Asalha Puja

July 27, 2018

Tonight’s Asala Bhujah. Asala is the name of the month in Pali. Bhujah means to pay homage. And we’re not paying homage to the month. We’re paying homage to an event that happened in this month, over 2,600 years ago. It was on the full moon of Asala in July. The Buddha gave his first dhamma talk, his first sermon, setting the wheel of dhamma in motion. And that wheel of dhamma had to do with the Four Noble Truths and the duties appropriate to them. And he described his awakening in terms of having realized what the Four Noble Truths were, what the duties appropriate to them were, and how he had completed those duties. It was only then that he knew that he was fully awakened. In the course of giving this talk, one of the listeners—there were five altogether at the time—got what is called a dhamma-i, in other words, gained his first glimpse of awakening. He was asked to be accepted as a monk, a follower of the Buddha. And so he became the first member of the Noble Sangha, the first member of the conventional Sangha. So we’re celebrating several things tonight. One was the fact that the Buddha was, as I say, a rightly self-awakened Buddha, someone who could not only gain awakening but also teach others. We’re also celebrating the fact that the triple gem is complete. First, there was the dhamma. The dhamma has always been there. It’s just a question of whether people discover it and know it or not. In the case of the Buddha, he was the first in our period of time to discover it. So then there was the Buddha and the dhamma. And then finally he was able to teach. So we have the Buddha, the dhamma, and the Sangha all together. So that’s the event we’re celebrating tonight, by paying homage to the Buddha, the dhamma, and the Sangha, both through the ceremony of the candle-circumambulation, but more importantly, through the practice, what we’re doing right now. Because an important part of that path to the end of suffering, and that’s what one of the Noble Truths is, is a training of the mind. So focus on your breath. Try to keep your mind with the breath. And think about how those events in the past have an impact right now. To begin with, we have the Buddha. He discovered that it is possible, through human effort, to put an end to suffering. He gained an awakening that, as he said, was like the leaves in a forest. And what he taught was the handful of leaves. This teaching on the Four Noble Truths was that handful. So it was an awful lot that he gained awakening to, but he realized that this was the most important thing to teach. He could have told everybody about all the wonderful things he saw in his awakening. But he thought it would be more useful to teach people how to find awakening for themselves. Because that was one of the messages of his awakening, was that the qualities that he developed to become Buddha were not something that were special to him. He wasn’t a god of some kind who came down. He took human qualities, good human qualities, and developed them. So the message is that we can develop ours, too, and find the happiness, that deathless happiness, that he found. And the fact that he was able to teach this to others shows that his discovery was something that is universal. In fact, that’s one of the meanings of “noble” in Noble Truth, is that it is universal. It’s not just a personal truth. It’s an opinion. It’s something that works for everybody. Because the nature of these truths is that they don’t just discuss the way things are, but they can imply duties, duties you can put into practice, so you can gain the results that the Buddha gained. The First Noble Truth is that there is suffering, there is stress, and it’s the big problem in life. And even though we may tend to think about the fact that we’re suffering because of things outside, because of the economy, because of our friends, because of our family, because of the weather, whatever, the Buddha said that’s not the real suffering. The suffering lies in the clinging. We hold on to things. We feed on things. And to be in a position of feeding is to be in a position of weakness, because we constantly need something new to feed on. You eat today and there’s nothing left in your stomach tomorrow, so you need to eat again and eat again. You constantly have to look for new sources of food, protect the ones that you’ve got. And there’s going to be conflict and there’s going to be instability. It puts you in a very precarious position. And as the Buddha said, when we’re suffering from anger, anything, we’re suffering from the clinging. The trick is learning to see what we’re clinging to that turns, say, an unfortunate incident outside in the world or some difficulty in your body into a problem for the mind. What is it that the mind is latching onto? You have to look for that. In fact, that’s the duty with regard to stress and suffering, to comprehend it, to see what’s actually going on. And also to see that it’s not worth holding on to. There are many things in life that we say, “Well, I’m willing to put up with the pain because I get so many other good things in response or in compensation.” But the Buddha says there’s something that doesn’t require that you put up with pain and suffering. It’s the happiness that doesn’t require this. So you want to look at all the things you hold on to and all the reasons you like the things that cause you suffering. And develop a sense of dispassion for them so you can get past them. That’s when you really comprehend them, you really comprehend suffering. As you get to know your suffering better, you also get to know the second noble truth, which is what is causing that. That’s craving, particularly craving for sensuality. In other words, the mind’s fascination with thinking about sensual pleasures and how you’re going to adjust the next sensual pleasure so that it keeps your interest up. That’s one of the things about sensual pleasures, is if you get the same one over and over and over again, it gets pretty dull. So the mind is constantly trying to embroider new ways of thinking about what the next sensual pleasure is going to be. That means we go through life looking at things as potential fodder for our desire for sensuality. In other words, we’re priming ourselves to hold on. We’re priming ourselves to suffer. That’s one form of craving that causes suffering. Another form is craving for becoming. In other words, you want to take on an identity in a particular world of experience because you think that through that identity and through that world you’re going to gain the pleasure you want. And we have many identities as well. Identities will go through the day based on all our different desires and the different sense of who you are, who’s going to be able to find that pleasure you want, and the you that’s going to enjoy the pleasure once you’ve got it. In other words, the you as the provider and the you as the consumer. And then there’s a world that’s relevant to that pleasure and blocks out all kinds of other aspects of the world. If you want an ice cream cone, the ice cream store is the place that’s relevant. The tire store is not relevant. Lots of things in the world are not relevant if you’re focused on ice cream. And once you’ve got the ice cream, then you think of something else you want, and then there’s a different world that’s relevant to your new desire. We go through life like this, from desire, desire, and a different sense of who you are, a different sense of the world you’re in. But those worlds collapse. So we keep desiring new ones. And this craving is what sets us up for clinging, for clinging to the sense of who we are and the world that’s going to provide us with our pleasures. We hold on tight to these things unless we get stuck. Once we’re thoroughly convinced that they offer nothing at all, which goes to the third kind of craving, which is a craving for non-becoming, to destroy our sense of identity, to destroy that particular world of experience. But the paradox is, if you try to destroy it, you take on a new identity as the destroyer. So there’s more becoming and there’s more craving. You don’t get out that way. That’s when you see that the craving leads to suffering. That’s when you decide that you should really abandon it, which is the duty with regard to the Second Noble Truth. The Third Noble Truth is the fact that it is possible to have dispassion put an end to craving and put an end to suffering that way. That’s a truth we should realize by practicing. And then the practice, the Eightfold Path, which boils down to virtue, concentration, discernment. Concentration we’re working on right now. Resolving not to harm anyone, not to intentionally lie, steal, kill, have ballistic sex, to speak divisively, to speak harshly. If we live a life of virtue, we create no trouble for ourselves, no trouble for others. That puts us in a position where we can focus on training the mind in concentration as the passion gets better, you begin to see the movements of the mind, to see how it latches onto things. You can see where the craving begins, why you fall for the craving, why you would like craving, why you would like the things that cause you to suffer. You can actually see that happening when the mind is really still. And you ask these questions. That’s the important part about the Four Noble Truths. They give you a framework for asking questions, because otherwise you take other frameworks. The big framework, of course, we have is “Who am I?” and “What kind of world is there out there that I can get my pleasures from?” With that kind of framework, the questions become, “Well, how do I maintain my identity and how do I get the pleasures I want?” But if you take the Four Noble Truths, you say, “This identity you’ve got, is it really worth holding on to? Those pleasures you think you want, are they really worth wanting?” It calls things into question. It gives you a new perspective with new duties. Then you start looking at the movements of the mind. Instead of saying, “How can I get what I want out of these movements?” you ask yourself, “Well, how do they happen? And where in the movement of the mind does the suffering get caused?” Because it is possible to use your mind and not suffer. But we’re using our minds in the wrong way. That’s what we’ve got to look for. So the Four Noble Truths force us to ask questions about the processes of our mind and how we can get past the processes that lead to suffering. So they shake things up inside. They say in the description of the Buddhist First Sermon that after he gave the sermon to the first disciple and gained his first taste of awakening, there was an earthquake. It’s symbolic of how it shakes things up in the mind when you start applying the Four Noble Truths. It shakes up your sense of who you are. You begin to see your sense of who you are as an action. It’s one of the movements of the mind, this sense of identification. You get to see how you create worlds of your experience as actions. And the question is, are these actions worth doing or not? In some cases, especially related to the path, there will be a certain amount of stuff that is worth doing, but then you see there are also actions that create totally unnecessary suffering. The path does require some clinging, it does require some desire, which means there’s going to be a little bit of stress or some stress in the path, but a lot less than the stress you cause yourself through other forms of clinging. The stress of the path is stress for the sake of happiness. Other stresses in the world, other sufferings in the world, are suffering for the sake of more suffering. In other words, they force us to keep acting in ways that create more and more suffering and pile it on, and we get pushed around by that suffering and we create more. It goes around and around and around like this. What the Buddha’s offering is a way out. He sets the wheel of Dhamma in motion. It’s not the wheel of samsara. It’s a wheel that leads out. So we can stop spinning around in the world and open up the heart to a happiness that’s above the world, beyond the world, that doesn’t require that we feed anymore, that doesn’t require craving. It doesn’t even require the path at that point. Once you’ve attained it, the path has done its work. The Buddha’s image is of a raft. You need the raft to get across the river. The river is the flood of views, the flood of becoming, the flood of sensuality, the flood of ignorance. The raft is composed of the factors of the path, one of which is right view. So you’re using right view to get beyond other views. Otherwise, you learn to look at the views of the mind. You look at the mind as actions through right view. Then you get to the other side of the river. Then you can look at right view in and of itself. You say, “Okay, it’s done its work. I can let this go too.” That’s when you put the raft aside. You don’t carry it around in your head. You’ve used it for what it’s useful for, and then you can put it aside because you’ve arrived. That’s what the whole purpose of this teaching is, is to arrive at that place. That’s the place of safety, where there’s true happiness and it doesn’t require any harm to anybody at all. And it’s never going to change on you. Even though the four noble truths start with stress, they don’t end with stress. They end with the end of stress. In the beginning of your realization, there is a dimension that can be touched by the mind. It’s the same dimension the Buddha touched, the same dimension that Anya Gondinya touched on that night. It’s still there. It’s always there. The question is whether we’re going to aim for it or not. Are we going to take these four noble truths and make them our personal guide, or are we just going to leave them as a story from 2,600 years ago? As the Buddha said, the Dhamma is timeless. But in our lives we tend to have too many other times for too many other things. So the day gets divided up into little times. But we do have this choice to step out of all those times, of all those little worlds of becoming, and find the happiness. And it’s the happiness that the Buddha is offering us. The choice is ours.

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