Possesiveness

May 19, 2025

In the traditional Buddhist calendar, tonight is Visakha Atami, eight days after the Buddha passed away. He was cremated, actually seven days, but they commemorated it on the eighth day. The story goes that after the news came to the Malins that the Buddha had passed away in his township, in their township, they made up their minds that they were going to cremate the body the next day. But then they set up a stage, and they had music, and they had dancing, and they had music and dancing all day long. So they said, “Well, tomorrow we’ll do the cremation.” And the next day they had music and dancing all day long, and this kept up until the seventh day. And they finally went ahead and had the cremation. They waited until Mahakassapa came. They tried to set fire to the pyre, but it wouldn’t light. It turned out the devas were keeping it from being lit because Mahakassapa was on his way. He came, was able to show his allegiance to the Buddha, his homage to the Buddha, and then the pyre miraculously lit on its own. And there are a number of events surrounding the cremation that are really interesting. One was that on his way there, Mahakassapa heard an old monk saying, “Thank goodness we’re finally rid of the Buddha. He’s always telling us what we can do, what we can’t do. Now we can do as we like.” That made him realize that there was going to have to be a council to decide on the Buddha’s teachings to give a standardized version. Otherwise people would remember what they wanted to remember and forget what they didn’t want to remember. With a standardized version, though, you’d have a standard which you could measure what was the Dhamma and what was not the Dhamma. Because as the Buddha said, there’s something you know that fits in line with what you’ve already heard of the Dhamma. It doesn’t matter who says their authority is, that it should be accepted. If it doesn’t fit in, then no matter what they say their authority is, a famous Ajahn, a famous community, you can’t accept it. So you need a standard against which to measure these things. That was one of the stories around the cremation. The other is when you look into the sutta that tells of the Buddha’s last year, the events from a year before his passing away up through the cremation. The story starts with an averted war and ends with an averted war. The war in the first case was Ajahn Dasatthu wanted to attack the Vajjans. And even though he had faith in the Buddha, he was pretty ignorant. He wanted to get some advice from the Buddha on whether or not he should attack. The Buddha didn’t answer the question directly. But he turned to Ananda and talked about the qualities that the Vajjans had that made them a tightly bound community with a lot of respect for one another. The messenger who had brought the question went back to the king. So the king realized he was not going to be able to conquer this community by force of arms. The Buddha then took that as an opportunity to call the monks together and talk to them about what was needed to keep the community tied together, to make sure there wasn’t going to be an easy prey to the force of greed, aversion, and delusion. So the story starts with a sense of the fragility of the Dhamma. And once the Buddha passes away, it can be very easy for the Dhamma to disappear. There are stories of previous Buddhists who had taught and not set forth a standardized version of their teaching. They basically would read people’s minds and say, “Do this. Don’t do that. Think this. Don’t think that.” That’s called the miracle instruction. And it brought a lot of people to awakening. But that particular tradition didn’t last long. Because there’s no analysis of what goes on in the mind. That other people could pick up from and use in training their own minds. Once that talent of that Buddha was gone to read minds, that was it. So again, it points to the need for that counsel. To have a standard against which you can measure things, and also a standard that describes to you what’s going on in the mind. But how can you make use of that knowledge? We read about the three kinds of fabrication that, under the influence of ignorance, can lead to suffering. Bodily fabrication, the way you breathe. Verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. Mental fabrication, perceptions and feelings. Now the wise response to that is not just to hold to the view that that’s how the mind works. But you also have to develop right resolve. You want to train the mind so that it can make use of that knowledge. Resolve on renunciation, or renouncing your fascination with thinking thoughts of sensuality. Resolve on non-ill-will or non-affliction. In other words, maintaining thoughts of goodwill for yourself and for others. And resolve on harmlessness. Harmfulness would be the attitude that you don’t really care whether people suffer or not. It’s not that you mistreat them out of ill-will, it’s simply out of callousness. Thinking that they don’t matter. Or that your own suffering from your own unskillful karma, that wouldn’t matter. You have to tame these attitudes. Develop thoughts of compassion instead, so that you get the mind into concentration. Use that knowledge of fabrication. You focus on your breath. You talk to yourself about the breath to adjust in ways that make it a good place to be. You focus on perceptions of the breath and perceptions of the mind that allow you to settle down. That’s what right resolve does. It takes the knowledge of right view and uses it as a guide. That’s the wise response to right view. So this is the right way to take the Buddhist teachings. Not to argue about them, but actually ask yourself, “How can I use these teachings to make a difference?” The Buddha says, “I’m creating suffering through my own actions, so I’ve got to change my actions. How do I do that?” That’s the proper attitude to bring. It’s good that we have that standardized version that’s kept the Dhamma alive all these many, many years. There was a war at the end that was averted. After the Malayans had cremated the Buddhist body, they decided they were going to keep all the relics for themselves. But there were other people who had been students of the Buddha as well, and they came and they made their claims. Different kings, even some Nagas, came and made their claim. And it looked like there was going to be a war, because the Malayans were refusing to give up what they had. And just as Ajatashatru showed that he really didn’t understand what the Buddha had said, those who were willing to go to war over the relics, showed they really didn’t understand what the Buddha taught, there was a stain of possessiveness. “This is my place. This is my this. This is my that.” As soon as you make a “my” there, there have to be fights over that. The Buddha calls this “pabbanca.” When you come up with the attitude, “I am the thinker.” And when you’re a thinker, that means you’re a being, and beings have to feed. Where are you going to feed? Well, you feed in the world. But there are other beings who are also doing the same kind of thing. They need to feed as well. So you’re going to come into conflict. You claim to something, “This is me. This is my territory. Nobody else can come in here.” You’re sure that you don’t understand what the Buddha taught. There are a lot of things we have to let go. When I was in Poland, that question came up, “Why is it that we let go?” When you realize that you can’t let go of everything all at once. And the answer is, you remember, the teaching is not just about letting go. It’s also about developing. You develop skillful qualities in the mind. The list is there in the Noble Eightfold Path. Even before the Noble Eightfold Path, there’s the teaching on the graduated discourse, where the Buddha teaches developing qualities of generosity, virtue, reflecting on the rewards of virtue and generosity. Realizing that the sensual rewards that come from that are going to end. And they entail a lot of what the Buddha says even is degradation. To realize that renunciation is a good thing. These are all thoughts that will lead eventually to right resolve. But there are also things you should develop. And in the course of developing them, you’re going to find that you have states of mind that get in the way. Those are the things you have to let go of. So if possessiveness gets in the way of your being generous, gets in the way of your being virtuous, you’ve got to let it go. These things that we claim as “me” and “mine,” how many of them do you really need? What’s the allure of possessiveness? Well, there’s a sense that you’re safe because you have your territory. But there’s a lot of other very unskillful attitudes that go along with that. The unwillingness to share. Why? Are people not worth sharing things with? And what happens if you don’t let go? There are many, many stories in the Buddhist tradition of people who couldn’t let go of something, and then they come back and their spirits are hovering around those places, trying to hold on. It’s a miserable state to be in. That’s why the Buddha said when you define who you are and what belongs to you, you’re placing limitations on yourself. We tend to think that our definitions of who we are are useful strategies for getting what we want. But then when you get those things, what are you going to do with them? Are you going to use them or are you just going to hold on? I mean, even in Western fairy tales, they talk about how when you try to hold on to some good fortune, it’s going to turn into ashes. It’s when you give it away that it becomes yours. That, of course, is the message the Buddha taught. The things we give away are ours. The things we try to hold on to are going to get torn from our grasp. And the more we try to hold on to them, the more miserable we’re going to be. So look at the things that you’re being possessed of and ask yourself, “What are these things preventing me from attaining them in terms of the good qualities of the mind?” Because those good qualities, those are your genuine treasures. Those are yours. Conviction. Sense of shame and compunction. Virtue. Generosity. Learning. Discernment. These are genuine treasures and they’re genuinely yours. And nobody can take them away from you. So if you want to be wealthy, focus there. Because those treasures don’t lead to war. They don’t lead to conflict. Anywhere else where you try to be possessive, there’s going to be conflict. Fortunately, there was a Brahmin who came and reasoned with the people who were about to go to war over the relics. Didn’t the Buddha teach you not to hold on to things like this? Didn’t he teach you peace and harmony? And the people came to their senses. And then he divided the relics. So everybody got a share. And they went home happy. But the happiest people in that story were the monks. They didn’t get any relics at all. They got the Dhamma instead. So it’s good that we have these events from the Buddha’s life that we place on our calendar year. So we can think about the implications. And draw lessons from them. That can keep the Dhamma alive here and now. Because the Dhamma is still fragile. People keep trying to change it. People who claim to be Dhamma teachers, they’re the ones who seem to hate the Dhamma the most. They’re always changing it. But you can make up your mind about whatever else they do. That’s their business. You’re going to do your best to tame yourself. Bring yourself in line with the Dhamma. And that’s how you keep the Dhamma alive. And that’s when it becomes genuinely yours.

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