The Best News in the World

May 22, 2024

Tonight’s Vesakha Puja, we’re commemorating the birth, awakening, and passing away of the Buddha, all of which happened on the date of the full moon, Vesakha. The awakening took place 35 years after his birth. He’s passing away 45 years after his awakening. That’s the Vesakha. The Puja is paying homage. What we did just now is called Amisa Puja, paying homage with material things, flowers, candles, incense, walking clockwise around the sala. In the old days, it was a way of showing respect to someone. When you left, you didn’t just leave. If you really wanted to show respect for him, you would walk around him three times, giving your right to him, then go. But as the Buddha said, the best way to show respect to him is not through material things, but through the practice, practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. So that’s what we’re trying to do now. When the Buddha finally found the path to awakening, it started with right consciousness. So let’s start with right concentration. Focus on your breath. Keep your thoughts connected to the breath. And then evaluate the breath. How does it feel? You might try some long breathing for a while to see if long breathing feels good to energize you. And if it does feel good, keep it up. If not, you can change. Try shorter breathing, or in short, out long, in long, out short, heavy, light, fast, slow, deep, shallow. Experiment for a while to see what breathing feels best right now. We use our powers of evaluation in the world to bring them inside, to something really close to you, how your breathing feels, and what would feel good. I think that this is something we know pretty well. But for a lot of us, we have trouble saying, “Does this breath feel better than that breath?” So pay attention. Look at what you’ve got right here, right now. Because the Buddha was focusing on his breath the night of his awakening. There’s no difference between his breath and your breath. The difference lies in the qualities of the mind that he brought. And you can develop the qualities that he had. But it’s good to think about how he developed those qualities. By all accounts, he was a very sincere and dedicated person. Think about it. Someone who decides that the pleasures of his life, even though they were quite extensive, he was a prince, his father was king. And as he said, the pleasures of his life were pretty refined. But he realized that these pleasures are subject to aging, illness, death. He himself was subject to aging, illness, and death. And he found his happiness in things that were no better than him. Nothing was accomplished. So he was willing to sacrifice everything, go out into the wilderness, to see if he could find something deathless. That was a pretty awesome audacious desire, a pretty audacious aspiration. And looking at him from the outside, it might have seemed very unlikely. Here he was, a prince, used to own the most refined pleasures. How was he going to live off of alms? How was he going to endure the dangers and the fears that come with living in the forest? Well, it turned out that he had more care than one might have seen from outside. But as I said, those qualities of his character were things that anybody could develop. Heedfulness, ardency, resolution. Heedful in the sense of realizing that if you don’t really pay careful attention to what you’re doing, you’re putting yourself into danger. But if you do pay careful attention, you can avoid danger. Ardent and willing to do whatever it needs to be done. As I said, his quest was the quest for what is skillful. So whatever was skillful, he would do his best to develop it. Whatever was unskillful, he would do his best to abandon it. And as I said, in later years, when he abandoned something, he really abandoned it for good. Then resolution. Once he was going to take on a path, he stuck with it. So that he could judge whether it was a good path or a bad path. And he tried several false paths, with two different teachers first, then off on his own, practicing austerities. The austerities lasted for six years. He got to the point where he realized that if he continued with the austerities, he would die, but wouldn’t have attained anything special. So what was he going to do? This involved a fourth quality, which he lived by. He didn’t discuss that much in terms of his own practice, but it must have been there. The conviction that there must be something deathless. There must be some way that it can be attained by human effort. So he cast about for another possible way. He came across right concentration. He had entered right concentration spontaneously when he was a child. He recollected that. Could this be the way? And something inside him said, “Yes.” So he stuck with it. And as he stuck with it, he developed other qualities as well. Right resolve. Right mindfulness. Right effort. Ultimately all eight factors of the Eightfold Path. Finally developing right view. Realizing that the issue that he was trying to solve was the problem of suffering. To the deathless, first you had to understand suffering, figure out its cause, develop a path of practice so that you can abandon the cause, and then realize the cessation of suffering. In other words, instead of going straight to the deathless, he had to first turn around and look at what was the opposite of deathless. What was his immediate experience? Experience of suffering. This too would have been unexpected. Nobody else at that time taught anything like this. And in following this path, there was nobody to encourage him. The five brethren who had looked after him as he was going through his austerities, got upset when, in order to practice right concentration, he started eating more normally again. They decided he’s gone back to luxury. He’s given up on this path. So they left him. So there he was, all alone, with no one to encourage him. But again, he didn’t get discouraged. And he found that he could arrive at the answers to the questions he wanted to know. One was he found out, in terms of the three knowledge that led to his awakening. First knowledge was the knowledge of his own previous lifetimes. Because the question is, if you’re looking for something deathless, what if your life’s going to end anyhow with death, and that would be it. Nothing would follow through then. So he asked the question, had he been born before? Had he died before? And he saw, over the course of many, many aeons, that he had been born and died again and again and again. So he saw that this process was not something that was going to end on its own. It kept going. And it kept going up and down, up and down. And at first it looked like it was totally random. As he said, it was like a stick thrown up in the air. Sometimes it lands on this end, sometimes it lands on that end, sometimes it just falls splat in the middle. It looked pretty random. But the question was, was there a pattern to this? Was there a cause for the ups and the downs? And that led to a second knowledge. Knowledge of how beings die and are reborn in line with their actions. Skillful actions leading to good destinations, unskillful actions leading to bad ones. And he saw that it was very complex. Sometimes you could do some good in this lifetime, but if you had some bad karma from a previous lifetime, where you gave up on your good actions or developed a wrong view at death, then even though you did have some good karma, you could pull down to a lower rebirth. And vice versa. Some people could do some pretty bad things, but then they developed good karma afterwards, developed the right view at death. So they could delay those bad consequences. Which is why simply looking at his own lives, didn’t taught him the pattern. He had to see it played out across the whole cosmos. Some people back in those times had had similar insights in their meditation. And it stopped right there. Set themselves up as teachers, teaching rebirth, teaching karma. But that wasn’t what he was looking for. He was still looking for the deathless. And so it was in his third knowledge, that getting to the deathless was going to require understanding the intentions that drove his actions. The question was, was there a way of understanding action? Was there a way of directing the mind so that it could act in a way that would actually lead to the deathless? Again, that’s kind of unlikely. The deathless couldn’t be caused. So could you cause it through your own practice? What he saw was that you didn’t cause it through your practice. But you could follow a path that would lead you there, like the road going to a mountain. The road doesn’t cause the mountain to be. You’re following the road. It doesn’t cause the mountain to be. But if you follow the road, you get there. And that’s what he did. So he found the deathless. He found what he had been looking for. So this is the event that we commemorate. That night when he came, those three knowledges. And then found total release. There are many names for the deathless. Nibbana is the one that’s best known. Nibbana means the extinguishing of a fire. And to understand that image, you have to understand how they saw fire back in those days. There was a belief there was a fire element, which if it was agitated, would cling to grab hold of some fuel. And as long as it was grabbing hold of the fuel, it would burn. It would be agitated, hot. But if it let go, it would go back to a peaceful state. In other words, the freedom came not by the fuel letting go of the fire, but by the fire letting go of the fuel. And the image there is that you gain freedom not because you stop being held back by the things you cling to. It’s your clinging itself that’s causing the problem. And when you stop the clinging, that’s when you’re freed. Because if you saw the suffering, we think about suffering as pain, mental pain, physical pain. But he saw the suffering was in the clinging itself. Again, something very counterintuitive. But it worked. And because it worked, that was what he ended up teaching for the rest of his life. How other people could find the same dimension that he had found. This is why his awakening is such an important event in human history. It proved that human beings, through their own efforts, could put an end to suffering. He had been very reflective in how he had followed his path, so he could teach it well. So we chant, “Svahagato bhagavatadhamo.” The Dhamma, the Blessed One, is well taught. There’s nothing that has to be improved, nothing that has to be brought up to date. It’s a universal teaching. As he said, there are some things that are categorical, truths that are true across the board no matter what. One of them is that skillful actions should be developed, unskillful actions should be abandoned. And the other teaching is the Four Noble Truths. What suffering is, what its cause is, the fact that it can be ended by putting an end to the cause. And the way to put the end of the cause is through the Eightfold Path, which boils down to three things. Some of the factors are factors of virtue, some are factors of concentration, some are factors of discernment. As we practice these things, they lead to release. So the Buddha would tell the story of his quest for awakening and what he learned on the night of his awakening. As he said, there are many more things he learned on the night of his awakening that he didn’t talk about. After he came to awakening, he stayed in the area of the Bodhi Tree where he’d gained his awakening for seven weeks, experiencing the bliss of release and probably learning a lot of things in his awakened state. But he taught just the things that, those three knowledges, the fact that following the third knowledge led to release, led to the deathless. Because other people could do that too, to reflect on how he got there, the qualities that he developed, and the audaciousness of his quest, and the confidence with which he never let himself get discouraged. Or if he was discouraged, he found ways of getting past it. That’s how release is found. That’s how freedom is found. This is one of the reasons why you’re practicing. Never get discouraged. You realize there are setbacks? There’s got to be a way around them. Remind yourself, whatever the setbacks you may face, other people have faced them with the same combination of strengths and weaknesses that you have, sometimes with more weaknesses than you have. But they were able to find their way around those obstacles. If the story of the Buddha’s awakening is a little bit too far away from your own experience, well, think about all the other people he was able to teach. Lots of people from all kinds of backgrounds. But they were able to do it. As the Buddha said, one of the important skills that you learn as part of the path is not to let your mind be overcome by pain, not let it be overcome by pleasure. In other words, whatever pain there may be. And here we’re talking not only about physical pain, but also mental pain. The pain of discouragement is one of them. It can be there in the mind, but don’t let it take over. Ask for pleasure. There are going to be some amazing things you meet with on the path. But again, the Buddha gives the example. Think about how amazing it would be to recollect many aeons of your own past lifetimes, or to see the whole cosmos and understand why beings are born the way they are. But as he said, he didn’t let the pleasure of those knowledges overcome his mind. He kept up with his quest. There’s got to be something better than this. That’s why he said one of the secrets to his awakening was discontent with regard to skillful qualities. If he hadn’t attained the ultimate release, he wouldn’t rest content. There must be something better. He kept to that aspiration. And that’s why we have the Dharma that we have now. We have the news that there are people who can do this. That’s the best news in the world. Think about all those aeons and aeons where there are no Buddhas, and how dark life must be in those aeons. We look around us and the world looks pretty dark. But there’s the brightness that the Buddha showed can be found. He found it. He taught other people to find it. They found it. They’ve passed this knowledge on. Now it’s arrived to us. What are you going to do with it? If you have any fighting spirit, you’re going to decide this would be a good goal to have. And you learn to develop the same qualities the Buddha had. They’re all possible. As he said, if he was teaching impossible things, he wouldn’t teach. All the things he taught were possible. And if we accept this challenge, they can become possible in our lives. If we don’t accept this challenge, then we’re making them be impossible. But there’s no good reason to do that. So don’t let the bad reasons overcome your mind.

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