Dhamma Wheel

July 16, 2019

Getting the mind centered is a central part of the practice. And we do the practice both for our own good and as homage to the Buddha for having taught us this practice. Tonight’s Asalaha Bhujah. Asalaha is the name of this month in Pali. Bhujah means to pay homage. We’re not paying homage to the month, we’re paying homage to the Buddha. We’re paying homage to an event that happened on the full moon day of this month, like tonight’s full moon day. After the Buddha came to awakening, he spent seven weeks experiencing the bliss of release. Then the question came to him, “Should he teach or not teach?” At first he was inclined not to teach, and there was a Brahma who was really upset. He came down and said, “Please teach. There will be those who will understand.” So the Buddha surveyed the world and realized that, yes, there would be those who would understand. But it was going to be a challenge. Then the next question was, “Who are the first people to teach?” He thought it was previous teachers, the ones who had taught him some basic concentration techniques. But then their teaching stopped there, so he left them. He thought they wouldn’t be able to understand the teaching easily because their concentration was so good, but it turned out they had just died. So then he thought of the five brother monks who had looked after him when he was doing his austerities. He saw where they were, so he went to them. At first they were disinclined to believe him because, after all, he’d given up his austerities. But he said, “Look, I found the path to awakening and I’ll be able to teach it to you.” Then he said, “Have I ever made a claim like this before?” And they realized that he was a very truthful person, so they gave him the benefit of the doubt and listened to his teaching. He started with the Eightfold Path as the middle way between pursuit of sensual pleasures on the one hand and pursuit of self-torment on the other. That’s the middle way in the sense that it avoids those two extremes. It doesn’t lie halfway between the two extremes. As I said earlier, a central part of the path is getting the mind centered, and when the mind is centered there’s a very strong sense of pleasure, but it’s not a sensual pleasure. So instead of being halfway between the continuum between torment and pain on one side and sensual pleasure on the other, it’s off the continuum. Then he started explaining the different factors of the path. The Buddha was a complete Buddha in the sense that not only could he gain awakening himself, but he could teach others. This was also the time when the Triple Gem became complete. Up to that point, you had the Dhamma and the Buddha. Now you have the Sangha and the person of that first student, Anjaneya. He was the first to understand. So that’s the incident that we’re commemorating. We’re paying homage to it, because the Buddha has us respect something inside ourselves. It’s worthy of respect, which is our desire for true happiness, because he said this was the path that leads to happiness, that leads to awakening, that leads to knowledge, that leads to unbinding, which means freedom. So it’s the bliss of freedom. But to find happiness, you’ve got to understand suffering. That was the point of what he called the wheel of Dhamma in the middle of the talk that he gave. Back in those days, say if you were composing a philosophical treatise or a legal treatise, and you wanted to consider all the various permutations of putting different variables together, instead of making a table, as we would say in English now, they had what they called a wheel, where you’d go through all the different permutations. In this case, the wheel was the four noble truths, the truth about suffering and its cause, its cessation and the path to its cessation. Each of those four truths has three levels of knowledge. The first level is simply to know what it is. The second is to know the duty with regard to it. And then the third is to realize that you’ve completed the duty. So four times three, that’s twelve. That’s why the dhamma wheel here has twelve spokes. So we can imagine that Ajahn Gauden did not simply listen to the ideas, but he also started putting some of those duties into practice while he was listening. That’s how he was able to gain his taste of awakening. So what are those truths and what are those duties? The truth about suffering. The Buddha never said that the life is suffering. He said clinging is suffering, which means that suffering is not something that happens willy-nilly. It has a cause, and the cause comes from within the mind. It’s actually something you do. You’re not simply on the receiving end. We think of pain, the pain of the body, and we can often be on the receiving end of that pain. But the Buddha is talking about the suffering in the mind, which is something else. Because after all, even after his awakening, the Buddha did suffer back aches. He’s talking about the pain of aging, the pain of illness. He was actually injured one time. So there was physical pain. But he trained his mind not to suffer. That’s the suffering the Buddha’s pointing to. And he said it lies in the clinging. It’s something you’re doing. And that means it’s something you can learn not to do. And the duty with regard to suffering is to comprehend it, to look at these things that we’re clinging to. You cling to the body, you cling to your feelings of pleasure and pain, neither pleasure nor pain. You cling to your perceptions, the labels you apply to things, the images you have of the world. You cling to your thought constructs, the fabrications, the way you put your thoughts together. This is something a lot of us identify very strongly with, our ideas. Our opinions. And then finally there’s clinging to our consciousness, which is aware of all these things. And we cling because we’re passionate for them, and so we have to learn to comprehend them to the point of dispassion, to see that they’re not really worth all that hanging on. The second noble truth is the origination from the cause of suffering, and that lies in craving. We crave for things we want, and particularly three kinds we want. Sensuality, in other words, we’re fascinated with thinking about sensual pleasures. There’s craving for becoming, that’s taking on an identity in a world of experience. We usually do that around the pleasures we want. Where in the world is a pleasure you want? The parts of the world that help and the parts of the world that hinder you to get that. That’s the world at that particular point, as far as you’re concerned. And then there’s your identity in that world, the person who has the ability to get that pleasure and the person who will enjoy it. That’s a second kind of craving that leads to suffering. And the third kind is you find yourself stuck in a level of becoming, you don’t like it and you want to destroy it. So the duty with these three kinds of craving is to abandon them. The cessation of suffering is when you give up those cravings. That’s something you want to realize, that when you drop the craving, suffering stops. You drop it temporarily, suffering stops temporarily. You drop it for good, it stops for good. And you do that by developing the path. The path comes down to basically virtue, concentration, discernment. And the duty here, of course, as I said, is to develop it. So those are eight spokes out of the wheel. If you know what suffering is, what its cause is, you’ve got a few spokes in your wheel. But to know these things on the level of just having heard about them and thought about them is one thing. But we actually work with them. That’s when you get the real knowledge, the real discernment. I can actually cut through some of that craving and clinging. But in order to do that, you must have a sense of well-being, because otherwise it’s just going to go back to its old ways of feeding. This is where we practice concentration. So here we are, getting the mind centered, trying to gain a sense of well-being inside. Because we realize that the reason the mind suffers is not because of things other people do. It’s because of what we’re doing. So we need to develop some new habits. So instead of allowing the mind to wander around as it likes, we’re trying to get it to stay. At first, it’s going to squirm and find all kinds of excuses to go someplace else, but you have to be firm with it. You have to be mindful, keeping the breath in mind. You have to remind the story. And you have to be ardent. You really have to put your heart into this. Because even though craving is the cause for suffering, there are certain kinds of desire that are part of the path. It’s okay to want to develop skillful qualities. It’s okay to want to abandon unskillful ones. It’s okay to want to follow the duties, the formidable truths. That’s the kind of desire you should develop. This means, of course, that you have to get the mind very still so you can see what really is skillful and what’s not. Because it all comes down to our skill. The Buddha traced our craving, the cause of suffering, down to a word, avijjana, which means not knowing, but it also means not having skill. We don’t have any skills in consciousness. We don’t have any skills in apprehending suffering. We don’t have any skills in abandoning the cause. These are things, though, that we can develop. The same with the path. Everything from right view down to right concentration, these are things that we can develop in the mind. So the path is partly letting go and partly developing. It’s important that we have a desire to pursue this path, because otherwise our desires for things out in the world take over. Because what does the world say? The world says you’re suffering because you don’t have things that we can sell to you. You’re suffering because you don’t have the positions that we can offer to you. In other words, they’re telling you that suffering comes from outside and pleasure comes from outside. Which is the opposite of what the Buddha says. And so much of our lives are lived believing what the world has told us. But you have to ask yourself, does the world respect you for going along with its ways? And is that respect, if it is there, to what extent is it really worthwhile? The Buddha respects you for wanting happiness, true happiness, a happiness that doesn’t turn on you. He himself respected that desire in himself, and that’s why he spent all that time developing his perfections and trying all different kinds of ways to find true happiness. He was a very determined person. And so he constantly respected that desire for true happiness. He didn’t give up. He didn’t say, “Well, maybe it’s not possible. Maybe what I’ve got is good enough.” As he said, the secret to his awakening was not to be content with his level of skill. If he hadn’t found the end of suffering, he was going to keep at it. And so he reached his aim. He respects our desire for true happiness, too. That’s why he taught. It wasn’t an easy job. There were all kinds of opponents at the time, and even the most monks and nuns who ordained with him, even they were rebellious at times. But he came out victorious. He established the Dharma so that he could teach not only his contemporaries, but also leave the way for awakening open to us 2,600 years later. So we think about that, and we realize that here’s a person really worthy of homage. The event we’re commemorating tonight is one of the events that showed exactly how much he could offer the world, and how much we can benefit by taking his teaching seriously. So as you’re sitting here with a breath and other thoughts come into the mind, you ask yourself, “What do you really respect? The respect of pleasures offered by the world, or do you really respect the true happiness that the Buddha says is possible?” Of course, you don’t have any immediate proof of what he says. But there should be something inside us that says, “True happiness is something that really sounds worthwhile.” And the idea that it is possible, which the world denies so much, is something we should take out, dust off, and take seriously ourselves. Because you think about the motivation, the Buddha’s motivation for looking for awakening. He realized that everything that he found in pleasure and everything he found happiness in was subject to aging, illness, and death. He himself was subject to aging, illness, and death. And so the pursuit of those things was eventually going to leave him empty-handed. The question was, “Is there pleasure? Is there happiness?” That’s not subject to aging, illness, and death. That would be worthwhile. That would be something really to give your life to. And that’s what he did. We have our lives. What are we giving them to? If we decide that the Buddha was right, can we pay homage to him? He’s an amazing person who brought this truth into the world and established it in such a way that we can hear it too, even though we live on the other side of the earth many, many years later. So if you take his teachings and put them into practice, you’re paying homage to the Buddha and you’re paying homage to your own desire for true happiness. And that act of homage is good all around for you and everybody around you. [Thai] [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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