

## *Heightened Skillfulness*

*February 16, 2022*

Tonight's Māgha Pūjā. We're commemorating an event that happened in the first year after the Buddha's awakening. It was on the afternoon of the full-moon day of Māgha, the month that corresponds to February or March, that 1,250 of the Buddha's arahant disciples all came to meet, without having made any prearrangement. And the Buddha was about to send them off to teach.

These were probably the 1,000 arahants who had listened to the Fire Sermon, and the 250 arahants who had come with Moggallāna and Sāriputta. So they'd gained awakening with a minimum amount of teaching, but now they were about to teach others. The Buddha wanted to give them a full account of the Dhamma, from the most basic up to the most advanced levels.

We don't have a record of the whole sermon that he gave that afternoon, but we do have some verses that came at the end as a memory device. The most famous of the verses is the Ovāda Pāṭimokkha—"Not doing any evil, accomplishing what is skillful, the cleansing of the mind: This is the teaching of the Buddhas."

Of course, the arahants already knew this as a general principle, but it was good to hear it. As Ajaan Maha Boowa once said, they were celebrating their attainment. And it's good to look into that verse. This is a day in which we're celebrating the Sangha and the Dhamma.

We have three main events in the year: Māgha Pūjā, Visākha Pūjā, Asālha Pūjā. Visākha Pūjā is the day of the Buddha. As for Asālha Pūjā, it's the day in which the Buddha gave his first Dhamma talk, and we had the first member of the noble Sangha. It was also the day when the Buddha proved that he was a fully attained Buddha, one who not only could attain awakening on his own, but could also teach the way to others.

Its essence, Asālha Pūjā, is a day for all three of the members of the Triple Gem. Māgha Pūjā, we're told, is the day of the Sangha, but it's also the day of the Dhamma, because without the Dhamma there wouldn't be the Sangha. Without the Sangha to carry out the Dhamma, we wouldn't have it today. So they always

go together.

So what was that Dhamma? It starts with avoiding all evil. Anything that's unskillful—in thought, word, or deed—you try to avoid. You don't say, "Well, I have enough goodness already in me that I can afford to be lenient on some things"—in other words, to be unskillful in some areas—but who wants pain in any situation? Who wants suffering in any situation?

When you really have seen the Dhamma, you realize that you don't want to do anything at all that would be unskillful, anything that would be harmful. That's why you get on the path.

As for developing skillfulness fully: You develop your virtue, you develop your generosity, and you train the mind in meditation. Specifically you train the mind in the *brahma-viharas*. This is *kusala*, skillfulness, leading to rebirth, a good rebirth.

With generosity, you can be generous with your material things; you can be generous with your time, with your energy, with your knowledge, with your forgiveness. As for virtue, you hold to the five precepts: You don't kill, steal, engage in illicit sex, engage in lying, or take intoxicants. With the development of goodwill, you try to develop goodwill for all, without exception. You realize if you have ill will for anybody at all, you're going to act in unskillful ways based on that ill will. That then becomes your karma.

So you don't think about whether someone does or doesn't deserve your goodwill. You're generous with your goodwill to all. In fact, there are ways in which you can see that all three of these forms of making merit—doing what's skillful, virtue, and the development of goodwill—are forms of generosity.

With virtue, you're giving safety to everybody. With the development of goodwill, you're freely giving your good intentions regardless of whether people wish you well in return. Now, people may sometimes look down on you for observing the precepts, or may think that you're weak because you're developing goodwill even for people who have harmed you, but you don't let their opinion sway you. You realize that what matters is the goodness of your actions.

But then the Buddha goes beyond that, to the cleansing of the mind, which suggests that here he's talking about more than simple skillfulness. In fact, you

could say this is the part that goes beyond skillfulness—or you could say that it’s skillfulness of a very special kind.

After all, when the Buddha was searching for nibbāna, he kept framing his search as the search for what is skillful. Of course, that’s skillful in the ultimate degree.

When we think about skillfulness, we think about that question the Buddha has you ask to develop discernment: “What when I do it will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?” Now, the “long-term” could be long-term in *samsāra*, but here you go beyond that to a higher level of skill: long-term in the sense of not changing at all because it’s outside of time. In this case, you heighten the way in which you practice your generosity, your virtue, and your meditation.

In terms of generosity, you look at your motivation. Instead of giving away good things in hopes of getting good things back, you think less about the things, and more about the quality of mind you’re developing as you develop generosity. It’s a spacious mind. It feels good. The mind becomes serene. You want to get it to the point where generosity is simply an ornament for the mind. In other words, you don’t need to feed even on the internal rewards of generosity. It’s just a natural expression of the mind that has gained awakening and sees that generosity is a good thing. It doesn’t even need to think about the fact that it’s a good thing, it’s just natural to that state of mind. We’re talking about the mind of a non-returner here.

As for virtue, heightened virtue relates to the virtues of a stream-enterer: virtues that are pleasing or appealing to the noble ones. They’re untorn, unbroken, unspattered. In other words, you really hold to the five precepts, but the way you hold them is qualified in two ways. On the one hand, you practice virtue in a way that’s liberating, conducive to concentration. In other words, even though you are scrupulous in following the precepts, you’re not tied up in your scruples because you realize that virtue is a matter of your intentions. When you’re clear about your intentions, then that kind of virtue really is conducive to concentration, really is liberating.

There’s another passage where the Buddha says that on this level you are virtuous, but you’re not made of your virtue. In other words, you don’t have to

take pride in your virtue. You don't have to make it part of your self-identity. It's simply a natural expression of what you see has to be done.

You don't think about how you're a better person than others who don't observe the precepts. You're clear about your own intentions that you're doing this for the sake of liberation, for the sake of developing good qualities of the mind. After all, what kind of virtue is conducive to concentration? One where you really are mindful to keep your precept in mind, you really are alert to your intentions and your actions, and you're ardent in doing this well. Those are the three qualities you need in order to establish mindfulness and to get the mind to settle down.

And then finally meditation: You meditate not simply to give the mind a good place to stay, but you're developing both tranquility and insight as you get the mind into concentration. You try to understand what you're doing, in terms of bodily fabrication—the way you breathe; verbal concentration—the way you talk to yourself; and mental fabrication—the perceptions and feelings you apply to the meditation, the perceptions that help you hold the breath in mind: how you picture the breath to yourself, the way it either originates outside and comes into the body, or the breath that originates in the body itself. Sometimes it seems as if it originates at certain centers in the body; other times it seems like every cell is a spot where the breath originates. You hold on to whichever perception of the breath calms the mind.

You're clear about your perceptions and you're clear about how you relate to the feelings that arise. There's a feeling of ease, which you allow to spread through the body, saturate the body, but you don't leave the breath. You don't let the pleasure that comes from the concentration overwhelm the mind. You let it do its work on its own as you keep on doing your work.

When the mind is firmly settled in, then, as the Buddha says, you step back. The image he gives is of a person sitting looking at someone lying down, or a person standing looking at someone sitting. You step back and observe your mind in concentration to see that it, too, is fabricated.

You do this for the sake of going beyond the concentration itself. Because you realize that as long as you stay in *samsāra*, in this running around that we do, no

matter how good it gets, you can always fall. It's always uncertain. You never know when a trap door is going to open up beneath you, and you don't know what's below the trap door to receive you.

So, seeing how dangerous time is, how dangerous fabrications are, you want to go beyond that. This is why the Buddha says you start by looking at the concentration itself as aggregates, and perceiving them as inconstant, stressful, not-self, alien, an arrow, a disease, an emptiness: whatever perception allows you to realize that even this refined pleasure, too, has its drawbacks. You want something better.

When you develop a sense of disenchantment with the concentration and look for something unfabricated, that's when you've really cleansed the mind, taken it to a higher level of skillfulness: the skillfulness that the Buddha himself was looking for.

So these, as I said, are the heart of the Buddha's teachings. We have events like this, at regular times of the year, to remind ourselves of the person who found this practice that we're practicing, and to think of all the people in the intervening years who've passed it on to us. It's their gift to us. And it's the kind of gift where you pass it on by using it well.

So as with all of these events—Visākha Pūjā, Asālha Pūjā, Māgha Pūjā—we pay homage to the Buddha and to his disciples in the way that the Buddha praised the most, which is through the practice: avoiding every kind of evil, developing skillfulness, and then taking that skillfulness to a higher level where it cleanses the mind. That's the best way we can show our gratitude.