been practicing austerities for many years and realized that that was not the way. And then, in intuition, perhaps getting the mind in a good, solid state of concentration would be the way. And he realized that it was a possible way. But he was too weak at that point after all those years of austerity. So he went back and began eating again. Then he sat down and made a determination. As long as he hadn’t achieved final awakening, he was not going to get up. He could let his body grow dry, his blood grow dry, and his body waste away. But he was not going to get up. And he got his mind into concentration. And from there he gained three knowledges. The first was knowledge of his own past lives, back many aeons, remembering what he’d looked like, what his name was, what kind of food he ate, what kind of pleasure or pain he experienced, and how he died. It was a pretty quick summary of life. Appearance, name, pleasure, pain, food, death. He went over and over and over and over again. That was his first knowledge. The second knowledge was when he posed the question to the mind,”Does this happen to everybody? And when it happens, why? How?” He realized that the way you were born or the level of your rebirth was determined by your actions. Skillful actions done under right view led to happy rebirths. Unskillful actions done under the influence of wrong view led to unpleasant rebirths. There was a pattern. He hadn’t seen the pattern in his first knowledge. It was when he had the larger perspective, thinking about the entire universe and all the beings in the universe, that’s when the pattern became apparent. And the third question was, “Is there a way to put a stop to all this? This endless pleasure, pain, food, death, pleasure, pain, food, death, again and again and again?” And that’s when he looked into his mind in the present moment to see what intentions he was forming at that point and how he could change the world. And what kind of views he was having and what kind of views would be useful to putting an end to the process. That’s where he began to see things in terms of the four noble truths. In other words, where there’s stress, there’s craving. But when you put an end to the craving, that’s the end of stress or suffering. And it can be done through a path, a path of practice. And the right concentration was part of that path. And he realized the other factors of the path as well, starting with right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, all of which acted as the supports for noble right concentration. So he had four truths, and each of them had a duty. Stress or suffering was to be comprehended, its cause was to be abandoned, its cessation was to be realized, and it was to be done by developing the path. When he realized that he had completed the duties with all these things, that’s when he gained awakening. He discovered a dimension that was deathless, that lay outside of the cycle of birth and death and time, and all the eating and pleasure and pain and dying of space and time. That was his awakening. Now, the main message of that awakening is that your actions are important on the way. And then, as you continue in this cycle of birth and death, you can eliminate a lot of suffering just by learning how to act skillfully. But then there’s also another level of skill that lies beyond that, that takes you out of the cycle. But either way, it depends on your actions. Your actions are your most important possession. And Jon Swart used to like to notice that the Buddha would talk about how different things were not-self. Your body is not-self. Feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness, all the sense media, all the elements of the body and the mind, these are all not-self. But then the Buddha says, “We are the owners of our actions. This is something that really is ours.” Because it’s through our actions that we shape the pleasure and pain of our lives. And it’s also possible through action to get out. So this is why when the Buddha taught, he taught a path of action. He started his teachings with the Eightfold Path. His very last teaching was the Eightfold Path. In which he set a strategy for how to put an end to suffering. And he taught that strategy to whoever was ready to receive the lesson. So here we are. The question is, are we ready to receive it, make the most use of it? At the very least, we’re going to take the Buddha’s teachings to focus our attention on our actions. It’s in this way that we gain refuge in the Buddha, because he helps us protect our valuables, our actions. Through his example, his vision of life is relevant always. The fact that our actions have results, and that the results can last not only in this lifetime, but can go on and shape other lifetimes as well. Notice the plural there. It’s more than just one more life after death. There are many, many, many afterwards. This is what we’re really talking about. It places all the emphasis on action. There are some worldviews that say, “Well, you die and you either go to heaven or you go to hell and that’s it. Eternal bliss, eternal damnation.” And you realize that no human action could ever deserve eternal bliss. No human action could ever deserve eternal damnation. It makes you think that your actions are irrelevant. Something else is making the choice. But here, there’s nothing but action. And the results are proportional, commensurate with the causes. So it keeps throwing the attention back on your actions. And, of course, where are your actions coming from? They’re coming from your intentions. Where are your intentions coming from? They’re coming from the mind right now. So you want to be able to look at the mind right now as intently and as frankly and truly as you can. Because the state of your mind is going to determine the state of the actions you’re going to do. If you put your mind into a good state, it’s much more likely that the things you say and do and think are going to be for your benefit and for the benefit of others. That’s what skillful means. Something that harms no one. Something that is conducive to benefit. So look after your mind. And we look after the breath as a way of indirectly looking after the mind. In John Lee’s images of looking into a mirror, as you look into the mirror of your breath, you see your mind. The breath is abnormal. You work with the breath, and that’ll have an influence on the mind. So pay lots of attention. Pay lots of attention to how your breath is going right now, and pay lots of attention to how well your mind is staying with the breath. This is a quality of alertness. When the Buddha talked about mindfulness, or the practice of mindfulness, which is the basis for concentration, he focused on three qualities. There’s mindfulness itself. Mindfulness is the ability to keep something in mind. Alertness is watching what’s going on. And then there’s ardency, which is trying to do it well. There’s got to be an element of wisdom for this really to be part of the path. In other words, you have to figure out what are the things to keep in mind right now, what are the things to leave aside. Right now you want to keep in mind your desire to put an end to suffering and the need to practice. But you also want to keep in mind lessons you’ve learned from meditating in the past. What’s worked when the mind has been abstract for us? What was able to get it to settle down? And if you’re faced with that problem right now, then try to bring that knowledge to bear. What kind of breathing was quick? Where were you focused? When distractions come up—sensual desire or ill will or restlessness and anxiety—have you dealt with them in the past? If they come up now, will you recognize them? Do you know what to do with them? If you’ve been reading or listening to Dharma talks, or if you’ve had some practice in meditation, you’ve got a fund of memories there that you want to draw on. That’s bringing wisdom to your mindfulness. With alertness, of course, you’re focused on the present moment, but you want to focus again on what you’re doing right now and what are the results. There are lots of other things you could be focusing on right now, but they don’t keep you on track the way this particular focus does. You want to be wise not only in how you’re mindful, but also wise in how you’re alert. And then there’s ardency. You want to bring some wisdom to your ardency. What is skillful right now? If there’s something unskillful coming up in the mind, how do you deal with it so it doesn’t take over? How do you replace it with skillful? Once the skillful qualities are there, how do you maintain them so you can prevent unskillful qualities from arising in the future? Those are the things we want to work on. That’s our real work as meditators. Then there comes the issue of how much effort is too much, how much is not enough. In some cases that depends on what your strength is tonight. In other cases, it depends on what’s the problem. Some problems, all you have to do is just look at them and they wither away. Other problems, you look at them and they stare right back at you. They’re not going to go anywhere. That’s what they threaten. But you’ve got to figure out, “Okay, what can I do to think in new ways and breathe in new ways that can get around these problems?” That’s when you have to take a more proactive approach to ardency. So you want your mindfulness to be wise, you want your alertness to be wise, you want your ardency to be wise. Of the three qualities, ardency is probably the most directly concerned with wisdom because it realizes you take these teachings and you want to use them. You don’t just use them to decorate your fund of knowledge. You realize that you’re suffering and something needs to be done. And here the Buddha’s offering you some tools to deal with your own suffering. There’s wisdom right there. Again, the focus is on your actions. These are our valuables. When you take refuge in the Buddha, this is what we’re protecting. We take him as an example. And in so doing, we get our own actions, our thoughts, our words, and deeds more and more in line with what we really want. I mean, we all want happiness. And the big irony in life is that we do so many things that get in the way of our happiness. And the Buddha’s pointing out why. Because we’re ignorant of what we’re doing. Our alertness is off someplace else. Our mindfulness is off someplace else. Our ardency is off someplace else. We’re ardent, many times, in all the wrong things. Instead of doing away with unskillful qualities, we’re developing our cravings. We’re developing our attachments. We’re not really looking at what we’re doing. We’re not taking seriously what we’re doing. Now, we don’t have to be grim about this, but it’s going to make the difference between happiness and sadness, pleasure and pain. And there’s nowhere else we can turn. It all depends on our actions. So we’re going to be grateful to the Buddha for pointing these things out, that our actions are important, and also that he can point out ways in which we can peel ourselves away from our unskillful ways of doing things and developing more skillful habits in their place. I don’t know of any other teacher that keeps coming back to this again and again, the way the Buddha does, unless they’re followers of the Buddha, that your actions make all the difference and you are capable of doing really good things with your actions. He wants you to respect what in you is worthy of respect. This is why we should pay homage to him. Because he keeps us on our toes. He keeps us alert to what’s really important and what’s going on right now. So spend the remainder of the hour being right here, where your choices are being made. Because that’s what’s going to shape everything else in your life. you

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2016/160520_Visakha_Puja.mp3>