

Asalha Puja – Completeness

July 10, 2006

Tonight is the full moon in July, which in Pali is called the month of Asalha. Each year on this day we commemorate an event. The Buddha had gained awakening two months before, and then on this night he gave his first Dhamma talk, his first sermon: Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion. As a result, he gained his first awakened student. Kondañña, the leader of the five brethren, gained his first glimpse of the deathless after hearing the Buddha's talk.

So tonight is a symbol of completeness. The moon rose just as we were doing the circumambulation. It's completed cycle itself. It's now a full moon. In a similar way, the fact that the Buddha was able to teach someone else to gain awakening completed his career as a Buddha. It showed that he was a full Buddha. He was able not only to gain awakening on his own, but also to teach other people to gain awakening as well. As a result, there was the first member of the noble Sangha, which means that the Triple Gem became complete. Up to that point, there were just the Buddha and the Dhamma. Now there was the Sangha as well.

So tonight is a symbol of completeness.

Our next step is make sure it's not just a symbol. Try to find some completeness in your own practice as well. The gist of the talk the Buddha gave that night started out with the fact that there are two ways that people strive to find happiness. One is through sensual indulgence, trying to find all the sensual pleasures they can. The other is through self-mortification, thinking that somehow if you deny yourself every pleasure, the mind will get purified and find a different kind of happiness, a higher happiness. But the Buddha pointed out that neither way succeeds in finding true happiness.

He said the true path was a middle way between these two extremes, starting with right view, all way through right concentration. Then he explained right view in terms of four noble truths: suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. His teaching was like a doctor's diagnosis: These are the symptoms of the disease. This is the cause of the disease. It is possible to gain freedom from the disease by getting rid of the cause, so it's possible to be cured. And this is the path, this is the practice you do to attack the cause of the disease and cure it.

He went on to point out that simply knowing these four noble truths isn't enough. There is a duty with regard to each. Suffering should be comprehended, its cause abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to cessation developed.

That's the second level of knowledge: knowing the task with regard to each of the truths.

And finally there is a third level of knowledge, knowing that you've completed all the tasks. The Buddha went on to say that it wasn't until he realized he had completed these tasks, and his knowledge was complete in all three rounds of knowledge about the four noble truths—in other words, there are twelve factors to this knowledge: It wasn't until then that he claimed to be fully awakened.

So that's genuine completeness. That's why the Dhamma wheel up here on the wall is the symbol for the Buddha's teachings. Its rim is a complete circle, and it has twelve spokes: three knowledges times four truths.

It was at some point in this explanation that Kondañña, following the gist of what the Buddha said, looked inside his own mind and let go of the cause of suffering enough so that he gained a glimpse of the deathless. In his case, his awakening wasn't quite complete. It was a few days later that he gained complete awakening. But at the very least, he knew that what the Buddha said was true. That there really is a deathless happiness. This is the way to true happiness: this noble eightfold path that he recommended.

This is what we're trying to practice right now, working on right mindfulness, right effort, right concentration, to see if we can bring out some completeness to our minds as well. Ajaan Maha Boowa once said that the fact that we're suffering shows that there's a lack someplace in our understanding, in our concentration, in our mindfulness. So as we practice, we try to make up for that lack. We take the qualities of the path—which boil down to virtue, concentration, and discernment—and try to make them complete.

These are qualities that all of us have to some extent. The Buddha made this point over and over again: The fact that he gained awakening wasn't because he was some sort of special being who could do things and develop things in his mind that other people couldn't. He said that it all came from qualities we all have to some extent at least. We all have some virtue, we all have some concentration, some discernment. If we didn't have these things, we wouldn't be here as human beings. The question is simply how to make them complete.

We have to abstain from harmful behavior in all situations, develop skillful behavior in all situations, try to keep the mind pure in all situations: mindful, concentrated, and very clear in its knowledge of what it's doing.

One of the Buddha's main insights on the night of his awakening was that the mind is always doing something, and its actions give results based on the quality of the intention. And it's not just the results of past actions that we're experiencing right now. There are also present actions. Without the present actions, we

wouldn't experience the present moment at all. So there's an element of fabrication, an element of intention, in everything we experience.

So apply the four noble truths to this realization. Look at your intention in the present moment to see if it's causing suffering or leading to the end of suffering. Everything comes down to the quality of the intention, the quality of the desire behind the intention. The cause of suffering, the Buddha says, comes down to three kinds of craving: sensual craving, craving to become this or that, or once you become this or that, craving to get rid of that, craving to demolish it. This is how most people's minds work. But the Buddha said there's another kind of desire, another way of understanding desire, which is actually part of the path. It comes under right effort: the desire to abandon unskillful qualities, and the desire to develop skillful qualities in the mind.

This, he said, makes all the difference—in other words, realizing that you've got to sort through your desires. You can't identify with every desire that comes up in the mind. You've got to figure out which ones are skillful and which ones are not. Look at them in terms of the stress, suffering, and pain they cause to the mind. So focus right here. This is an important place to look.

This is why we meditate, focusing on the breath here in the present moment, because the breath is about as close to the mind as you're going to get until you can look at the mind directly. It's a good place to bring your attention, because the breath is very sensitive to what's going on in the mind. Fear arises in the mind and it's going to affect the breath. Anger arises, lust arises, and there's going to be a change in your breathing. So try to get sensitive to this level of your awareness. The way to get more sensitive is to be as attentive as possible to the question of how comfortable your breathing is. How does it feel right now? Does it feel easy? Does it feel refreshing coming in? If not, see what would be more refreshing.

The greater the sense of ease and refreshment you get from the breath, the more you become sensitive to the slightest dis-ease of the breathing—something you tend to take for granted, thinking that this is the way the breath has to be: You begin to realize it doesn't have to be that way. This is how you sensitize yourself to what's going on in the present moment.

So you develop mindfulness, you develop concentration around these issues, to sensitize yourself not only to the movement of the breath, but eventually to the movements of the mind as well, so that you can really look at the desires, the intentions that are shaping the present moment and realize you have a choice. No matter how much your past karma may weigh on you, you always have the choice to do the skillful thing in the present moment. First, of course, that requires getting more sensitive to what the skillful thing would be. Then, once you see it,

you make the choice: “Okay, I’m going to go for what’s skillful,” regardless of what you might like to do or are habituated to doing. If you see a situation calls for a certain kind of action that would help alleviate suffering in the mind, you go in that direction.

That’s how you achieve completeness in the mind. Otherwise, the mind is always going to be lacking. It’s always going to be hungry. When the mind is hungry, you can’t trust it. It’s going to grab after this, grab after that. Sometimes it grabs after good moods, sometimes it grabs after bad ones, grabs after good intentions, grabs after harmful ones, things that will harm not only itself but also other people. When the mind is hungry, it’ll take what it can get. And the hungrier it is, the less it wants to hear about what it should and shouldn’t be doing.

This is why as we practice meditation. It’s not just a question of being mindful and alert, it also means developing a sense of ease and fullness in the present moment: the realization that you can just sit here and breathe, and you can have a strong sense of ease, refreshment, rapture even in the present moment. This nourishes the mind. When the mind is nourished, it can look at a situation with a lot more equanimity, a lot more objectivity, whatever the situation, and see what it needs to be done, what would be the skillful thing, the harmless thing to do right now, and it’s willing and able to do it

This is how the mind achieves completion, fullness, by developing a sense of fullness in the present moment in the breath, and then working on that to develop fullness of understanding, fullness of discernment, till ultimately you can make yourself a full-fledged member of that noble Sangha as well. Because this is the other part of the teaching that’s always relevant: The teachings are not there just to say there were wonderful people in the past, people we want to honor. We honor them because they show us the way that we can find completeness in our lives as well.

So take their lesson to heart.