Keep the Dhamma Wheel Rolling

August 1, 2023

Tonight’s the Sahlaha Puja. It’s the night in which we remember the Buddha’s first sermon, which established the Dhamma, and also completed the Triple Gem. And that one of the listeners, Anya Gondanya, gained the Dhamma I while listening to the Dhamma. He became the first noble member of the Sangha, and also the first member of the conventional Sangha. He immediately asked the Buddha for ordination and the Buddha gave it to him. That was the night in which the Triple Gem then became complete. The Buddha became Buddha two months earlier, although there was still no proof that he was a full Buddha. A full Buddha has to be able to teach others to get away from his awakening. So tonight was also the night in which he proved that he was a genuine, full Buddha. The story goes that after he gained his awakening, he spent seven weeks sitting in the vicinity of the Bodhi Tree, experiencing the bliss of release. Then the question came up, should he teach others? And at first his mind was inclined not to, because he realized the difficulty in establishing the Dhamma and the Vinaya, especially in a way that was going to last. The story goes that somebody, Brahma, was able to read the Buddha’s mind and was distressed. The Buddha had gone to all that trouble to gain awakening. And he was in a position where he didn’t have to teach. His total purity meant that he would no longer have any debts to anybody. But this would mean that the world would be deprived of the Dhamma. So he came down from his Brahma heaven, got down on one knee, and begged with the Buddha, “Please teach those with little dust in their eyes.” The Buddha, concerned upon his own, realized that that was true, and so resolved to teach. Then the next question was, who to teach? At first he thought of his two teachers, early on in his career when he had gone to study with them and that they taught him Formless Jhanas. He realized that, at the time, that this was not the goal that he was looking for. He had gone off, practiced on his own. But he thought of them and he said, “If they could hear the Dhamma, they could probably benefit from it right away.” But he realized also that they had just passed away. Then he thought of the five brethren, the monks who had helped him when he was going through six years of austerities, but then had left him when he had given up on the austerities. He said, “They should be able to appreciate the Dhamma.” So he went in search of them. They were at that time in Sarnath, near Banaras. So he walked all the way there, apparently within one week. It was a long distance. When he arrived, they saw him coming from afar, and their first reaction was, “Oh, he’s a musical slack-off. We’re not going to show him any respect.” But they could help themselves. As he approached them, they set out a seed for him, washed his feet. But they still called him “friend.” He said, “It’s not appropriate to call me friend now. I’m now awakened.” They said, “How can you be awakened? You gave up on the practice.” He said, “No, I didn’t give up. I found the actual way.” Twice they resisted. And the third time he said, “Have you ever heard me make a claim like this? Before.” And they realized that he hadn’t, that he was an honest person, was not inclined to make false claims. So they listened to him. He taught them the Dhamma. We noticed that setting the Dhamma wheel in motion. He started out with a judgment. We usually think of the Buddha as teaching us that we should accept things, be non-reactive, just accept whatever comes. But that’s not the way he taught. His very first sentence was saying, “There are two paths that should not be followed by those who have gone forth. One is the path of sensual indulgence, and the other is the path of self-torture.” Then he set out the path that should be followed, which was the Middle Way. Now, it’s the Middle Way not in the sense that it’s halfway between pleasure and pain. It’s middle in the sense that it gets everything just right. In this case, its approach to pleasure and pain was that you use them as tools. Part of the path was right concentration, which has some very intense pleasure, but it’s not a sensual pleasure. That pleasure is meant to be used as a tool. In the course of it, you’ll also be contemplating pain. But not for its own sake. You’ll be contemplating so you can comprehend it, see where the suffering is in the pain. Pain of aging, pain of illness, pain of death, physical pain, mental pain. You comprehend that it is basically the clinging to the aggregates. Now, that may not sound as familiar as the idea of pain. The aggregates are activities of the body and mind. We cling to these things and lay claim to them as ours. And in the act of clinging, we create suffering. What we are is suffering. Because what we are is our attachment to the aggregates, these activities. That’s a pretty radical claim. The things that we value, so much that we hold on to them. The Buddha’s basically saying, “No, they’re not worth it.” So again, he’s asking us to make a value judgment. So he sets out the path of the Middle Way. It’s composed of eight factors. Again, he calls them right factors. There’s right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. It starts with right view, because as he noted, every path starts with a view as to what is possible in life and what is of value in life. And then based on that, your resolves and your thoughts and your words and your deeds, the things you hold in mind, the things you concentrate on, are all determined by right view. So in his explanation of the path, in that evening, he focused on right view. Wrong view, of course, would be in the case of the path of sensual indulgence, the idea that the highest possible pleasure is sensual pleasure, so you might as well do what you can in order to get it. Based on that, you would have the resolve for more sensuality. You would have ill will for anybody who got in your way. And you’d be inclined to harm them. And we see all around us people willing to fight wars just because of their greed. And the things you say, the things you do, the way you find your livelihood, the things you hold in mind, the aspects of the mind that you encourage, the aspects of the mind that you discourage, the things you concentrate on, all these come from your view that sensuality is the highest form of happiness. That, the Buddha said, is wrong view. In the case of the path of self-torture, pain then becomes the idea that you do everything to endure pain. And then your resolves and your actions and things you concentrate on are based on that idea. So the Buddha instead sets out right view, the view of the middle way, which is that suffering is basically clinging to the aggregates. The cause of suffering is craving. Craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming. The end of suffering is when you can abandon that craving. And the way to the end of suffering is to follow the Noble Eightfold Path. Now, each of these truths entails a duty. And this is where the Dhamma Wheel comes in. If you’ve ever chanted the Sutta, you know the passage where the Buddha says, “This is suffering. This suffering is to be comprehended.” And then when he’d realized that he had comprehended it, that was part of his awakening. The same with the cause of suffering. In each case, in the case of each truth, you have the truth and the duty associated with it, and then the fact that the duty has been completed. The Buddha goes around the Wheel. Nowadays we’d call that a table. In those days, they called it a wheel. You go around all the permutations. So in the case of craving, the duty is to abandon it. And in awakening you realize you have abandoned it. In the case of the cessation of suffering, the duty is to realize it. And in awakening you realize you have realized it. The path is to be developed. And again, you realize that you have developed the path. When you have all twelve spokes in this Wheel, that’s complete awakening. And as I said, it was with this talk that the Buddha set the Wheel in motion, which means that he had now taught the Dhamma for the first time. And from this point on, the Dhamma would go around the world. As we see tonight, here we are on the other side of the world, and yet we still recollect this day, because we realize how important it is, the fact that the Dhamma is still alive in the world. It’s still there to be practiced. It still has its imperatives. Like right now, we’re trying to develop right concentration, get the mind focused on the breath, think about the breath, evaluate the breath, to see what kind of breathing can give rise to a sense of pleasure, rapture, refreshment. Keep focusing on the breath. That’s the beginning of right concentration. Then as you can maintain right concentration, your sensitivity to what’s going on in the mind, the movements of the mind, skillful or unskillful, become a lot more clear. So that’s your view as to what’s causing suffering in your mind. It gets a lot clearer, it gets more and more right. Because when we start with right view, it’s basically the discerner that comes from listening and comes from thinking, seems to make sense. But it’s only when we actually fulfill all the factors of the path that our right view becomes more and more complete. So right view informs our practice, our practice informs right view. The two help each other along. So this way, we’re showing homage to the Buddha on the night that he passed away, 45 years later. He said it is possible to pay homage to the Tagadha, that’s his name for himself, with flowers and incense. But that’s not genuine homage, like what we did just now, carrying the candles and flowers and incense around the sala. It’s one way of showing respect for the Buddha. But the most genuine way of showing respect is to actually put his teachings into practice. Because after all, he didn’t work all those many, many lifetimes to become Buddha just to get flowers, candles and incense. He wanted to set the Dhamma in the world in such a way that people could benefit from it. The Dhamma is always there, simply the way things are, how they function. But it takes the Buddha to point this out, to discover it and make it clear, and establish it for others. And it will last for a while. The Buddha says in some cases, the teachings of some Buddhas lasted only for a generation or two, because they didn’t make the effort to set out the Dhamma the way he did. He taught the Dhamma in detail, in terms of basic principles, the rules of the Vinaya. Those long 45 years that he had foreseen would be difficult, and they were. Sometimes we get the impression that he floated around on a lotus blossom. But that’s not the case. He had to deal with sectarians who argued with him, sectarians who made false accusations against him. And even people who were ordained in his Sangha would misbehave in lots of ways, and he had to set forth the Vinaya. And he did it in such a way that it has lasted. So we’re fortunate it’s still with us. We meet together on a night like this to express our appreciation for the fact that the Dhamma is still there. The Dhamma wheel is still rolling. We can do our best to help it keep on rolling by practicing. So it’s good that we have events like this every now and then, to remind ourselves it’s not just us sitting here meditating. It’s part of a larger movement. The efforts of lots and lots of people to keep this valuable teaching alive. And so we can participate in that movement as well. And as we reflect on it, this gives us more energy in our practice. So that we can complete the Dhamma wheel within ourselves. So that we can know the truth of suffering and comprehend it, and reach the point someday where we realize we thoroughly have comprehended it, and so on with the other truths. As the Buddha said, the fact that he awakened wasn’t due to any special qualities that he had and nobody else had. They’re qualities that anybody can develop. Heedfulness, resolution, and ardency. We all have these qualities to some extent in some areas. And he’s asking us to apply them to this big problem of suffering. Because after all, we all start out life, our first encounters with pain, as he said, give rise to two reactions. One is bewilderment. Why is this happening? And the second is the desire to find somebody who can explain a way to put an end to it. Well, he provides that answer to those questions, to end our bewilderment, and to show us the way. So he’s dealing with a basic problem that’s not just a problem for Indians 2,600 years ago. It’s for everybody. No matter what your race, your nationality, your background. This is a problem we all have. And he’s offering an answer that will work for all of us. So it’s good to remember the events of this night, so we can help keep the Dharma Wheel rolling.

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