

In Line with the Truth

May 28, 2010

What we did just now is called *amisa-puja*, or paying homage with material things: candles, incense, flowers. Now's the time for *patipatti-puja*, or paying homage through the practice.

Tonight's *Visakha Puja*, the full moon of May. The Buddha was born on a full-moon day in May. Thirty-five years later, he gained awakening on a full-moon day in May. Then, forty-five years after that, he entered total nibbana on a full-moon day in May. So, we're commemorating three events tonight, *the* major events in the Buddha's life. And, as he said on his final night, the best way to pay homage to him—and we want to pay respect, we want to show our gratitude—is through practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, which means that we have to train our minds.

So we sit here focusing on the breath to train the mind in mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment, persistence, compassion for ourselves and others. All sorts of good qualities get gathered together here if we focus properly on the breath. Try to focus with a sense of ease, as a way of showing compassion to yourself. We all want happiness, and this is a good place to find it, because the breath is always there—and the happiness we find from the breath is something that we don't have to take away from anyone else. It doesn't place any burden on anyone else. No one else is going to try to steal it away from us. Nobody's going to come in and try to take the pleasure of a comfortable breath away from us. This is our own territory here, so we want to make the most of it. That's compassion.

To stay with the breath requires mindfulness, keeping it in mind, remembering that this is what you want to do: You want to stay here with the breath, you don't want to spend the hour with your mind wandering all over the place, because that wouldn't be in line with the Dhamma. It might be in line with your defilements, but practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma means that you have to change yourself to be in line with the Dhamma. You don't try to change the Dhamma to be in line with your own ideas.

We've followed our whims, we've followed our desires for who knows how long, and where does it get us? It gets us into more suffering. So now it's time to bring the mind into line, keeping it with the breath. Wherever it branches out, you just have to cut off that branch and come right back to the breath. Actually, you don't have to cut it. You just let it go and don't pay any attention to it, don't follow it, and it'll die on its own. Just keep coming back to the breath, back to the breath.

Each time you come back, reward yourself with a good, comfortable breath, something that feels really good deep down inside. If there's any part of the body that seems to be deprived of breath energy, think of opening it up and the breath penetrating in, so that you can touch the Dhamma with the body. That's an expression the Buddha uses to describe

the mind in concentration: the sense of well-being that's not just in your head. It's throughout the body.

You develop alertness, watching what's going on, to check and make sure that everything is where you want it. If it's not, you can change. This way, the mind develops concentration, thinking about the breath and evaluating the breath, being totally focused on issues of the breath, to give rise to a sense of ease, well-being, rapture, fullness.

This is the good thing about practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma: It brings us well-being. It's not the case that the Buddha's going to gain anything from it. We're the ones who gain from it, and it's a sign of his great compassion that he asked for this kind of homage. He had dedicated his life to finding the Dhamma so that he could find true happiness and then teach it to others, so that they could find true happiness for themselves, through their own actions, through training their minds.

This is the way we show our respect and gratitude for that intention, by taking the teachings he gave us for the purpose of training our minds, for the purpose of finding a true happiness within, and using them for that purpose. Even though our greed, anger, and delusion may have other ideas about where true happiness might be found, we've followed them long enough. We've associated with them long enough. We've listened to them, followed them, and where do they take us? Just back to more and more suffering, again and again and again. And yet we never seem to learn.

Now we're trying to learn: What would be a better way of finding happiness? Although we don't have absolute proof that what the Buddha said was true, at least it sounds reasonable, we've seen other people who've received good results from the practice—so we give it a try, we give him a fair hearing. We give the Dhamma a fair test.

Now, to test the Dhamma requires that you be *genuine* in your practice, you be *true* in your practice: In other words, you really do what the Buddha recommended, because if you're going to test it, you have to give it a fair test.

Right before he died, he gave his last teaching on being heedful, to remind us of our motivation for doing the practice. If we don't do it, we'll just keep going around and around and around, doing all kinds of unskillful things, saying unskillful things, thinking unskillful things, and then having to suffer the results. Then we come back and say, "Well, maybe let's try it again." If we keep going around and around like this, it's a sad affair because we're not the only ones who suffer. We create lots of suffering for the people around us, too. Each time you're born, you need food, clothing, shelter, medicine. As a human being, you need care, and all this places a burden on other people. This is why the Buddha said that the path to the end of birth, aging, illness, and death is a path of compassion, both for yourself and for the people around you. So you want to be heedful about how you do that, to be really careful in doing it right.

Then, right before the Buddha gave that final instruction on heedfulness, he asked everyone, "Are there any questions?" When you think about it, it's pretty amazing: This

person's about to die, and he asks for any last questions. He stated his offer three times to show that he was serious, and then he said, "If there are any monks who are embarrassed about speaking up in front of everybody else, you can speak to a friend sitting next to you." Still nobody spoke up. Ven. Ananda said to the Buddha, "I'm convinced that there's no one here who has any doubts." "Well, you speak out of conviction," the Buddha said, "but I speak out of knowledge. It's true." The most backward of the monks there was a stream-enterer, had seen his first taste of awakening.

What's important about this incident is that it shows the importance of questioning. The Buddha was open to questions, but also that he wanted you to be open to questions as well, to ask yourself, to *grill* yourself about what you're doing. He called this process "cross-questioning." You cross-question the teacher, the teacher cross-questions you, and then you learn how to cross-question yourself. You develop all kinds of important qualities this way, but two in particular: mindfulness and alertness.

Sometimes people would ask the Buddha a question, and before he gave them an answer, he'd cross-question them about something that they were familiar with, something they already understood, to show that what they already understood would give them some insight into what they were doing in the meditation.

For example, someone asked him, "Why is it that when some people receive your instructions they gain awakening, and other people receive your instructions and they don't?" The implication being that the Buddha was being unfair or biased, giving awakening to some people and not to others. But the Buddha asked him, "Have you ever given directions to anyone?" The man said, "Yes." "The road from here to Rajagaha—can you tell people how to get there?" The man said, "Yes," and gave a description of the route to follow. The Buddha said, "Okay, when you give these instructions to people, do all the people who receive your instructions get to Rajagaha?" The man replied, "Oh, no, sometimes they take a wrong turn and they end up way out west." But then, as the man said, "What can I do? I gave the same instructions to everyone—some people listened and followed them, other people didn't." And the Buddha said, in the same way, when he gives teachings to people, it's like giving directions on a path—some people will follow the directions and get to the results at the end; other people won't follow the instructions, so they won't get the results.

This kind of cross-questioning tries to make you remember lessons you've learned from life that you can apply to your practice: This is one of the functions of mindfulness. When you come up against an issue in your practice, you can ask yourself, "What have I learned from the past that can help me with this problem right now?" That's one kind of cross-questioning.

Another is just looking at what you're doing right now. Look at the results you're getting—are they good? Is the mind settling down as you'd like it to? If it's not settling down, what could you do to get it to settle down? Once it's settled down, what can you do

to keep it alert? When it's steady and alert, what can you do to see if there's still any further work to be done? Any inconstancy in your concentration? Any stress? What can you do to let go of that? In other words, you let go of the cause, stop the cause, so that the mind can get even more and more steady, more and more grounded.

This kind of cross-questioning develops alertness. Mindfulness and alertness are *the* basic factors that we have to bring to our mindfulness and concentration practice, and they involve questioning. It's not just a matter of doing what you're told. When the Buddha talks about practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, he doesn't mean just following the instructions blindly. You have to check and see: If the results you're getting are not what you want, what can you do to bring your actions even further in line with the Dhamma? What lessons from other areas of life can you apply here so that you really do get the results that the Buddha promised—a happiness that's totally unconditioned, one that's not subject to inconstancy, or stress, or not-self.

So practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, on the one hand, means that you have to submit to instructions, and many times you do things that the mind doesn't want to do. The mind wants to wander round and look at the flowers, look at the sky, play games with whatever little animals it finds along the path. But no, we've got *work* to do. If we don't develop these qualities of mind, there will be a lot of problems down the line—lapses in our mindfulness, big blank spaces in our alertness—and we can end up doing all *kinds* of harmful things.

That's because when the mind's sense of well-being is not really solid, events can change, and the mind changes with those events. As long as society is relatively peaceful, relatively calm, we don't see that there's any opportunity where we'd actually do evil in any way. But say things start falling apart—food is hard to come by, water is hard to come by, basic necessities of life get harder and harder. Some people will turn to killing, stealing, lying, and all other kinds of harmful activities, because that's the only way they can think of to get what they want. You have to ask yourself, can you guarantee that you wouldn't fall into that pattern yourself?

The only way you can guarantee it is if you've found something really solid inside, where your confidence in the Buddha has been verified in your practice. This is what heedfulness means, realizing that the mind is capable of all kinds of things, so you want to develop the qualities that will ensure that what you're capable of is all good—and as for things that are unskillful or harmful, that you're not going to be capable of doing them. You wouldn't want to go near.

So on the one hand, practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma means following the Buddha's instructions; but on the other hand, the Buddha's instructions also have you question what you're doing. Call to mind lessons you've learned from the past, examine what you're doing in the present moment, so that your test of the Buddha's

teachings gets better results, and becomes a genuine test, a fair test, in which you test yourself as well.

You find that when you're true, the Dhamma becomes true for you, too. And we find that the more we practice the Dhamma, the more we do want to pay homage to the Buddha, the more gratitude we want to show him, because the good things he taught, the good things that he discovered, are not just casual things that anybody can pick up—they required a really special person, a really dedicated person, to find them.

So we want to show our gratitude and respect for that dedication. After all, it's *because* of the Buddha's dedication that we're here practicing. Without him, where would we be right now? It's because we have him as our admirable friend, as he put it, that we're able to let go of the causes of suffering and stress, and find a measure of true happiness. As we devote ourselves to this practice of the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma—questioning our actions, using this process of questioning to develop further mindfulness, further alertness, further integrity—we'll find that what the Buddha taught is something really beyond price.