Magha Puja Fight Fire with Fire

March 6, 2023

Today is Magha Puja. Magha is the name of the month which straddles February and March. It’s the full moon of that month. We’re not paying homage to the month; we’re paying homage to an event that happened on the full moon of that month. 1,250 of the Buddhas are undiscipled souls. They all came to meet. There hadn’t been any invitation issued, there hadn’t been any meeting planned, but they all came for the meeting. The afternoon of that day, the Buddha gave a sermon called the Avada Padimokkha, which is basically a summary of the main points of the teaching. Then he set them out to teach. They had already gained awakening, so for their own purposes, they didn’t need to be reminded of these points. But many of them had gained awakening after listening only to one Dhamma talk from the Buddha. So he wanted to fill them in on some of the other details. The Dhamma talk would be taught to people who didn’t go straight to Arahantship on hearing the Dhamma once. So we commemorate that date, the beginning of the establishment of the Dhamma. The Buddha had already sent other of his students out to teach before them, but they were smaller numbers. But this was a huge group. We don’t have the text of the full sermon. All we have is the set of verses with which the Buddha concluded it. This was one of his ways of teaching. He would give a Dhamma talk, and then at the very end he would give a verse that summarizes the main points, so that people could remember them easily. We chanted that just now. We started with kanti-brahman-dapo-jjigah. Patient endurance is the foremost austerity. It’s interesting that the Buddha begins the talk with fire imagery. The word for “austerity” in Pali, dapo, also means burning. They would talk about how people could meditate and develop a power inside that could be used for all sorts of purposes. The Buddha said the best purpose is not to exert power over other people, but it’s to develop patience and endurance in your own mind. Of course, the ultimate, then, is nibbana. That’s the next line in the verse. That’s putting the fire out. So we’re not here just to create meditative power. We’re here to use that power for a good purpose, to bring true peace to the mind. That’s the purpose of the teaching. Then the rest of the verses have to do with basically developing virtue, avoiding unskillful behavior. That is the practice of concentration. So as a way of paying homage to that message, let’s practice concentration now. This, too, is a kind of fire. One of the terms in Pali is jhana. It’s related to a verb jyati, which means to burn with a steady flame. There are lots of different verbs in Pali for burning, but one has reference to a steady flame, the kind of flame you’d find in an oil lamp. That’s jyati. We’re going to take the fires in the mind and focus them and steady them. We have the fires of desire. Focus your desire on getting the mind to settle down. Stay here with the breath. This is called homage through practice, that circumambulation. We had that just now. That’s homage through material things. That’s misibbhuja. We have the flowers, we have the incense, we have the candles in homage to the Buddha. The incense is symbolic of virtue. As the Buddha said, “The fragrance of virtue goes against the wind.” The flowers represent concentration. As the mind blossoms, as it begins to settle down. And then the candles represent the light of discernment. But the Buddha wasn’t interested just in symbolism, and he wasn’t just interested in receiving material homage like this. As he said, the highest homage is homage through the practice, when you actually take his teachings and you put them into practice. After all, that’s why he taught. That’s why he went to all the trouble of developing all the perfections of a Buddha. Not only could he find the ultimate peace, the ultimate happiness, but he could teach the way to others. He said they, too, could follow his teachings. The Arahant disciples who met on that day were proof that the Buddha had attained all those perfections. They had seen the Deathless within themselves. They had achieved nibbana within themselves. Now they were free to do what they wanted. He pointed out that the best thing to do would be to teach others. Now that you’ve taken care of your own problems inside, the problems of the suffering and stress that you create for yourself, now that your minds are totally free of suffering, you can go out and teach. So we think about that event. We think about all the people who’ve carried on the teachings since then. John Swedman once made the comment that one of the things a person discovers on becoming an Arahant is that there has been an unbroken line of Arahants. There always have been Arahants in the world ever since the time of the Buddha. Sometimes the numbers are very, very small, other times they’re larger. But there’s always been somebody someplace who’s practiced the teaching all the way to the end. In some cases, the tradition of the practice and the traditions of scholarship have diverged very widely. Other times they’ve come back closer again. We’re dependent on a long line of people to keep the Dhamma alive. When we sit and meditate, especially when we’re off meditating on our own, it’s hard. Sometimes you get a sense that you’re in this with other people. But when you start thinking about the events that led to the fact that you have the Dhamma available to you, you realize that you’re dependent on a long line of people. You’re part of a larger social movement, the movement to keep the true Dhamma alive, not only for your own purposes, but also to pass it on. So this is how we pay homage to the Buddha. And also how we pass the teachings on, by practicing. You’re sitting here, focused on your breath. Have a sense of the importance of being devoted to getting the mind heightened, as the Buddha said. How is it heightened? We lift the mind above its ordinary sensual interests, its sensual desires. You take pleasure in the form of the body as you feel it from within. This is a higher pleasure because it doesn’t require that you take anything away from anyone else. Unlike the pleasure of sensuality, nobody’s going to fight over your breath. At the same time, it’s a pleasure that, unlike sensual pleasures, doesn’t intoxicate the mind. It can be very strong and very compelling. But it requires that you keep the mind clear as you’re doing this. If the mind isn’t clear about where it’s focused, how it’s focusing, it begins to blur out. So the pleasure of right concentration is a reliable pleasure. Think of the Buddha as he was on his quest for awakening. There was a period when he’d gone through six years of austerities, and realized that it was a dead end, literally. I mean, he could have died. He’d not accomplished anything. So he thought, “Could there be another way?” He’d already tried the formless attainments that he’d learned from some other teachers. “Is there something else?” He thought of a time when he was a child and spontaneously entered into the first jhana while sitting under a tree. The question arose, “Could that be the way?” And something inside him said, “Yes.” So he asked himself, “Why am I afraid of the pleasure that comes with that jhana?” He said, “There’s nothing to be afraid of.” So he pursued that. That’s devotion to the hidden mind, because this is a pleasure that had nothing to do with sensuality. So learn how to appreciate this. The Buddha has to repeat that many, many times. Respect for concentration. There’s a passage where he talks about the different types of respect that keep the Dhamma alive. He says, “Respect for the triple training.” And then he basically repeats himself. Respect for concentration, because concentration, of course, the heightened mind, is part of that triple training. But it’s so easy for people to overlook it, so easy for people to discount it. People want to take a shortcut on the no-bladeful path and make it a sevenfold path, forgetting about the jhanas, looking down on people who take what they say is the slow route. As the masters of the forest tradition said, if the Buddha said there are eight factors in the path, there must be eight factors. We don’t try to outwit the Buddha. We don’t try to cheat on the path. We try to develop all eight of the factors—right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. All these things go together with all the other right factors of the path. As Ajaan Lee points out, the concentration is probably the hardest of the different factors. He makes the comparison of building a bridge over a river. You put the pilings on this side of the river and the pilings on that side of the river. That’s relatively easy, because as you get to the sides of the river, the water is shallow and the current is weak. But the pilings in the middle of the river, those are the ones that are hard. The river is deep, the current runs strong. There’s a lot you have to fight against when you get the mind into concentration, but the fight is worth it, because this is what gives solidity to the path. The sense of well-being that comes from the mind is really concentration. That’s your food on the path. It’s your nourishment. It’s also what guarantees that when insight comes, it’s not going to be disorienting. After all, what are you going to be learning? You’re going to be learning that the things you’ve liked to do are the things that are actually causing suffering. Things you’ve identified with, you’re better off if you don’t identify. If you don’t have a good, solid place to let the mind rest and let the mind gain its strength, those kinds of insights are going to be very disorienting. So we do the work. Get the mind to settle down. Get it to stay settled down with a sense of being just right, balanced, here in the present moment. That’s where we’re following the path. We’re following the teachings that the Buddha gave to be disseminated to those arahant disciples. And they took them out and spread them around. They’ve reached us now. And we’ve depended on people who’ve not only taught these things in the past, but also practiced them to show that they’re for real. We can read about integrity. That’s one thing. But when you actually sense integrity in the tradition through the people who’ve been practicing it, that makes a much larger, more lasting impression. And it convinces you that maybe there’s something really genuine here. So if you’re genuine in the practice, you can pass on the genuine Dhamma. Even if you don’t teach out loud, just the way you behave, that’s fine. That’s a teaching right there. So you have to ask yourself, what are you teaching the people around you? Try to make it a teaching where you’re passing the Dhamma on to.

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