

## *Magha Puja*

*February 23, 2005*

Tonight is Magha Puja, which commemorates a day during the first year of the Buddha's teaching career. After he had converted a thousand fire-worshipping ascetics with the fire sermon, and then Sariputta, Mogallana, and their 250 followers, it was on the afternoon of the full moon day in the month of Magha, which corresponds to February, when 1,250 arahants, all assembled, without any previous invitation, and the Buddha gave them a discourse. It's called the Ovada Patimokha. It's one of the discourses where we don't have any record of exactly what he said. There is a summary, however, which we chanted just now, and which covers the main points. Basically, the main points of the sermon are the main points of the Buddha's teaching. His listeners were arahants, they didn't need to hear the Dhamma in order to gain awakening, but they were about to begin teaching others themselves. So the Buddha gave a summary of the main points they should teach.

First point is that *khanti*, patience and endurance, is the foremost energy of the practice. The word used for energy, *tapas*, means the kind of fire you create through your meditation. There are old stories about people meditating really hard, and the fire of the meditation gets so hot that it warms the seat of Indra or Brahma, who have to come down and check out what this person is meditating for. If the person is meditating for something good, Indra or Brahma grant a boon. If it's something bad, they do what they can to thwart this person. In our practice, however, this *tapas* is the power of the meditation to burn through our defilements. The patient endurance is what creates that power.

So keep this in mind as you are meditating. When things get tough, when there's pain, where there's physical pain, mental discouragement, learn just to sit through it. That's the beginning. But you don't want to stop just there. We're not here just for patience and endurance. We're here to gain release through discernment. Still, the ability to stick with things underlies your ability to see things you otherwise would back away from. One of the reasons we don't go beyond pain in our practice is because we back away from it. When we back away from it, we can't see it for what it is. We can't gain any insight.

Sometimes you may think that just sitting here in pain isn't doing anything at all. But it's an important perfection of the character to be able to sit with things, to endure things. Without it, you keep running into barriers. The more it becomes

habitual to back off, back of, back off, then the more difficult it is to actually see anything for what it is.

So when things get tough, don't get discouraged. When nothing seems to be happening in the meditation, just stick with it. Watch. Because often it's in the midst of a dry patch like this that something finally becomes clear—when you least expect it.

So learn to develop your powers of endurance. Learn how to stick with things no matter what's happening. You do your best to alleviate whatever pain there may be, through the breath, through the way you focus on things. But many times there will come a point where nothing you can figure out with the breath helps, nothing you can figure out with the way you focus the mind will help. So you've just got to watch so that you can learn something new.

The second point of the teachings about nibbāna. This is the utmost, the Buddha said, and he added that all the Buddha say this. There's nothing higher. It's the end of all desires, in both senses of the term. In other words, it's both the ultimate object of desire, and once it's attained, there's no need to desire anything anymore. It's not that when you reach it, you have to decide, "Well, do I really like this or not?" It obliterates any need for desire, period. Which is why it's foremost.

We often hear that the Buddha taught acceptance and equanimity. Learning how to accept whatever comes up *is* part of endurance, but that's not the goal. It's simply one of the steps in the path. You admit what's happening. You're clear about what's happening. But you also want to see where there's a lack, where there still is suffering in what's happening, what you can do to overcome it so that there's no lack at all, no limitation at all on the mind. That sense of lack and limitation is what gives rise to desire. What you learn how to do is to use your power of desire skillfully, so that it actually does lead to the happiness you want. If you can't go all the way to nibbāna, at least focus your desires on the path, develop the desire for right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, all the way down the line.

Desires for these things are fruitful. We sometimes think that the Buddha gave only one role for desire, as the cause of suffering, but that's not true. Unskillful desire is the cause of suffering. Skillful desire forms part of the path. It energizes the path. You have to, as the Buddha says, generate your desire, arouse your persistence, uphold and exert your intent. All these things build on the desire for what's right for true happiness.

Then, when all the elements of the path come together, it leads to a glimpse of nibbāna. When you see that, then even though you haven't gone all the way to the

end of the practice, when you have that first glimpse, you realize that this is the end of all desire. That's why the Buddha said it's foremost.

Another important part of the Ovada Patimokkha was a passage that's often called the heart of the Buddha's teachings: not doing any evil, becoming consummate in what's skillful, and purifying the mind. This comes down to is virtue, concentration and insight. With virtue, you avoid whatever is harmful to yourself or to other people.

And the most skillful thing you can resolve on, that you can aim for, is bringing the mind to concentration, like we're doing right now. It's based on the resolve to bring the mind above sensual passion. This is why it's also called the heightened mind. All too often, our mind is a slave to sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, this thing and the other. We tend to place ourselves in service to our everyday concerns, and in so doing we place ourselves below them. What the Buddha is asking is for you to lift your mind above those concerns. Your main concern in life should be just this: to do the skillful thing. Be willing to learn what the skillful thing to do may be in any situation. You may not get there, but always try to hold to the intention that to want to learn, so that the intentions of the mind are always heightening your day-to-day concerns. This desire to be skillful is what leads the mind to concentration.

And it goes beyond that. You begin to purify the mind. In other words, you gain insight into the ways the mind creates suffering for itself, and you learn to let go. You do this bit by bit by bit, even as you're practicing the precepts, developing the mind in concentration. But when there's real discernment, real insight into seeing the mind as it's creating unnecessary suffering for itself right then and there, seeing that it is suffering, seeing that it's unnecessary, that's all you really need to let go.

This is how you purify the mind: seeing where you're causing unnecessary stress and suffering. As the Buddha told Rahula, you have to look at what you're doing, both physical actions and words, and especially actions in the mind, seeing where you're causing harm by the way you think. That's how the mind gets purified. And you can see that kind of thing only when the mind is really still. But once you see it, and you realize it's unnecessary, you automatically let go. That's what cleanses the mind, that's what purifies the mind, makes it bright.

Otherwise we're filled with all kinds of ignorance, which darkens our awareness. There's nobody else who darkens it. Sometimes we pick up strange ideas from other people, but if the mind didn't have that problem of ignorance to begin with, it wouldn't pick up those strange ideas. Nobody could fool it. But the

fact that it's already always ready to be fooled, that's why we pick up wrong views from the people around us.

So the fact we're ignorant is our responsibility. Fortunately, we also have good qualities in mind so that we can erase that ignorance. Just bring light. Bring light into where? Bring light into our intentions, being clear about what we're doing, being clear about the results of our actions on every level, physical action, verbal actions, mental action: That's where we have to be clear. Once we've cleared that, it brightens the mind. And once you bring brightness to mind, as Ajaan Suwat used to say, you don't have to go tearing apart the darkness. The brightness itself, that moment of insight, makes all the difference right there, clears everything up.

So these are some of the teachings the Buddha gave that day. For his arahant disciples, it was just a way of reminding them, showing them some of the implications of their experience. Some of them hadn't heard much of his teaching and they already gained awakening. The teaching had to be fleshed out, put into words, so that they could pass it on to other people. But for us, the teaching shows the way to practice, the basic principles we should always keep in mind, so that we can someday see what they saw. In the meantime, we learn how to create less and less suffering for ourselves and the people around us.