

Asalha Puja

July 5, 2020

Tonight's Asalha Puja. Puja means paying homage. Asalha is the name of the month—June, July. Of course, we're not paying homage to the month. We're paying homage to events that happened in this month on the full moon. After the Buddha had gained awakening, he continued to experience the bliss of release for seven weeks. Then, at the beginning of the eighth week, which would have been about a week ago if this were that year, he decided to teach. First he thought of his two teachers who had taught him before he had gone off on his path of austerities. He realized that they had passed away and gone into the formless realms, where they couldn't be contacted. So that was their loss. Then he thought of the five brethren who had attended to him during his austerities and had left him when he stopped the austerities. He realized that they were in Benares, so he decided to go there. He walked for a week.

When they saw him coming, they said, "Oh, here comes that lazy Gotama." They made a pact that they wouldn't attend to him as they had in the past. But they couldn't help themselves. As he approached, they took his bowl, prepared a seat. But they addressed him as *avuso*, or friend. He said, "This is not appropriate. I've gained awakening." They said, "How can you have gained awakening? You've left the path of austerities." So he gave the talk that we chanted just now. It started out with how the path of austerities was an extreme that was to be avoided, just as sensuality was an extreme to be avoided. Instead, he taught the middle way. This was his first teaching.

There are two striking images in the teaching. One is the name of the teaching, which is Setting the Dharma Wheel in Motion. The other is the image of the middle way. This is a middle way between the extremes of devotion to self-torture or devotion to sensual pleasures—but it's not a middling way. In other words, we don't go halfway between pleasure and pain. Think of Ajaan Chah's image. Self-torture or pain is like the head of a snake. Sensual pleasures are like the tail of the snake. We see that the head has teeth, so we know we shouldn't catch it there. But then we think it's okay to touch the other end because it doesn't have any teeth. But of course, the two ends are connected. If we were to take a middling way, it would be like picking up the snake by the middle, which wouldn't help with anything at all.

When the Buddha's talking about a middle way, he's talking about getting off the continuum. Ordinarily, we go back and forth, back and forth between sensual

pleasure and pain. To avoid the pain, when we don't see any other alternatives, we go back for sensual pleasures. But sensual pleasures have their drawbacks, and often lead to more pain. The purpose of the path is to get us out of that back-and-forth—to learn how not to touch the snake at all.

The back-and-forth is very similar to that hell described in one of the suttas: a big iron box, with flames coming out of each wall of the box, and reaching over to the other side. Hell beings are in the box, running around, their flesh being burned away and then being replenished so that it can burn away again. Every now and then, a door opens in one of the walls. You can take that as the prospect for sensual pleasure. They go running to the door, but just as they get there, it slams shut. Then another door opens on another side, so they go running over there. And just as they get there, it slams shut. This goes on for a long time. Finally, they get to a door that doesn't slam shut. But then as they rush through it, they fall into the hell of excrement.

That's symbolic of the way people tend to run after sensual pleasures because they think that it's the only escape from pain. Yet, all too often, either they don't get the pleasure, or the pleasure's going to entail more pain.

We need to get out of that back-and-forth. That's what the middle way does. It provides a way that transcends that back-and-forth, precisely in the pleasure offered by the factor of right concentration. That was the factor that the Buddha discovered first of all the factors in the path.

You know the story of when he was performing his austerities. Finally, after six years, he realized that the path of austerities was leading nowhere. He could die and not gain the awakening he wanted. He asked himself, "Is there another path?" He remembered a time when he was young and had entered the first jhana spontaneously. So he asked himself, "Could this be the path?" And something inside him said, "Yes." But then he realized that because he'd been starving himself, he didn't have the strength to get the mind into good strong concentration. That's why he left his austerities.

So the key to the path—and as the Buddha sometimes said, the heart of the path—is right concentration because it provides an alternative. It's neither sensual pleasure nor pain. It's a pleasure that's non-sensual, a pleasure of form. This pleasure is special because, unlike sensual pleasures, it doesn't intoxicate the mind. It doesn't have to involve any unskillful attitudes. It's part of the way out. The other seven factors of the path are then its requisites, or its supports.

In his first sutta, though, the Buddha actually talks about only one of the other factors, which is right view, and he defines it in terms of the four noble truths.

The first truth is the truth of suffering. It's not that life is suffering, or that there is suffering. Suffering is clinging. That truth points inside. The five brethren who were listening to this realized that they were going to have to look inside themselves. Where was their clinging? What kind of clinging? Why do they cling? That was the second truth. Three kinds of craving: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming. These are the things that cause us to cling in ways that create suffering. The structure of the truths is then that it's possible to put an end to that clinging by putting an end to the craving. That's the third noble truth. You do it by developing the noble eightfold path, by the middle way, which is the fourth.

It's like a doctor's analysis of a disease. He describes the symptoms, then he identifies what causes the symptoms. Then you attack the symptoms, not straight at the symptoms, but at the cause. He said, "It is possible to cure them, and here's the cure." That's the middle way.

As for the Dhamma wheel: In philosophical texts and legal texts back in the time of the Buddha, when you had to list different variables against one another to work out all the permutations to make what we would call a table, they would call it a wheel. Remember, this was an oral literature. You have to recite each of the permutations one by one by one. An image that would be useful to hold in mind would be: How many spokes did this wheel have? And they'd just go through each spoke around the hub.

The wheel in the sutta comes in a part where the Buddha lists the four noble truths again, but this time he talks about the duties appropriate to each, and the fact that he'd completed those duties. That gives three types of knowledge for each truth: the knowledge of the truth itself, the knowledge of the duty, and knowledge that the duty has been done. Four noble truths, three knowledges—three times four is twelve. Those are the twelve permutations that we chanted just now.

Our Dhamma wheel here in the sala has twelve spokes. But back in ancient India, the really old, old depictions of the Dhamma wheel would have many, many spokes. Apparently that was because they kept in mind the fact that the wheel was still set in motion, so you visualize all the spokes whirring around.

When you set a wheel in motion, in ancient India that was a sign of exerting power as far as the wheel travels. In this case, the first person it traveled to was Añña Kondañña, one of the five brethren. He was the one who attained the Dhamma eye: *Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation.*

Now, sometimes that realization sounds like the simple conclusion that everything changes. But you have to ask yourself, "What state of mind would that

realization occur to in a way that would be really valid?” It would be valid only if you’d seen something that wasn’t originated and didn’t pass away. There are passages where they say that someone who’s attained the Dhamma eye has seen the deathless.

When Añña Kondañña saw that, it was at that point that the Triple Gem became complete.

As I mentioned this morning, we think of Visakha Puja as homage to the Buddha and Magha Puja as homage to the Sangha. Asalha Puja, some people say, is in homage to the Dhamma. But it’s actually in homage to all three, because this was the point where all three became complete. The Dhamma as a teaching was finally established in the world, and when it was, the first member of the noble Sangha arose. And when there was the first member of the noble Sangha, that proved that the Buddha was not just a private Buddha. He was a complete Buddha.

These are our refuges. Tonight we’re paying homage to the act that made all those refuges complete—outside.

It’s up to us to bring them inside to make them complete in our hearts. That’s what the symbol of the Dhamma wheel is for, to remind us that this is the teaching to keep in mind at all times as we practice. Everything else that the Buddha taught has to be fit into the context of the four noble truths and the duties appropriate to them. For example, sometimes people say that the Buddha’s basic teaching was on not-self, and they interpret that as a no-self teaching. But you remember, the Buddha’s whole purpose in teaching was to help people put an end to suffering, and how does believing that there is no self, or coming to the conclusion that there’s no self, help put an end suffering? It can be an excuse for all kinds of laziness. And it can actually get in the way of the path when you say, “Well, there’s nobody to suffer, so there’s nobody doing anything, so why bother?”

But if you look at the teaching in terms of the four noble truths, you see the not-self teaching as a not-self strategy, where one of the duties is to develop dispassion for the craving, develop dispassion for the clinging. You do that by seeing how the things you crave and cling to are inconstant, stressful, and not-self: not worthy of claiming as yours, not worth holding on to. In that case, the teaching on the four noble truths and the teaching on not-self fit together. In fact, the teaching on not-self works precisely because the third noble truth says that when you let go of all this clinging and craving, then there’ll be true happiness. That’s our motivation for taking on the teaching of not-self to begin with.

So if you want to bring the Dhamma into your heart, remember it's the four noble truths. Whatever comes up in the mind, ask yourself, "Which truth does this belong to?" Once you know which truth it is, you know the proper duty. You look at all the different teachings that the Buddha laid out in the course of his 45 years of teaching, and you want to know how and when to apply them.

So take the four noble truths and their duties as your guide. That way, the Dhamma wheel comes into you. It exerts its power in you, but it's not an oppressive power. It's a liberating power. The Buddha never forced his teachings on anyone. They're there for anyone who wants to put an end to suffering. They're a refuge available to anyone. If you respect the Buddha, and if someone asks, "Why do you respect the Buddha?" you can say that it's because he asks you to respect something that's worthwhile in yourself, which is your desire for true happiness. He's saying: Take that seriously. All too many people in the world will tell you that true happiness is impossible. Go for the quick fix. Grab what you can while you can. But, as the Buddha said, that's just a recipe for more and more suffering. There is a true happiness that is available.

So the purpose of having days like this is to reflect on what's really important in the teaching and to rededicate ourselves to practicing it. You see the compassion that the Buddha had for the five brethren. It didn't stop there. It continued on and on and on as he continued teaching for 45 years. And it extends now into today. As long as still we keep these teachings in mind and still put them into practice, they're still alive. The Dhamma that was established on that night is called *Sasana Dhamma*, the Dhamma of the teaching. It's not always available in the world. *Sabhava Dhamma*, the Dhamma of truths, or of things in and of themselves: That's always true. But it's only when the Dhamma's been formulated that people can take those truths and use them to learn how to put an end to the suffering they've been causing themselves for who knows how long.

It took all that work that the Buddha did over his many, many lifetimes to become a Buddha, to bring this Dhamma back into the world. And then, when he goes to teach people out of compassion, the first thing they do is they treat him with disrespect. So make sure that that's not your attitude, that you treat the teachings with the respect they deserve, because there's no other teaching in the world that's nearly as precious as this, nearly as useful as this. It takes a lot to bring it into the world. So take advantage of it while it's here.