

Samvega Transformed

May 13, 2020

Tonight we commemorate the Buddha's cremation, seven days after Visakha Puja. The story goes that the Mallans, after learning the Buddha's passing away, decided to cremate the body the very first day. But they spent their time in setting up pavilions, arranging for music and dance in honor of the Buddha. It went on until late in the afternoon, so they figured, "Well, we'll cremate the body tomorrow." The next day, though, they had more music and more dance, again until late in the afternoon. This kept up until finally the beginning of the seventh day, they decided they would cremate the body.

They had their plans for how to do it, but the devas had other plans. Initially, they were going to take the body out to the south of the city and cremate it there, but when they tried to lift the coffin up, they couldn't. So they consulted with Ven. Anuruddha. He said, "The devas have other plans. They want you to take the body out to the east side of the city. So they went out the east side of the city, and tried to light the pyre, but it wouldn't light. And again, Anuruddha said that the devas were waiting. Maha Kassapa was coming. When Maha Kassapa showed up with a large entourage and paid respect to the Buddha, the pyre lit spontaneously. When the fire died down, there was nothing left but the relics, which have since been scattered all over the world. We even have some relics here, we're told.

What's interesting about the places associated with the Buddha is that the Buddha himself said that there were places for giving rise to a sense of *pasada*, or confidence, Yet in the commentaries and in popular language in Thailand and all over Southeast Asia, they're called places for giving rise to *samvega*. I think part of the reason for this change is that the Buddha took the *samvega* out of *samvega*. In other words, *samvega* originally meant terror. It was the feeling he had felt when he was young and realized that he, too, was subject to aging, illness, and death. He'd probably known it, but it didn't really hit home until one point when he realized that all the happiness he would search for, if it was subject to aging, illness and death, would leave him with nothing.

He had a strong sense of terror at how meaningless everything was, how pointless everything was. As he said, he saw the world as a small body of water drying up, and the fishes were fighting one another over the last remaining water. And it didn't matter who won because they were all going to die. Everywhere he looked in the world where he might want to lay claim to something on which to

base his happiness, someone had already laid claim to it. So if he was going to try for a happiness in the world, he'd have to fight other people. That was his terror.

But then he saw that the problem came from an arrow buried in his heart, and that it was possible to remove the arrow. The arrow here, of course, is the suffering caused by craving. Once the arrow is removed, then there's no more suffering.

The story that built up around the Buddha's leaving home was that he had never seen any old people, ill people, or dead people before he was well into his twenties. Then one day he went out and rode around the city, and he saw them for the first time. He felt that strong sense of *samvega*. Then he saw a forest mendicant. In this version of the story, he told himself, "If there's a way out, that's it."

The feeling he felt then—that there's a way out—was *pasada*, confidence. Throughout his practice—as he did go out into the forest, first looking for teachers who would teach him the way to the deathless, finding that nobody at that time knew anything about it, realizing he was going to have to find it on his own—he still had the confidence that there must be a way out, and it must be attainable through human effort.

Now, there's a paradox there. If something is free from suffering, it has to be unconditioned. So how could human effort, which is composed of conditions, create that? He realized you couldn't create it, but a path of action just might lead there. That's what he found. He was able to fabricate a path of practice, the noble eightfold path, that led to the threshold of the deathless. And then, abandoning the path, he was able to enter into the deathless.

So he realized that that sense of the world closing in, with every opportunity for happiness already being laid claim to, the terror that he felt, the dismay, was something he could shatter. He was able to show others that they didn't have to feel terror or dismay with that either, because there was a way out. That's how he took the *samvega* out of *samvega*. As a result, the meaning of *samvega* began to change.

You see this even in the Canon itself. The later additions to the Canon describe *samvega* as a rapturous feeling, probably because by that time it had become so closely associated with *pasada*. The Buddha had shown through his own practice and his teachings that it was possible to find a true happiness that didn't require fighting other people off, a happiness that was not going to end in death. All the many people who followed him and found that it was true, became witnesses to that truth. Whatever *samvega* they had felt before was now thoroughly replaced with *pasada*. So the associations of the word changed.

In the Apadanas, which are probably the very last part added to the Sutta Pitaka, they talk about people who've made a gift to the Sangha or to the Buddha, and as a result of that—and here we're talking about gifts many eons ago—they received the forecast that they would become arahants in this lifetime under Gotama the Buddha. The texts talk about their course through the many, many lifetimes, as kings, as queens, universal monarchs, and then finally, when they've had enough of all the fun that the world can provide, they let it go, the texts say, with a sense of rapture and samvega.

In other words, this is samvega that knows that there's a way out, and it's confident that there's a way out. It's not the samvega that the Buddha felt when he was young, where it seemed like everything was closed. This is a samvega that's had all the doors open. So it's no wonder that there's a sense of rapture there, that—regardless of what the affairs of the world have been, what your life has been—there is something better. There's a way out. You're not trapped.

This is the message of the Buddha's life, the message of his passing away. He passed away totally peacefully. He inspired song and dance for seven days, and left behind a large following of people who had found the same freedom, the same purity that he had found. They had found the open doors. So they've kept that message alive ever since.

So even though they talk about the people at the time feeling a lot of grief around the Buddha's passing, there were also the arahants. They said, "Well, what can you expect? That's the nature of fabricated things. They're going to pass away." They could meet even his death, the death of their teacher who'd found the way and shown it to them: They could meet that with peace. Years back, a vipassana teacher was studying with Ajaan Suwat, and asked him about his feelings when his teacher, Ajaan Funn, had passed away. Ajaan Suwat said when he was young, first studying with Ajaan Funn, sometimes the thought would come to him, "What will I do if anything happens to Ajaan Funn? I'd be totally lost." But by the time Ajaan Funn did pass away, Ajaan Suwat was much more solid in his practice, and he was able to experience Ajaan Funn's death with equanimity. This is the nature of things: to arise and pass away.

It was the Buddha's ability to train his students in that same solidity of mind—that's what took the terror out of terror, turned samvega from something that was suffering from a sense of closed-in meaninglessness into something where the doors are wide open.

That's the Buddha's accomplishment. And the doors are still open now. That image of the open door comes in the Canon. The doors are open to the deathless. They're open when a Buddha opens them. We have to make sure, though, that in

our own practice we don't close the doors. We have to have confidence in our ability.

It's not that the people back in those days were superhuman. They had many of the same foibles, sometimes worse problems than we do. But they were able to do the practice to get through that open door. They could do it; we can do it. This is why we commemorate events like this, to try to collapse the sense of time so that awakening is not something far away. The path is right here. It's what the Buddha taught from the very beginning of his teaching career to the very end.

The first thing he taught was the noble eightfold path. The last thing he taught was the noble eightfold path. The path is still here. It leads to an open door. So we should have a sense of confidence that it is possible in general, and it is possible for us in particular. This part of the Buddha's teaching is timeless. The truths he found are as true now as they were then, and they're the same truths. It's up to us to be true, to be honest, accountable, earnest in our practice. Take advantage of the open door while it's still open.