Asalha Puja Listen Well

July 13, 2022

Tonight’s Asala Puja. Asala is the name of the month. Puja means homage. We’re paying homage to events that happened on the full moon night of Asala, the first year after the Buddha gained awakening. As you may remember from Visakha Puja, eight weeks ago. He gained awakening on the full moon day in May. And then for seven weeks, he stayed in the vicinity of the Bodhi tree, experiencing the bliss of release. At the end of the seven weeks, he thought about teaching. At first he was disinclined to teach because what he discovered was so subtle. He was afraid that he’d teach and not get any results. And so he was inclined not to teach. The story goes that there was a Brahma, Sahapati, who read what was going on in the Buddha’s mind and was really upset. He had gone to all that trouble to become Buddha and then was not going to teach what he had learned. So he came down from his heaven, cut down on one knee and asked the Buddha, “Please to teach that there would be those who have little dust in their eyes and they would benefit from his teaching.” So the Buddha contemplated again and realized that it was true. There would be those who would benefit. So he decided to teach. Then the question came, who would he teach first? He had started with two Jhanas, who had taught him formless Jhanas. He thought of teaching them, but in each case he realized that they both passed away. It was too late. They had gone into the formless realms where you can’t go to teach because they’re out of, incommunicado basically. So he thought of the five brethren. Prior to his awakening, he had gone through six years of austerities and the five brethren had looked after him in hopes that if he would gain awakening through his austerities, they’d be the first that he would teach. But then when he realized the austerity was going nowhere, he would die without having gained the release he was looking for. Then he stopped to think, would there be another way? He realized right concentration would be the right way, at least part of the way. But in order to get the mind concentrated like that, he needed more strength than he had. So he started eating food again. The five brethren were disgusted with him and they left. They figured he’s given up. There’s no chance that he’s going to gain awakening now. But it so happened that he was on the right path that led to his awakening in the full moon in May. So he thought of teaching them and he realized that they were in Sarnath, which is near Varanasi. So it took him about a week to walk there. The story goes they saw him coming from afar and they said, “Oh here’s that lazy Gautama coming to see us.” So they decided that instead of following their old path, one of rising up to greet him and treating him with respect, they just sent out some water. If he wanted to wash his feet, he could wash his feet. If he wanted to sit down, he could sit down. But they weren’t going to show any special respect. But as he got close, they couldn’t help themselves. They rose up, received his bowl, but still they addressed him as friend. They said, “This is not appropriate. You don’t address an awakened being as friend.” They said, “How could you be awakened? You gave up on your austerities.” He said, “Well, the austerities were the wrong way, but I have found the right way.” Still they didn’t believe him. Then he reminded them of his honesty. He said, “Have I ever made a claim like this before?” They realized, “No, you haven’t.” So they’re willing to listen to what he had to teach. He taught them the sermon that we chanted just now. He started out by saying that there were two ignoble extremes. One is the extreme of sensual indulgence. The other is extreme self-torment, self-torture, austerities. What he found was the middle way, which was the Noble Eightfold Path. He listed the factors, and then he explained the first factor, right view, in terms of the Four Noble Truths. And then he set out the wheel, that this sermon is named after, the Wheel of Dhamma. And then in those days, when you set out a table of variables and then went through all the different variables, it was called a wheel. We call it a table. They called it a wheel. He had the Four Noble Truths. And for each truth, there were three levels of knowledge. One was the knowledge of the truth itself. The second was the knowledge of the duty appropriate to that truth. And then the third was the realization that he had completed that duty. As he said, when he completed his duties, he would have got all Four Noble Truths. That’s when he realized he didn’t attain full awakening. He was no longer having any rebirth. His mind was released. Now two things happened after he gave that sermon. One was that while he was giving the sermon, the leader of the Five Brethren, Gundanya, gained what’s called the Dharmai. At his first glimpse of the Deathless, it’s expressed, whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation. That’s a formula that later gets repeated again and again and again. Every time anyone reaches stream entry, gains the Dharmai. That’s how it’s expressed. You have to think about what would induce that realization to appear in the mind. Because in some cases, it was in the minds of people who had already practiced a lot. In other cases, it was people who hadn’t practiced much at all. The idea of whatever is subject to origination occurs to you when you found something that is not subject to origination. It’s not created by any fabrications in the mind at all. That’s the Deathless. You realize that things that originated pass away. The Deathless doesn’t pass away. The other thing that happened at the end of the sermon was that the Deva set up the shout that now the Dhammacakka had been set rolling. The Dhamma wheel had been set rolling in the world. And no one could stop it. Because the wheel has another meaning in Pali as well, which means power. The range of one’s power. The Buddha’s power now is supreme over that of all the other teachers. So this is the event that we’re commemorating tonight. It’s the event that basically proved that the Buddha was a complete Buddha. He could teach the Dhamma so that others could gain awakening too. And it was the night when the Triple Gem became complete. We now had the Buddha, the Dhamma, and now the Noble Sangha. After the talk, Gundanya asked for ordination in the Buddha’s dispensation. So he became the first member of the conventional Sangha as well. So we commemorate this night because we realize how our refuge is complete. Think of a world in which these teachings are not available. No one knows for sure what is the true end to suffering. As the Buddha said, it’s a world that’s bewildered. It’s searching for an end of suffering, but it’s bewildered. Can’t find it. Now the way has been set out. So the question arises sometimes, often arises, why is it that people were able to gain the Dhamma and listen to the Dhamma? There’s a passage where the Buddha explains. He says the five factors are necessary. One is that you don’t despise the teacher. Two, you don’t despise the Dhamma. Three, you don’t despise yourself. In other words, you feel that you have the sense that you are capable of doing this. The fourth is that you apply appropriate attention. And the fifth is that you are single-minded. In other words, you listen to the Dhamma talk. Your mind doesn’t wander off someplace else. You follow it. And then you apply appropriate attention, which means you look into your own mind. See, what is this talking about that’s related to my own suffering and to the possibility that I could put an end to it? You see elements of all of this in the story around the Buddha’s teaching of his first sermon. First he had to make sure that they didn’t despise him. That his listeners didn’t despise him. And secondly, he asserted, he said, “I found the Dhamma,” and then he went on to say, “And if you listen to what I have to say and follow in line with it, you too will find the goal, reach the goal.” So he’s asserting both that he was not to be despised and also that they shouldn’t despise themselves. And then as he explained Four Noble Truths, he’s basically teaching, this is appropriate attention. This is how you look at things. This is how you look into your own mind. The First Noble Truth is, where is there suffering? Well, it’s in the clinging. What do you cling to? You cling to form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness. So Gandhanya was following along. He looked at his own body. He looked at his own feelings and perceptions and fabrications and consciousness. Look at the way he was clinging to these things. This is the suffering. Suffering is not something that we simply receive. We’re not simply on the passive receiving end of suffering. We’re actually doing something. We’re clinging. We’re feeding off of these things. As the Buddha explained it another time, when we feed off them, they turn out and bite us. And why do we do that? Because of craving. The Buddha listed three kinds of craving. Sensuality, for becoming, for non-becoming. Sensuality is your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures. Becoming is when you take on an identity and a world of experience. We crave these things. We crave the pleasures and so we crave the identity where we feel that we’re capable of enjoying these pleasures and that we are ourselves. And we’ll benefit from attaining them. But you realize that wherever there’s the pleasure, it’s going to be located in the world. And it’s not going to fall apart at some point. There’s stress and suffering there as well. Even craving for non-becoming. Once you start thinking in terms of your identity in the world, and you want to destroy that identity and destroy that world, you’re still stuck in the terms of becoming. So that craving too leads to suffering. The way out is to see what it is that leads to that craving. See what events are on the mind before you take on an identity and before you identify a world. And see them simply as events. Arising, passing away. One event causing another event causing another event. When you see them on their own, just the raw material from which we create this sense of who we are, of where we are, you realize there’s not much there. You’re trying to build a house out of very ephemeral things. In order to abandon this craving, you can’t just tell yourself to let go. You have to develop a path. Which is why the Buddha put the path first in his explanation. You have right view. Based on right view, you develop right resolve about how you’re going to act in ways that don’t involve sensuality, don’t involve ill will, don’t involve harmfulness. So first that applies to your actions, which is why right speech, right action, right livelihood are part of the path. And then you bring it directly into the mind. You look to see what in the mind is skillful and unskillful. You resolve to abandon whatever is unskillful and develop what’s skillful. And to do that, you need mindfulness. To recognize what’s skillful and recognize what’s unskillful. And to remember what’s worked in the past. To develop only skillful qualities in the mind. As you stay focused, ardent, alert, mindful, say in the body or feelings, mind, you get into right concentration, which the Buddha had already identified was part of the path. So these are the things that Gundanya was looking at in his mind. The text doesn’t say precisely where the insight was, but he was able to see how his mind created suffering. And he was able to develop dispassion for that. With dispassion, there came cessation. With cessation, there came release. Not full release in his case, but he let go enough to have his first taste of the deathless. It was because he was single-minded in watching what was going on in his mind. And then following what the Buddha had to say while he was saying it, watching his mind as he was looking at the realities in his mind. That’s what enabled him to let go. So the Buddha provided part of it, already inducing him to be willing to listen and to be willing to believe that perhaps he too could benefit from listening. And the Buddha gave him the framework for appropriate attention. This is how you look at things. This is how you analyze what’s going on in your mind. But Gundanya himself had to provide the single-mindedness that enabled him to see these things. So it wasn’t just words going past him, but his mind was quiet enough so he could actually see when there were events going on in the mind. He didn’t miss them. He saw what the Buddha was pointing to, the things that should be developed, he developed. Things that should be abandoned, he let go. So that’s the lesson we learn. This is how you practice. This is how you listen to the Dhamma in a way that gets results. And this is the way we show our true respect for the Buddha on the night of his passing away. He mentioned there are two ways of showing respect. There’s respect with material things. He calls it amissabhujja. Like we did just now with candles, flowers, and incense. And then there’s patipatipujja. We show respect with the practice. So take some lessons. Try to get your mind single. Look at it in terms of appropriate attention. Where is the stress? Where is the suffering? What are you doing to cause it? Don’t look outside. It’s by looking inside that we really see the truth. That’s what you can bring. That’s what makes a difference. So it’s important that when we remember events like this, we don’t just think of them as interesting stories. The Buddha’s awakening and the fact that he could teach the Dhamma, these were things that changed the world. And they should take central importance in our own lives. What is a good life to live? How to live a good life? The Buddha’s giving the prime example. These events were so important that when the Buddha gave an awakening, there was an earthquake. When he taught the Dhammacakka, there was an earthquake too. These were momentous events. We try to keep them momentous in our lives as they inform our practice. So we too can benefit. We give what we can in terms of trying to understand our minds, trying to be single-minded in approaching this. As long as we have confidence that yes, we can do this, that we become part of the process, part of the story too, the people who benefited from this Buddha’s dispensation, the choice is ours.

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