The Dhamma Eye

July 20, 2024

Tonight’s Asalha Bhuja. Asalha is the name of the month in Pali. And Bhuja means homage. We’re not paying homage to the month, of course, we’re paying homage to an event that happened on the full moon of that month, two months after the Buddha gained awakening. He taught his first sermon. We’re told that after he gained his awakening for seven weeks, he stayed near the Bodhi tree, experiencing the bliss of awakening, the bliss of release. And at the end of the seven weeks, then the question occurred to him, should he teach? At first he was inclined not to, thinking about how subtle it was, the Dharma that he’d gained awakening to. And then somebody, Brahma, who was a non-returner from the time of a previous Buddha, got upset, could see what was going on in the Buddha’s mind. He thought, ah, the world is lost. So he came down from his heaven, got down on one knee, and pleaded with the Buddha, please teach. There are those who will understand, those with little dust in their eyes. So the Buddha surveyed the world on his own, thought that that was true, that there would be people who would benefit. So he decided to teach. And the question was, who is he going to teach? At first he thought of his teachers, the two ascetics who had taught him formless concentration. But then he realized that they had gone to the formless realms. And when you’re in the formless realms, you can’t communicate with anybody. You’re out of reach. Then he thought of the Five Brethren, the people who would look after him during his six years of austerities. He saw that they were in Sarnath near Banaras Sea, which is quite a ways from where he had gained awakening. But he managed to cover the distance in a week. And so on the day of the full moon he arrived. At first they were inclined not to welcome him, because they thought he’d gone back to a life of luxury after his austerities. But they couldn’t help themselves. As he approached, they took his bowl, they washed his feet. But still they called him “friend.” “I was so.” The Buddha said, “It’s not appropriate to call an awakened one ‘I was so’ anymore.” He said, “How can you be awakened? You’ve gone to a life of luxury.” He said, “No, it wasn’t a life of luxury.” He said, “I found the deathless.” If you listen to the Dhamma, you can attain the deathless too. At first, again, they were disinclined to believe him. They said, “Look, have I ever made a claim like this before?” So they reflected back on his truthfulness. So they decided to give him a hearing. They gave the sermon they would call “Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion.” People often ask, “Where’s the wheel?” It’s in that passage where the Buddha talks about the four Noble Truths. And three knowledges appropriate to each truth. The knowledge of what the truth is, the duty appropriate to the truth, and the fact that he’d completed the duty. In the case of the first Noble Truth, the truth of dukkha, stress, or suffering, the duty was to comprehend it. He realized that he had fully comprehended it. The second Noble Truth, the truth of the origination or cause of suffering, which is craving. And the duty there was to abandon it. He realized he’d abandoned it. The third Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering, which comes with the total abandoning of craving. That’s to be realized. He realized that he hadn’t fully realized it. And then there was the fourth Noble Truth, the path to the cessation of suffering, which should be developed, the Eightfold Noble Path. He realized he’d completed the duty there. He’d fully developed it. And as he said, when he realized that he’d completed all these duties, that’s when he realized that he knew that he was fully awakened. That’s the wheel. The wheel is also a symbol of power. And as the devas called out, this wheel has now been set in motion. The symbol being that a king who has a chariot, who can drive unimpeded, has power as far as he can do that unimpeded. And as the devas said, now this wheel of dharma has been set rolling in the world, and there’s nothing to impede it. Now in the course of giving this talk, one of the Buddhists disciples now, Ajna Gondanya, or his name was Gondanya at the time, gained his first taste of awakening. As they say in the passage, “gave rise to the spotless, dustless Dharma-I.” He was one of those people with only a little dust in his eyes, and now the dust was gone. The question is, what did he see? The phrase they quote “whatever subject to origination is all subject to cessation” gives only a hint. Sometimes it’s translated as “whatever subject to arising is subject to passing away.” And it’s seen as a affirmation of the truth of the fact that things are inconstant and impermanent. But that’s not what it says. Whatever subject to origination. Origination means something that’s caused. And usually in the Canon when they talk about something being originated, it’s caused from within the mind. And what Gondanya saw was that, okay, everything that’s originated in the mind will pass away. But that realization occurs spontaneously only when you’ve seen something that is not originated and does not pass away. One of the Buddha’s later disciples, Sariputta, when he was asked, when he had gained the Dhamma-I, “Have you seen the deathless?” And he said, “Yes.” So the deathless is not originated. It’s totally unfabricated. That too is what Gondanya saw. And as you say, “Those who see the Dhamma see the Buddha.” He realized that what the Buddha said was true. There is a cessation to something. There is suffering in that deathless dimension. If they hadn’t fully realized it, there was more work to be done. They had confirmed that yes, the Buddha was right. And they say that when someone has attained the Dhamma-I, they’ve also attained the stream to Nibbana. In other words, it’s inevitable that they will gain full awakening. And in most seven lifetimes. In the meantime, they’ve cut three fetters. The first fetter is the fetter of doubt. Having seen the deathless, you have no more doubt about the Buddha. They’ve cut the fetter of attachment to precepts and practices, or habits and practices. You see that attaining the deathless is not a matter of simply following the rules. It requires an act of discernment. You can’t gain your way to awakening simply through brownie points. It’s also said that someone who’s gained the Dhamma-I has virtues pleasing to the Noble Ones, habits, precepts pleasing to the Noble Ones. So it doesn’t mean you’ve abandoned precepts entirely, but it means your relationship is different. In one of the passages in the Canon, they say that you’re no longer made of virtue even though you are virtuous. You hold by the precepts, but you don’t build an identity around that. The precepts are pleasing to the Noble Ones because one, they’re not torn, blemished, spotted. In other words, you hold to the precepts, the five precepts against killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, taking intoxicants. You hold to them firmly. But you’re also doing it in a way that’s conducive to concentration. Some people when they hold to the precepts get very nervous about them, afraid that they’ve broken this one and broken that one. But you realize that the whole point of the precept is to point at your intentions. And when your intentions are solid, you know your intentions well and you’re confident, that confidence then becomes a basis for concentration. You look at your actions and you see no reason for remorse. You haven’t harmed anybody. You haven’t harmed yourself or anybody else. So holding the precepts in that way is a source of joy. That’s why they’re conducive to concentration. The third fetter is that you let go of self-identity views. This is defined as saying you don’t identify yourself with any of the aggregates, form, feeling, perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness. You don’t see yourself as identical with them. You don’t see yourself as owning them. You don’t see yourself as in them or them as in you. Because you’ve had this separate experience, the consciousness that the Buddha calls consciousness without surface. And then it doesn’t reflect off of anything. The image is a beam of light. The sun rises in the morning. It goes through the window on the eastern wall of a house and shines on the western wall. If there’s no wall, where’s it going to land? It lands on the ground. If there’s no ground, where does it land? It lands on the water. What if there’s no ground or water? It doesn’t land. Most of us have a consciousness that lands someplace. It lands and not only that, it grabs on. This is a consciousness that doesn’t land. The image has one limitation, though. That beam of light goes in only one direction. But a consciousness without surface is beyond all directions. That’s what Gundanya saw. As I said, there was an earthquake. The Buddha had been able to teach the Dhamma after all. It wasn’t going to be an impossible task. The Dhamma wheel is now set in motion. It’s been rolling ever since. And here it’s rolling into our lives. It’s still rolling. There’s a saying in the Sutta, “No one can stop it.” Well, no one can stop it from going around the world, but if you ignore it, if you resist it, you’ve stopped it in your heart. So it’s good to think about this sermon and allow it to come in, realizing that there is this possibility. You just think of all the people the Buddha taught in the course of his 45 years of teaching. All kinds of people came to the Dhamma. Men, women, children, educated, uneducated, rich, poor, high class, low class. It wasn’t a matter of what background you had in terms of what you knew or didn’t know. It was simply a matter of being really true when the Buddha would give his talk leading up to the Four Noble Truths. You talk about generosity and virtue, the rewards of generosity and virtue in heaven, and the drawbacks of sensuality, and the blisses to be found in renunciation. Now renunciation sounds like a deprivation, but it’s not. You renounce your interest in sensual pleasures and you look for the pleasures of concentration. And you were there, then the Buddha would see that you were ready. He teaches the Four Noble Truths. At this point we realize that it’s the Four Noble Truths that are what he awaits. It wasn’t the Three Characteristics, it wasn’t any of the other teachings, it was the Four Noble Truths. So it’s good to contemplate them. Look at them in your own heart. Where are you suffering right now? Where is your clinging? Where is your craving that’s causing that clinging? First you focus on the cravings that are unskillful, so you can get more and more on the path. Ultimately though, of course, you have to let go of the path. But you don’t let it go until you’ve developed it as best as you can. They say that those who have gained stream entry, or seen the Dharma, have completed their training in virtue. That doesn’t mean they don’t have any training completed in concentration and discernment. They have some training. It’s just there’s more that needs to be done. But it’s interesting that when they talk about training under the Buddha, the people who are in training are the stream enterers. In other words, prior to that you’re getting ready for training. But only with the arising of the Dhamma are you really in the course of training. So that’s a challenge. How do you get yourself ready? Well, you work at the path as best you can. Work on your concentration. Work on your discernment. Work on your virtues, both in terms of holding to the precepts and developing good qualities of the character. This is something that’s often overlooked. A lot of people think, “Well, if I do the techniques of meditation well, I don’t have to spend a lot of time sitting. That’ll take care of it.” It doesn’t. It requires certain qualities of character, certain maturity, truthfulness, discernment, basic qualities that come with learning to be generous. This is why the Buddha said the heart of his teachings was that, or one of the phrases of the heart of his teachings was that you would avoid every evil, but you would try to bring your skillfulness to completion. Pusavasubhasamvada. So you don’t just strengthen your concentration, or strengthen your meditation, or strengthen just one aspect of the practice without trying to work on all of them. Otherwise you’re like a person who’s strengthened, say, one arm or one leg, but everything else in the body is weak. The body is going to be all out of balance. So you work on the complete path. That you are worthy of taking on the training. That’s when the Dhamma wheel has rolled into your heart.

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