

Asalha Puja

July 22, 2013

Try to drop all sensual thoughts, all unskillful qualities in the mind: *vivicc'eva kāmehi, vivicca akusalehi dhammehi*. Think about and evaluate the breath so that there's a sense of ease and well-being in the way you breathe. This is how you get the mind into concentration. Concentration is part of the path. When you practice the path, that's called paying homage through the practice—*patipatti-puja*—the kind of homage the Buddha preferred.

Tonight's Asalha Puja. We're paying homage (*puja*) in the full moon in the month of Asalha to remember the day when the Buddha first set forth the Dhamma as a teaching. The Dhamma as the truth of the world, of course, exists all the time. But to have it put into words so people can practice it: That's a rare opportunity. That's what the Buddha did on this night. Two months after he gained his awakening, he went and taught the five brethren—people who had looked after him while he was doing his austerities but then had abandoned him when they saw that he'd abandoned his austerities. They'd basically given up on him. And paradoxically, when they gave up on him was when he gained awakening.

After gaining awakening, he sat under the Bodhi tree and stayed in the area of the Bodhi tree for seven weeks, experiencing the bliss of release. Then on the invitation of the Brahma Sahampati, he decided to teach, and the five brethren were the first people he went to teach. At first, they were disinclined to listen to him, even after he said two or three times that he'd gained awakening, seen the deathless, and he was going to teach it to them. But then he reminded them, "Have I ever made a claim like this before?" And they realized that he was the sort of person who would not make claims idly, so they decided to listen and give him a chance.

That's when he set the wheel of Dhamma in motion—like the Dhamma wheel we have here on the wall: 12 spokes that represent the four noble truths multiplied by the three levels of knowledge appropriate to each truth. There's the truth of stress or suffering—*dukkha*—the truth of the cause, the truth of the cessation, and the truth of the path of practice leading to cessation. Those are the four truths.

In explaining stress, the Buddha gave a list of examples. There's the stress of suffering at birth, aging, illness, and death; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, despair, having to be together with what you don't like, of being parted from what you do like, not getting what you want. Then he summarized all kinds of stress as "the five clinging-aggregates." He didn't explain what he meant by that; he moved on to the next truth.

The cause of stress and suffering is craving—the kind of craving that gives rise to becoming. He listed three kinds: the craving for sensuality, the craving for becoming, and the craving for no becoming.

The truth of cessation was the abandoning of those forms of craving. In other words, to get rid of the stress of suffering, you don't abandon the stress of suffering; you abandon the cause, developing total dispassion for the cause.

Then there was the path of practice starting with right view and going on through to right concentration. In setting out these four noble truths, he was setting out right view. That's the only part of the path that he really explained, and he didn't even explain that fully. But it was enough, as we'll see.

Then he went on to explain that each of these truths has three levels of knowledge. Simply knowing the truth: That's the first level. Knowing the duty appropriate to each truth is the second level: Stress or suffering is to be comprehended; its cause is to be abandoned; the cessation is to be realized; and the path leading to the cessation should be developed. That's the second level. The third level is knowing that you've completed those duties.

Then he said that when he had fulfilled all three levels of knowledge for all four noble truths, that was when he knew that he'd gained full awakening. In other words, he was making a claim for awakening and the results of awakening, which was that there'd be no further birth, no further suffering.

In the course of making his claim, he gave a sketch of right view, and the important point was his stating that suffering is clinging that comes from craving. That's all he really explained, but that was enough for one of the five brethren. Añña-Kondañña, the head of the five brethren, to get the Dhamma eye. In other words, he became at least a stream enterer, seeing that all things are subject to origination are subject to cessation. Now to see *that*, he had to see something that was *not* subject to origination or cessation. That was the deathless.

That's when we say that the Noble Sangha arose in the world. The devas made note of the fact all the way up to the Brahma world. After that, Añña-Kondañña asked for ordination, and that's how the conventional Sangha began.

So notice, the Buddha didn't explain everything. He explained the connection between clinging, craving, and suffering, but that was enough for Añña-Kondañña. That's all the Buddha taught that night, at least as far as is recorded. There may have been more, but this was what was remembered and passed on.

Of course for us, we hear that and we're still here without anything new happening. We're the type of people who have to listen to the Dhamma and then put it into practice over and over again. It was for us that the Buddha later explained all these truths and all the different factors of the path in great detail. We can listen to the explanations and, even then, we still need to practice more.

So that's what we're doing right now: practicing more. We've practiced before, but we have to keep practicing more—because there's something in our minds that's still resisting—something that still doesn't understand. But we keep at it. We keep being persistent because we have the conviction that this might be the way to true happiness. We're inspired by the

example of the Buddha and the Noble Sangha. We find the Dhamma inspiring. And so we sit here and practice.

At the very east, we're paying homage to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. And we recollect that this was the night in which all three of the refuges—all three of the gems—became complete as a set. After all, if the Buddha hadn't taught, he would have been a private Buddha. But the fact that he was able to give this teaching and that someone was able to gain awakening... It's the existence of the Dhamma as a teaching and the existence of the Sangha that make the Buddha a complete Buddha. So the Triple Gem became complete. And we're trying to make that Triple Gem complete in ourselves as well, just as we're trying to make that Dhamma wheel complete in ourselves.

Which of the spokes is missing in your mind? You know the four noble truths. You've probably heard the words, so at least you've got four spokes. It's those other spokes, the spokes of actually doing the duty and completing the duty: That's what remains. And the big factor that's usually missing is concentration—getting the mind under control—because the mind is wandering around so much, and we don't develop the path; we develop other things. We develop our thoughts about food, clothing, shelter, thoughts about material gain, status, praise, and pleasures. Those are the thoughts we tend to develop. The Buddha didn't teach us to develop those things; he taught us to *abandon* them.

So tonight, let's take some time to really focus on developing concentration. *Vivicc'eva kāmehi, vivicca akusalehi dhammehi*—**any** sensual thought that comes up right now, just put it aside. Think about the breath. Evaluate the breath so that you can give rise to a sense of pleasure and rapture. Then maintain that. It's easy to focus on the breath; the maintaining is hard. But it's a skill that can be mastered, especially when you appreciate the advantages that come from mastering the skill. That makes it easier to stick with it.

So if you find the mind wandering off, remind yourself: If you don't master this skill, there's just a lot of suffering left over, waiting for you in the future. And there's a lot of suffering weighing down the mind right now. We tend not to notice it because that's what's been weighing down the mind for so long. It's like one of those workers in Thailand who unloads ships, carrying huge sacks every day. They carry sacks of flour, sacks of rice, sacks of all kinds of things. And they're used to being weighed down. Because we're so weighed down, we forget that this isn't the way things have to be. We can be a lot lighter. We can choose not to carry our burdens. Unlike those workers, we don't need to suffer. They need to carry all that stuff because they need the money. But what payment are we getting from carrying things around? Nothing at all.

We get a little bit of pleasure, yet it's our going after the pleasure that ties us down to the craving. So you have to stop and ask: Is it really worth it? Look at the pleasure you get out of greed, aversion, and delusion. Then look at the drawbacks. The human mind is generally very poor at weighing drawbacks and advantages, drawbacks and benefits. We tend to go for the

short term and forget about the long term. Then we complain about our suffering, forgetting that, well, we made the choice.

So take some time to let go of your burdens. Get secluded from sensuality and anything that's unskillful. See what it's like. The mind doesn't touch any of these things; it doesn't get involved with any of these things. It's right here with the breath, thinking about the breath, evaluating the breath. When there's a sense of pleasure, let it spread through the body. Survey the body to see where there are any patterns of tension. Or if there's any sense of blockage anywhere, think of the breath penetrating it and going right through until you can fill the body with that sense of pleasure, that sense of ease, like the water that seeps through the ground. The trees pick it up and they let the water flow throughout the entire tree: through the roots, up the trunk, out to the leaves. Every part of the tree is moistened. Try to keep your body fully moistened with pleasure and rapture—or at least pleasure and refreshment.

Give yourself fully to this path. This is how you pay homage correctly to the Buddha. We have the candle circumambulation, and it's nice to think about the symbolism of the flowers, candles, and incense. The incense stands for virtue. As the Buddha said, the sweet smell of virtue, unlike the smell of incense, can go against the wind. In other words, a virtuous person is respected in all directions. Concentration is like the flowers. The flowers bloom. Discernment is like the candles: It gives light. And you notice we started out with just one or two candles out there. Then, as we lit one another's candles, we all got the radiance of all the candles. We all benefited. As you gave flame to someone else's candle, your flame was not diminished and that person's candle got brighter. And you got some of that brightness, too.

It's good to reflect on the goodness and other things we give to one another. Our goodness is not depleted, and everybody benefits from the goodness we share.

So, it's nice to think about the symbolism, but it's even better to do the reality of the practice—to develop the virtue and the concentration and the discernment. As Ajaan Lee pointed out, concentration is the difficult one. It's like a bridge going across the river. The pilings next to the banks on either side are relatively easy. But the pilings in the middle of the river are the ones that take a lot of work. So give your time to the concentration.

That's the homage the Buddha wanted because you benefit from it—and not only you. As you develop these good qualities of mind, they bloom and give light that you can share with the people around you. This why the goodness of the path is so good. It doesn't create boundaries; it dissolves boundaries. It's a happiness that spreads around. We're the recipients of the goodness of all the people who've practiced the Dhamma and have kept the memory of the Dhamma alive. They themselves benefited from the practice, and their light has shed light on us. Well, make sure that our candles are lit so that we benefit from the light and that we shed light on into the future.