The Heightened Mind (Magha Puja)

March 1, 2018

Tonight’s Makkha Puja. The word puja means homage. Makkha is the name of the month in Pali. We’re not paying homage to the month, we’re paying homage because of an event that happened in this month, in the first year of the Buddhist teaching career. It was on this full moon day, in the afternoon, that 1000 Arhats and 250 of his Arhat disciples all spontaneously came to meet him. He gave them a teaching and basically sent them out. Of those Arhats, 1000 were the Arhats who had heard the fire sermon. The other 250 were the followers of Buddha and Moggallana. All of them had attained awakening after hearing only very brief Dharma teachings. Now it was time for them to go out and teach. So the Buddha taught them the basic principles of his teaching, from the very basic things all the way up to the nirvana. All we have left of that talk is the verse that concluded it, in which he just cited the main topics. One of the principal ones that gets repeated twice, actually, is being committed to the heightened mind. There’s a couple of meanings, “heightened mind.” For one, it means concentration. It’s interesting that of all the various factors of the path that the Buddha singled out, it was the concentration that he emphasized most. Concentration is what enables right view to do its work. Without the concentration, you can think and think and think and theorize about the Buddhist teachings. But you can’t really use them in the fullest way, unless the mind has been trained to be heightened in this way. It’s called heightened because you’re developing a pleasure that’s not sensual pleasure. It’s the pleasure of form, the way you feel the body from within. So we’re practicing right now, practicing the teachings as a way of showing homage. As the Buddha said at another time, in fact, the night of his passing away, the best way to show homage to him is not through flowers and incense, which we just did, but through the practice. So he urges us to be committed to the heightened mind. So let’s practice the heightened mind. Lift the mind above its ordinary concerns. Because when the mind is in concentration, you’re here with just the body in and of itself, the feelings in and of themselves, the mind in and of itself. In other words, these things are not as they relate to the world, but as they are simply experienced right here, right now. So you don’t have to follow the world. That’s another way in which the mind is heightened and rises up above the world. Because what are the concerns of the world? Gain and loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain. These things spin around, just like the earth. First there’s gain, then there’s loss, then there’s gain again. It goes back and forth. And as long as you follow these things around, you’re going to be spinning around, too. When you’re spinning around, it’s hard to gain a sense of what’s right and what’s wrong. You lose your sense of north and south, east and west. In other words, which direction you should go. So you have to heighten the mind, lift it up, so you can look at the rest of your life from this vantage point. Concentration together with discernment. The Buddha says that when you develop your discernment, it’s like standing up in a tower, looking down on the people below you. You see the way people run around after things, and there’s a strong sense of sanghvega. This is what human life is for most people. They’re just running after things that then keep slipping out of their fingers. And you look back at your own life, and that’s the way you’ve been living your life. But you have the choice. Do you want to continue that way or not? You’ve got this path. You can lift the mind above its ordinary concerns just by being with the breath in and of itself, the feeling of ease that comes by. Focus on the breath in a way that you’re not putting too much pressure on it. You’re just asking it, “What does the body need right now?” Have a sense of ease in the way you breathe. Think about the breath in a way that allows it to be easy. Then try to maintain this state of heightened mind. Be committed to it. And see what it has to offer. Another phrase in the passage we have from the Ovada Padimokkha is to cleanse the mind. Once the mind has been concentrated, then you look at where there’s still defilement in the mind. When greed arises, how does it arise? When anger arises, how does it arise? When delusion comes in, how does it arise? And how do you recognize it? How can you know when these things come? All too often we know them only when they’re full-blown and they’ve already taken over the mind. But when the mind is concentrated, you’re in a position where you can see. This is how they start. Because, after all, to get the mind concentrated, you’ve got to deal with distraction. You’ve got to learn how to recognize distraction before it takes over, before it pushes you out. This is how concentration does give rise to discernment. It’s not the case that you get the mind concentrated only then discernment comes. It requires some discernment in getting the mind to settle down and getting it to stay there so you can maintain the concentration. Otherwise, distraction comes in and suddenly you’re miles away and you don’t know what happened. Here it is. It’s your own mind. You don’t know what it’s doing to itself. That’s what you want to look into, to figure out how the mind fools itself, deceives itself. Like the wizard in The Wizard of Oz, part of the mind hides behind a curtain and directs things and deceives you into thinking that nothing’s going on. And then, when you’re the slightest bit distracted, it takes you off. So it requires discernment to see this. What are the warning signs that the mind is about to go off? When has it made the decision that it’s going to go off at the first available opportunity? When you can see that, then you can get more control over the mind. As the Buddha said, “The virtue of getting the mind under control, getting this heightened mind, is that you can learn how to think what you want to think and not think what you don’t want to think.” In other words, undesirable thoughts don’t take over the mind. At the same time, you become more discerning of what things really are worth thinking, what it’s worth wanting to think. Because you’re here more continually, you begin to see, “This thought leads to that, that thought leads to this, that thought leads to this.” You begin to see connections you didn’t see before. That’s what the discernment is, seeing the connection, seeing cause and effect. I know a playwright who used to lead a workshop on playwriting. He said, “It’s all about seeing cause and effect. If there’s going to be a story, there has to be something that happened because of something else.” What’s the same with understanding the mind? Things happen because of something else. If you don’t see that, then it’s not really discernment. You need to see the connections. And because the mind is here continually, you’re in a position where you can. You can follow the story all the way through. As soon as you heighten the mind in concentration, it puts you in a much better position. You can really see what’s going on in your mind so you can gain some control over it. You can train the mind so that even when it’s not in concentration, it does have a sense of being above the issues around you. So you’re not overwhelmed, say, by the aging, illness, and death of the body, the aging, illness, and death of people you love. Change is in society. It’s a part of the mind that can stay above all that. And if you’re committed to training the mind in that direction, you find that it does give you refuge. You don’t have to be spinning around after the world. You can stand above and watch it from above. Even the events in your own life, you can watch them from above. You can move in this way. And from this perspective, you’re in a much better position to make wise choices. So this is how we show homage to the Buddha and to the Noble Sangha. The Buddha for having found this path, and the Noble Sangha for having passed it on. So it doesn’t get lost from the world. And by practicing, we pass it on to other people, too. We set a good example. It’s when people stop practicing, that’s when the Dhamma’s going to die. It’ll become like a recipe for medicine. It’s just sitting around. Nobody knows, “Does it work? Does it not work?” They don’t see anybody using it. But people are still using the medicine. They’re getting the results. That inspires other people to use the medicine as well. So in paying homage to the Buddha, we’re also treating the illnesses of the world, starting out with a world of our own minds and moving out into the world at large. It’s good to have events like this every now and then over the course of the year. It helps you step out of the year. It helps you step out of the narratives around here. People all over the world have been celebrating this event for centuries now. So allow your mind to think about that, both the long period of time, over 2,500 years now, and also the fact that the Dhamma has spread around the world. People all around the world are commemorating this event tonight. Because we have events like this, it reminds us that we’re part of something larger than ourselves. And that thought should help give impetus to our practice.

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