Endurance & Restraint

February 12, 2025

Tonight’s Magha Puja. Magha is the name of a month, roughly corresponding to February. Puja means homage. And we’re not paying homage to the month. But it’s on the full moon of this month, in the very first year of the Buddha’s teaching career after his awakening. There was a spontaneous meeting in the afternoon, in Huelawana, the first monastery given to the Buddha. 1,250 arahants all met spontaneously, without any prior arrangement. There were probably the 1,000 arahants who were the three Kasma brothers and their followers. Plus the 250 who had followed Moggallana and Sariputta in leaving their previous teacher and becoming students of the Buddha. All of these were in the city of Ranchikara, or in the environs. And they all came to see the Buddha that afternoon. Basically, he gave them an account of the various teachings, from the most basic up to the most advanced, before sending them out to teach. It’s called the Ovada Baddhi Mukha. We don’t have the full text of the sermon. We have the verses that the Buddha stated at the end, which he summarized the main points. This is an important event in his teaching career. Nine months after his awakening, he now had more than 1,000 students to go and help him teach, spread the Dhamma. And so it’s an event that we remember, along with Visakhapujja, which we remember the night of his awakening. Asalhapujja, which we remember the day in which he gave his first sermon, and gained his first disciple. Now seven months after that, he has more than 1,000. We have events like this to remind us that we live in a year that we can make special, just as the Buddha made his year special. It’s probably one of the most special years in the history of the world. It’s good to bring that year and place it on top of our lives. Our year. To remind ourselves of the tradition we belong to. We’re not just meditating on our own. We’re part of a longer tradition. So it’s good to look at the teachings that the Buddha gave to set out that tradition. He doesn’t mention the formidable truths. He starts with patient endurance. The ability to be with difficult things and not react in unskillful ways. But you could say that most of the sermon that he gave that night, or excuse me, that he gave that afternoon, was about endurance and restraint. You show restraint as an expression of your endurance. You endure harsh words. You endure pains. You endure all the difficulties that come with living with other people. You may remember the simile of the acrobat and his student. The Buddha said when you practice, you’re gaining control over your mind through the practice of mindfulness. You’re helping others. And when you help others, you’re gaining yourself. In other words, you have to deal with other people. And it’s interesting, the Buddha talks about equanimity and patience as being two of the main qualities we have to develop in dealing with others. There wasn’t some starry-eyed Pollyanna thinking that we’re all going to love one another. He noticed that living with other people is difficult. And one of the main difficulties is how you talk to yourself about the difficulties. You’re told to talk to yourself in different ways. Remind yourself that you are, as the Buddha said, burning away your defilements. There are other people, other teachers at the time, who were talking about tapas, the practice of trying to burn away your karma or whatever. The Buddha didn’t believe in burning away karma, but he did believe in burning away your greed, aversion, and delusion. And you do that through patience and endurance. But the trick to patience and endurance is not just putting up with things. You learn how to talk to yourself in a way that makes you eager to be enduring, eager to have that strength. Because you know that’s going to lead to something really important. Because the next line in the talk was about nibbana. Nibbana is the ultimate goal. Patience and endurance is the ultimate means to that goal. So think about that. We sometimes think that by putting up with difficult situations we’re being weak and unassertive. But here the Buddha is saying that it’s connected with something really high, the total unbinding of the mind. And it’s expressed in restraint. You don’t harass others, you don’t oppress them, you don’t scold or revile them, you don’t injure them. You treat one another well. Where are you going to get the strength to do this? Well, the final line in the talk was about the heightened mind. Aticitta was another term for the practice of concentration. You practice restraint, not only in your dealings with others, but also in your own consumption of food. You have restraint in terms of the Bodhimukha, the rules for the monks, the rules of the monastic code. For laypeople, the rules of the five precepts, the eight precepts. You try to find a quiet place to live. So you can focus on the real work that needs to be done, which is inside. So the more you’re able to maintain harmony as a group, your ability to put up with difficulties that other people provide, and not respond with difficulties. They may be throwing things at you, but you don’t throw things back. That gives you the space you need in order to focus on the mind. The central part of that talk, or the central part of that verse, that summarizes the talk, is sometimes called the heart of the Buddhist teaching. Sambambhava-sakarana, the non-doing of all evil. Whatever you know that is not skillful, even if it’s a minor thing, you don’t do it. It may seem tedious focusing on the minor things, but this is where your defilements show themselves most easily, especially in your speech. You really have to be careful about what you say to make sure that it’s true. And beneficial. And timely. Because your speech often reveals defilements inside. Sometimes you distort the truth a little bit to please other people, or to look good in their eyes. And what is that if it’s not a defilement? It’s the little things like that that the Buddha wants you to be careful about. As Ajahn Mahan used to say, “Nobody ever got along with a log in their eyes.” But when you pulverize the log down into sawdust, it’s very easy to get it into your eyes and to blind you. So you look at the little things. Watch out for the little things. Avoid anything, you know, that’s in any way unskillful. Gusala suba samadha, the development of the consummation of all that is skillful. Here again, you want to focus on what you’re doing. Look at your thoughts and your words and your deeds as an area that you want to master as a skill. We’re born into this human realm. We have these human abilities. We try to think of all our activities as an attempt to be skillful in our thoughts, in our words, and our deeds. And look for every opportunity to be skillful. Don’t say, “Oh, I’m too tired today.” Well, what can you do to overcome that tiredness, or that attitude of tiredness, or the attitude that you’re being harassed and being too much put upon? Learn to talk to yourself in new ways. Because this is so much of the practice. It’s so much of the training of the mind, just talking to yourself in different ways. You may complain that it’s artificial, but Buddha, in all those ways he has, you talk to yourself. He didn’t say that just because it sounded nice. He wants you to actually say, “These are good ways to talk to yourself.” Take them on, make that part of your inner conversation. Make it the dominant part of your inner conversation. And see what happens. We’re here to train, not here just to express ourselves, or just to be ourselves. Because the selves that we’ve been for a long time have been involved in creating suffering. We want to learn new skills, and as we develop new skills, we become new people. Harmless to those around us. Steadfast in the face of difficulties. And not weighing ourselves down unnecessarily. Here again, you think about the principle of endurance. How you talk to yourself makes a huge difference. When I first came back from Thailand, people would ask me what was the most difficult part of being in Thailand. And I had to stop and think, and I couldn’t think of anything in particular. And I realized it was because I didn’t constantly harp on what was wrong. That’s what got me through. You think about the Ajahn Chah in the forest. They had to face much harsher difficulties, yet they were able to maintain a positive attitude. So take them as your example. They were not superhuman beings, human beings just like us. But they were willing to train. Not just be themselves, but to submit to the training. We don’t like that word “submit,” but that’s a part of what we have to do, so we’re not creating more suffering for ourselves. And finally, there’s the purification of the mind, making the mind bright and pure, bright and clean. Its thoughts and its words and its seeds, particularly through raising the level of the mind. Here again, think about the fact that the word “mind” here, citta, can also cover the heart. Trying to lift our heart, lift our minds, until we’re above the ordinary, back and forth of the human realm. We spend so much time picking up the news of other people. Picking up the moods of the people immediately around us. We should learn how to lift ourselves above those things. This is an image the Buddha uses again and again. When you’re discerning, it’s as if you’re in a tower, you’ve raised yourself above the issues around you. And the mind is no longer a slave to them, no longer takes them as its food. You feed off of something better, you feed off of wisdom. You feed off of discernment. It’s in this way that you can aim at that goal of unbinding, total freedom. It’s all too easy as we go from day to day to day to forget our larger goal, especially when there’s a lot of work around the monastery, a lot of work in the homes. But we can’t let the work run us. As the John Cohen used to say in time, we learn to do the work so the work doesn’t do us. Don’t do it in a way that’s not doing us. You do your jobs, you do your duties as a gift to yourself, as a gift to others. A gift to yourself in the sense you’re developing really good qualities inside. And those are going to be your food. That’s why the Buddha said that patient endurance is the ultimate austerity. It’s what burns away our defilements. You realize that you can survive difficult things. You don’t have to be totally oppressed by the work you have to do. You can raise your mind above it. Largely through the way you talk to yourself. So talk to yourself in a way that you find patient endurance something you want to develop and see it not as a weakness, but as a strength. And it’s one of your major tools in developing discernment. You’re not going to understand the mind’s relationship to pain until you’re able to put up with some pain. You’re not going to understand the mind’s way of talking to yourself unless you put up with the way other people talk to you. So you want to learn how to be eager to develop this quality of patience and endurance. As the Buddha singled it out as the beginning point of his teaching. There’s got to be a reason for that. Develop these qualities as your way of paying homage to the Buddha, all that he’s done for us. Do you think about that? Forty-five years after he gained Awakening. Teaching, teaching, teaching. Sometimes he’d go up into the forest to be alone, but we don’t know whether that was just to be totally alone or whether he was teaching Davis at the time. But we sense that there was somebody who could benefit from the teaching he went there. Even in his very last day. Because these days that we commemorate, Vesakabhuja, Salabhuja, Maghabhuja, two of them were important not only in the Buddha’s first year after he gained his Awakening, but also in the very last year of his life. Maghabhuja was the time when he gave up the will to live further. He called the monks together and gave another summary of the teachings. In this case it was the 37 Wings to Awakening. Then in three months he was going to pass away. Then on Vesakabhuja that year, that’s what he did. So let his years inform your years. Think about it, the fact that we have an awakened being, awakened to how to put it into suffering. And he taught that as freely as much as he could. We should see that as the main event in human history. And adjust our lives around it, adjust our attitudes around it. Let it inform the way you approach every day. And you won’t go wrong.

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