Open Are the Doors to the Deathless

July 10, 2025

Tonight is Asala Puja. Asala is the name of the month in Pali. This is the full moon of that month. In the tradition it was on this full moon that the Buddha gave his first sermon. This was two months after he’d gained his awakening. He spent seven weeks out of those two months enjoying the bliss of release. After all those many aeons of working for his perfections to become a teaching Buddha, he finally had succeeded. So at that point he had no responsibilities. But at the end of seven weeks he reflected, “Should he teach?” His first impulse was not to. He thought of the difficulty of setting up the Dhamma, setting up the Vinaya, setting up the Sangha. He thought of how subtle the Dhamma was that he’d discovered, and how it was going to be very difficult for people to understand it. The commentaries get tied up in knots about this. Here he was, he was going to be a teaching Buddha, and then he suddenly decides not to teach. And they say he was playing coy, he was waiting for an invitation. I think it’s more an indication that, as Buddha, he had no debts to anybody. He didn’t have to teach. The fact that he did end up deciding to teach was pure compassion. He didn’t have to promise some, but he was concerned. Buddha has made all these perfections and now he’s not going to share his teachings with anybody. So he came down, got down on one knee, and begged the Buddha, “Please teach. There are those who have little dust in their eyes. They’ll benefit from the teaching.” The Buddha surveyed the world and he saw that that was true. There would be people who would benefit. So he said, “Open the doors that are the doors to the deathless. Let those with convictions show their faith. Let those who have ears show their faith.” So he was going to require faith and conviction on their part, to listen to him, and to try the teachings that he was going to present as a path of practice. Because he couldn’t take Nibbana out to show it to anybody, the release he’d gained, was something they would have to take on trust to begin with. But in teaching he was going to open the doors to the deathless. Then he thought for a while, should he teach first? He thought of his two teachers, who had taught him the four most jhanas. But they had entered into the four most realms, where they were out of touch with anybody. So he couldn’t teach them. Then he thought of the five brethren. These were five monks who had attended to him, but he was undergoing austerities. And they had left him when he gave up on the austerities. They thought he’d gone back to a luxurious lifestyle. So they were disappointed and they left. He surveyed the world to see where they were now. They were in Sarnath, which is near Bananas. So he walked there. It’s quite a long walk. It took him a week. And he arrived on this day of the year. And first he had to convince him that it was worth listening to what he had to say. When they saw him coming from afar, they said, “Well, we’ll send out some water for him to wash his feet, and a place for him to sit down.” “But that’s all we’re going to do for him.” But they couldn’t help themselves. As they got nearer, they went out and they received his bowl, attended to him. But they still called him “friend.” He says, “You don’t call the target a friend.” And they said, “Well, how can you be one who’s attained the goal? You gave up.” He said, “No, I didn’t give up. I found a new path.” And if you listen with faith, you’ll be able to follow the same path. He had to say this three times. He finally said, “Look, have I ever made claims like this before?” They realized that he was a very truthful person. He hadn’t made any false claims. So they were willing to listen. This is in line with the principle the Buddha said. When you listen to the Dhamma, if you want to get the most out of it, you have to make sure that, one, you have no contempt for the teacher, no contempt for the Dhamma, and no contempt for yourself. In other words, you have to believe that, yes, you can do this. So they listened. And they brought forth in their minds two other qualities that the Buddha said were necessary for getting the most out of the Dhamma. One was getting the mind single. In other words, getting it concentrated. And secondly, applying appropriate attention, which means listening to the Dhamma and asking yourself, “How does this apply to the problem of the suffering in my own heart? How does this apply to what I’m doing right now that’s creating the suffering and how I can stop?” Because that’s precisely what he talked about. But before he talked about the issue of suffering, he cleared up the issue of someone who’s abandoned austerities, who’s not necessarily gone back to a life of luxury. Because that’s all the five brethren had seen. On the one hand, there are people who are devoted to sensuality and sensual pleasure, and then there are those who are devoted to austerities. Those were the two options that they saw. The Buddha basically said, “There’s a third which avoids those two options.” He said, “Those two options are extreme. They’re ignoble. The noble path goes between them.” It’s like going through an area where there’s a chasm on the left, a chasm on the right. The path between them was not one of middling pleasures or middling pains. It was a different approach to pleasure and pain. Because notice the terms that he used. Devotion to austerities, self-torture, or devotion to sensual pleasures. People see pleasure or pain as ends in themselves, good in and of themselves. Those who like the pleasure say, “Well, hey, what else are you going to look for in life?” What are essential pleasures you can find? Those who see that that’s not a noble path would go to the other extreme, which says pain must be good in and of itself. It cleanses the mind, purifies the mind. In fact, that was the Buddha’s own understanding when he undertook those austerities. Because when he realized he was going to die and not get anything noble, that’s why he abandoned that path. The path between the two of them uses pleasure and uses pain. The pleasure is not the pleasure of sensuality, though. It’s the pleasure of form, how you feel the body from within as you get the mind in concentration. The Buddha himself had found this in the night of his awakening by focusing on the breath, like we’re doing right now. You can breathe in ways that are intensely pleasurable. And as he said, you can take that sense of pleasure and spread it through the body. Together with rapture or refreshment. So the mind gets to feed on a sense of well-being. And as he said, if you don’t have this kind of well-being, this kind of pleasure inside, then no matter how much you see the drawbacks of sensuality, you’re going to go back. You need this pleasure in order to get the mind away from those ways of looking for pleasure, because they’re they intoxicate the mind. In fact, it was this state of concentration that was the first factor of the path that he found. So this is the pleasure. As for other pleasures in life, he said, you look at how they have an effect on the mind. Because some pleasures are okay. You can enjoy them. They don’t excite greed, aversion, delusion. Others are not. Okay. So you have to judge the pleasures against another standard, which is what impact do they have on the mind? The same with pain. As he noted, some people have to practice a painful path, which can mean two things. One is that getting the mind still in concentration is not enough. They have to contemplate the unattractiveness of the body. The disgusting nature of food, which are painful topics. They go against the grain. But some people have very strong greed, aversion, delusion, lust. So they need these practices. So even though the Buddha did abandon austerities himself, he didn’t say that austerities were all bad. Simply the question of, if you’re going to be going without, pleasures of life, sensory pleasures, you’re not looking for the pain as a good in and of itself. You have to look and see what impact does this pain have on the mind? Because some people, by following a painful path, find that it makes them heedful, alert, alive to the dangers of the pleasures they’ve been going for. So both the pleasures and the pain, these pains are judged as to what impact they have on the mind. And that becomes the standard. What kind of mind states are skillful, devoid of passion, aversion, delusion? How are you going to find them? Well, through this middle way. The other role for pain, of course, is that it’s part of the First Noble Truth of pain in the mind. That’s the problem the Buddha’s going to solve. That’s what the Four Noble Truths are all about. All too often Buddhism is described as being pessimistic because it focuses on pain and suffering. Well, the Buddha never said that life is suffering. But he did say, “There is suffering and this is what it is.” It’s just clinging to the five aggregates, which are activities of the mind. So it’s something you’re doing. And why are you doing it? Because of craving. Do you have to keep on doing it? No. It’s because of that “no” that the Buddha’s teachings are not pessimistic. You can bring a way out. You can put an end to that craving. And you do it by following the path. This path between the extremes of devotion to sensuality and devotion to self-torment. So as you’re practicing tonight, think about the pleasures that the Buddha said is actually noble. It’s the pleasure of the mind in concentration. And the approach to pain that is noble. Seeing that the pain may have an impact on the mind. Because of what? Because of your craving. Because of your clinging. What are you clinging to? What are you craving? You can look into your mind right now. So you approach the pain and the suffering, not something to run away from or something to run toward, but something to comprehend. Exactly what are you doing that’s causing a burden to the mind right now? Do you have to keep burdening the mind in that way? The Buddha’s answer is “no.” What is your answer? The mind will say, “Well, I don’t know. I can’t see.” Ok, get the mind quiet. And then if anything comes up in the mind that seems to burden the mind in any way, ask, “What did I just do?” This is what appropriate attention is all about. You reflect. You take the teachings and you don’t just think of them as interesting things to hear about, but you use them as tools for reflecting on your own mind. That’s one of the reasons why the Buddha compares the Dhamma to a mirror so many times. You look into the Dhamma and you want to see your own mind reflected there. So when the Buddha talks about feeling, you focus on your own feelings. He talks about perception. You focus on your own perceptions, thought constructs, consciousness. You look at these things as they’re happening, as he talks about them. And ask yourself, “How do I cling to these things? What’s the passion? What’s the desire I have around these things? Why is that?” And part of the mind will say, “This is the only place you’re going to find happiness in life, is by holding on to these activities of the mind.” Because these aggregates that the Buddha talked about, the word “aggregate” is an unfortunate translation. It sounds like gravel. But they’re activities. And they’re activities that we use as we feed in the world. This is what defines us as beings. The way we feed, both physically and mentally. You have form, which is the form of the body, and also the form of things outside you can feed on. Feelings. There’s a feeling of the pain that comes with hunger. And the pleasure you’re looking for as you try to assuage that hunger. Perceptions. The labels that tell you, “This is food. This is not food.” Thought constructs. You get food that’s raw. How do you fix it? If you can’t find it, how do you go about finding it? There’s consciousness, which is aware of these things. Without the awareness, you wouldn’t be able to do these things. We hold on to these activities because we associate them with feeding, which is where we ordinarily find our happiness in life. But the Buddha said, “We suffer because of clinging.” And the word “clinging” in Pali, Upadana, can also mean feeding and taking sustenance. This is where the teachings get counterintuitive. Exactly where we’re looking for pleasure ordinarily, that’s where the Buddha said, “That’s where the suffering is.” This is one of the reasons why we need concentration to pull away from our ordinary ways of feeding, and why we need discernment that provides us with the perceptions that allow us to step back even further. So you want to see the drawbacks of these things you’re feeding on. You want to see the drawbacks of the act of feeding itself. Seeing that they’re inconstant, and just noticing the inconstancy of the things that you ordinarily are holding on to, helps separate you from them. You step back. Because if you can see these things arising and passing away, it means they’re not you. If you see the suffering or the stress that’s involved in the feeding, you can ask yourself, “Is this really where I want my happiness to be found in the midst of all this stress, including the stress?” Ordinarily we’d say, “Well, this is the best you can get, so you might as well put up with it.” But the Buddha’s saying, “No, there’s better. It’s not worth it.” This is why he said, “You have to have some faith and conviction in him if you’re going to find the path to the Deathless.” As the Buddha’s saying, “There’s something better you haven’t seen yet, but if you can let go, you’ll find it.” That’s what the doors to the Deathless require, faith and conviction. The Buddha doesn’t force us. What does force us, of course, is the fact that we are suffering. And he’s offering a way out. As a result of that first talk, one of the members of the Five Brethren was able to get the Dhamma. He actually saw the Deathless as a result of letting go of these things. He reflected back on everything else he’d experienced up to that point. That’s why that phrase, “In ken chi samudaya tamang samantan nirodha tamanti,” would occur spontaneously to his mind. Everything that’s subject to origination, in other words, anything that comes out of the mind, when the mind has dispassion for it, it ceases. And when it ceases, there’s the happiness of the Deathless. That’s why the earth shook. The Buddha had been able to teach someone else the way to the Deathless. The doors were open. The question is, the doors are open for you too. Are you going to go through? That’s a question that each of us has to answer for him or herself.

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