Asalha Puja

July 8, 2017

Tonight’s the Salah of Puja. It’s one of three nights in the course of the year that we stop and commemorate events in the Buddhist life. Puja means paying homage, and the different events are named in accordance with the month of the event. We sack our puja in the middle of May, commemorate the Buddha’s birth, and then thirty-five years later his awakening, and then forty-five years after that his final passing away. The Salah of Puja tonight commemorates his first Dhamma talk. Magha Puja commemorates an event where he had 1,250 of his Arahant disciples come and met without any previous arrangement. He gave a summary of the Dhamma and then sent them out to teach. Some people say that we sack our puja as the night for the Buddha, tonight’s the night for the Dhamma, and Magha Puja is the night for the Sangha. Actually, tonight’s the night for all of them. It’s the first time the Buddha actually taught the Dhamma. He gained a noble disciple. And in gaining a noble disciple, he proved that he really was a teaching Buddha. He wasn’t just a private Buddha. So all three of the triple gems became complete. So why are we commemorating this and why are we paying homage? It’s because the attainment that the Buddha had, and he was able to teach others to attain, was something really noble. As he said, there were two kinds of searches in the world. There’s a search for things that aid you to grow ill and die, and then there’s a search for things that don’t age, don’t grow ill, don’t die. There’s only one thing that doesn’t age, grow ill, or die, and that’s nirvana. The first search, he says, is an ignoble search. There’s nothing really special about it. This is the way everybody searches for things, even common animals search for things like that. But human beings are special. We can search for something noble. And it’s noble in the sense that it’s a true happiness, it’s lasting, and it doesn’t take anything away from anyone else. Every other happiness in the world requires that you feed off of somebody else. Our interconnectedness is actually inter-eating. Whereas nirvana is a happiness that doesn’t need to feed. It’s not dependent on conditions at all. And so it’s good that we stop every now and then to take note of these events, to remind ourselves that a true happiness like this is really possible. It wasn’t just something 2,500 years ago. It’s something that’s still possible today. The story of tonight goes that after the Buddha’s awakening, he sat in the pleasure of release for seven weeks. And then at the end of seven weeks, he thought about the possibility of teaching. At first he was discouraged. He realized that what he discovered was something very subtle. And something that was going to take a lot of effort to find. He wondered if there’d be anybody out there who’d be ready for that teaching. One of the Brahmins, Sankhapati, realized what was going on in the Buddha’s mind and he despaired. He said, “Oh my gosh, after all that work to gain awakening, now he’s not going to teach?” So he went down and unbended knee asked the Buddha to teach. He said, “There are those with little dust in their eyes. They will be able to understand the teaching and benefit from it.” So the Buddha considered the matter himself and realized that, yes, that was true. There would be people who could understand and be worth his while. So he decided to teach. Then the next step was, who was he going to teach first? First he thought of two teachers that he’d studied with in the course of his search. But then he realized that they had just recently passed away and gone into the formless Brahma worlds where they were totally out of touch. There was no way he could teach them. Then he thought of the five monks. The monks attended to his needs when he was undergoing austerities. They had left him when he’d started eating food, thinking that he’d given up on the search. But he realized that they would be ready to receive the teachings. So he set out on foot from Bodhgaya, walked all the way to Sarnath, and met them. When they saw him coming, they saw, “Here comes that slacker, that backslider.” They said they’d made a pact among themselves that they wouldn’t show him the respect the way they had before. But there was something about his presence that, as soon as he came, they couldn’t help themselves. But still, they didn’t want to listen to anything he had to teach. He said, “Look, I found the Deathless. Have you ever heard me make a claim like this before?” They realized that he was the sort of person who wouldn’t make idle claims or unsubstantiated claims. So they decided to listen. What he taught first was the Eightfold Path. It’s a path between two extremes. The extreme of sensual indulgence and the extreme of self-mortification. Now, when going between these two extremes, it’s not a path of middling pleasures or middling pains. It’s a path that uses pleasure and uses pain for a higher aim. It uses the non-sensual pleasure of concentration as nourishment, and it uses the pleasure of the problem of pain or the issue of pain as its main focus for developing discernment. Because when the Buddha went through the different factors of the path, he explained one of them that night, which was the factor of right view. Setting out the Four Noble Truths. And again, these truths are noble, just as the path is noble, because they are related to that noble search. These are the truths that allow you to see into the mind and understand where it’s creating unnecessary suffering for itself and how it can stop. And also how it’s tied up in things that age, grow ill, and die, and how it doesn’t have to. These are the Four Truths. That’s the truth of suffering. Now, the Buddha didn’t say that life is suffering. He said something a lot more useful, which is that suffering is clinging. Clinging to the five aggregates. He gave some examples. Aging, illness, and death. And all of these things, he said, the essence of what makes you suffer there is the clinging. Then there’s the cause, which is three kinds of craving that lead to becoming. Craving for sensuality, craving for becoming itself, and then even craving for non-becoming. The craving, in other words, to destroy an identity that you’ve developed in a particular world of experience. And the reason why that leads to becoming is because in trying to destroy it or hoping to destroy it, you take on a new identity. So it’s those forms of clinging that we have to deal with. Those are the things that cause us to suffer. The third truth is the cessation of suffering, which comes from abandoning clinging or becoming dispassionate towards clinging and craving. And then, finally, there’s the path to the cessation of suffering, which is the Eightfold Noble Path. That right view encompasses not only seeing that these four truths are truths, learning how to see your experience in terms of these four truths, but also realizing that each of them entails a duty. In other words, when you recognize that something is suffering, the duty is to comprehend it. And comprehending it here means understanding it so thoroughly so that you develop dispassion for the clinging. The duty with regard to craving is to abandon it. The duty with regard to the cessation of suffering is to realize it. And the duty with regard to the path is to develop it. That’s what he explained on that night. The reason this is called the Wheel of Dharma is because he explained the truths and their duties in a set of four and three variables. Then he worked through all the permutations. Back in the time of the Buddha, what we’d call a table nowadays was called a wheel. He went through each of the permutations. It was like going around the circle of the directions. So there are four truths, and then there are three levels of knowledge with regard to each truth. There’s knowledge about what the truth itself was, knowledge of the duty appropriate to that truth, and the knowledge that you’d completed the duty. So a Dhamma Wheel becomes complete at awakening, when you realize you’ve completed all the duties with regard to these truths. That’s what the Buddha said. As long as he hadn’t completed all those knowledges, he didn’t claim awakening. But when he did, that was when he claimed awakening. Because having completed all those tasks, he opened the mind of the deathless. Because the tasks all come together, there comes a point where you realize that the path has done its work, and then you have to let it go as well. So it’s your abandonment of all things conditioned. And every kind of clinging will be complete. One of the five brothers, Anyagondha Jnat, was able to understand the Dhamma, not just intellectually or conceptually, but following along, he was able to see where in the mind was his clinging and what was the craving that led to that clinging. Having explained to him, he developed a concentration and discernment that allowed him to complete the duties of the path. And he gained what’s called the Dhamma Eye, seeing that whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation. And that’s a thought that arises spontaneously in the mind only when you’ve seen something that is not subject to origination. In other words, something that is uncaused and unconditioned. And it’s a seeing that unconditioned, the deathless, is. That’s what the Dhamma Eye really sees. And that’s how he became the first member of the Noble Sangha. And the fact that he was able to understand that completed all the other parts of the Triple Gem. The Buddha was now a teaching Buddha. The Dhamma was now expressed. And there was someone who would benefit from it to the point of gaining the first glimpse of awakening. His discernment was very sharp. He didn’t have to have a lot of things explained to him. Ajna Gandhanya. We reflect on him, we reflect on the Buddha, and we reflect back on ourselves. We realize that the Buddha was able to basically gather all the fully bloomed flowers, you might say, or gather all the ripened fruit. Now we’re the ones left over. That doesn’t mean that we can’t become noble disciples ourselves. It’s simply that we require more work. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha spent forty-five years teaching. He was able to explain the Dhamma in a lot of detail so that people who didn’t have the discernment to pick up on it just after hearing a couple of phrases would be able to understand it and put it into practice. And as the Buddha said, you practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. That’s how you show homage to the Buddha. Just now we’re showing homage to what they call a misabhujjha, homage to the material things. We have the candles and flowers and incense. And they’re good symbols for the teaching. In other words, the incense is a symbol for a virtue. As the texts say, the fragrance of virtue goes against the wind. In other words, the virtuous person is attractive all around the world. The flowers stand for concentration, the blooming of the mind. And the candles stand for insight or discernment, the light that allows you to see what the mind is doing, see where the mind is creating trouble for itself, and also seeing how it is possible not to keep on creating that trouble. So those are the symbols. That’s the actual practice. And it’s through the actual practice that the Buddha said that you pay homage to him. This is the homage that he wanted. He said this is the homage that is appropriate to his attainment. He didn’t spend all that time looking for the deathless just so he could get candles, flowers, and incense. He wanted to be able to help people, all the beings of the world, that were ready to listen to the Dhamma in practice. We hear what he has to say and we don’t just stop there. We realize that what he has to say has a direct bearing on us. And the truths are not just truths to think about. They’re truths that carry duties. The Buddha’s not imposing these duties on you. But the simple fact of suffering in your own heart, that does put a squeeze on you. It makes it worth your while to look into what he has to say and give it a try. So right now we’re practicing concentration. Concentration can be an object that the mind finds congenial. It can be the breath. It can be the body. You can repeat the word buttho. Anything that you find congenial for the mind to settle down. So it has a sense of well-being in the present moment, a sense of clarity in the present moment. Because it’s in practicing concentration that you begin to gain a lot of insight into the mind. Concentration gives you nourishment. It’s your food on the path. It’s also your test case to look at how the mind is creating unnecessary suffering for itself and how it can, through its own efforts, begin to put an end to that suffering. Replace it with a sense of well-being, even though the well-being of concentration is not deathless. It is conditioned. But it’s a harmless and blameless happiness. You’re sitting here. You’re not taking anything away from anyone else. You’re not harming anyone else. You’re not harming yourself. You’re developing good qualities in the mind. And this strengthens you, as the Buddha said, when you have the pleasure that comes from this kind of concentration. It’s really helpful in overcoming your sensual cravings, even though concentration itself is a kind of becoming. The first thing you’ve got to deal with is the mind’s attachment to sensuality, because that’s a form of clinging that can’t play any role in the path at all. In the meantime, you use this type of becoming, the identity of yourself, as a meditator here in the world of a meditator’s experience. So you can look at other becomings. You can look at other thought worlds that appear in the mind, and be able to step back from them. You don’t have to jump into them as soon as they come past. You can step back and ask yourself, “Is this something I want to go with? What would be the results? What would be the long-term consequences of going with this?” In other words, putting the mind into concentration enables you to see, perceive, and understand the workings of the mind in terms of the four noble truths. This is why Right View on its own can’t do the work, but together with all the other factors of the path, and particularly with Right Concentration, it can develop the subtlety and the strength. So you can find something noble in yourself as well. Because when we pay homage to the Buddha, we’re also paying homage to a deep desire in our own minds, and a desire that’s worthy of homage, worthy of respect, a desire for harmless happiness, a desire for happiness that doesn’t need to take anything away from anybody, a happiness that’s unconditioned. The world teaches us not to pay attention to that desire. It tells us, “It’s impossible. Nobody can do that. Besides, we’ve got something really good to sell for you in the meantime.” That’s their attitude. But the Buddha was really concerned about this deep desire for happiness that we all have, a genuine happiness. And he says it’s something worthy of respect, because it is a possibility. So remember, as you’re paying homage to the Buddha, you’re also paying homage to good things in yourself as you practice. This is what the Buddha has you do with all of his teachings. You take the stories of the past, you take the various teachings he gave, and you bring them into your mind right now and see what implications they have for how you’re looking for happiness in your life and how you can do a better job of it. That’s when you really benefit from events like this. Bring everything inside, because it’s inside where the problem is, inside where the cause of the problem is, but also inside where the potentials for putting an end to the problem can be found as well.

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