

The Buddha's Narrative

May 8, 2009

A poet once said that the universe isn't made of atoms, it's made up out of stories. That's certainly true of our worlds. The stories we tell about our own lives, the stories we tell about other people's lives—these are what give meaning and direction to our actions. So it's good that once a year that we stop to reflect on the story of the Buddha. Tonight's the night that marks the day on which he was born, then 35 years later the night on which he gained awakening, and then 45 years after that, the night that he passed away. The last two are the big events in his life, the ones that gave meaning to the Buddha's life.

And as we practice, they give meaning to our own practice as well. Today is called *Visakha Puja*. *Visakha* is the name of the month in Pali. This is the full moon of *Visakha*. And *Puja* means to pay homage. As the Buddha once said—and in fact it was on the night of his passing away—there are two ways of paying homage. One is through material things, as we did just now. We took candles, flowers, and incense to pay homage to the Buddha, and walked around the sala, which in the old days was a way of showing respect to someone. Before you would talk to them, you'd walk around them three times before you sat down to talk. Then when you left, you'd get up and walk around them three times before you left, always keeping your right to them. All of this is called material homage.

Then there's homage through the practice, which the Buddha says is the higher of the two forms of homage. That's what we're doing right now, training our minds. Because that's why the Buddha taught all those 45 years: to get other people to train their minds in the same way he had trained his, to make their lives special in the way he had made his special.

Think about it: If he hadn't started thinking when he was a young man that a life devoted to sensual pleasures, devoted to power, devoted to beauty, devoted to relationships with other people—if that's where you find your happiness, it's going to end up in aging, illness, and death. The happiness is going to get destroyed. He wondered if there could be a happiness that was deeper, more lasting, one that wouldn't be touched by aging, wouldn't be touched by illness, wouldn't be touched by death.

So he went in search of that happiness. If he hadn't done all that, he would've been just one of many, many princes that history has seen. They've had their little brief moment of power and pleasure, and then just lost it all, with nothing really to show for it except usually for a lot of the stupidity that goes around power, that

goes around influence and sensual pleasures. But instead, he started looking for something better than that. And he found it.

That's what the story of his awakening is. After many false starts through several years, he finally found true happiness through training his mind in the path we're practicing right now: developing mindfulness, alertness, concentration, ardency, and all the skillful qualities of the mind. He was able to bring his mind to good solid concentration.

Then he started asking questions: Was this his only life or were there other lives? In other words, is life preceded by nothing or is it preceded by other lives, is it followed by other lives?

He remembered back many, many eons, all the many lives that he had had, in many different levels of being: high levels, low levels, no real pattern to it. That knowledge, even though it wasn't totally conclusive, gave him two things to think about. One is that the activity of the mind does not end with the body. It goes from one life to the next in the same way a fire that's burning in one house will then go over and set fire to another in the house next to it, on and on and on in that way. The other thing was that there was very little upward progress. It would go up for a while, then go down, then go up again and go down again and down again and up and up, with no steady progress, and usually with no lessons learned from one life to the next.

The next question he asked was: Did this apply to him alone, or did it apply to other beings as well? That led to the second knowledge, in which he saw all the beings in the universe dying and being reborn. When they were reborn, they were reborn in line with their actions, skillful or unskillful. The skillful ones were done under the influence of right view, i.e., seeing that your actions are important, that what you do in terms of body, speech, and mind really does shape your life. Unskillful actions were done under the influence of wrong view, i.e., the view that it doesn't really matter what you do. That suggested to him that our actions really do shape our lives, and that the pleasure and the pain we experience comes from our actions, comes from our intentions.

Then he asked if he could use that knowledge to put an end to suffering. That question led to the third knowledge on the night of his awakening. He saw that focusing in on the intentions of the mind, that what you experience right now is based on two kinds of things: past intentions and present intentions. When you make your present intentions more and more skillful to the point where you don't need to intend anymore, that's when you break through to a deathless happiness. This third knowledge was what confirmed the other two knowledges, that it is possible through human efforts to find a true happiness that's not touched by

aging, illness, or death; something that's called deathless because it lies outside of space and time.

That's the narrative of his awakening. After he sat for seven weeks, experiencing the bliss of release, he decided to teach. First he was doubtful as to whether there'd be anybody ready to follow the same path that he'd followed, but then a brahma, a very high level of deva, got upset thinking that after all that effort the Buddha had put into gaining awakening he wasn't going to teach anybody. So the brahma came down and he invited the Buddha to teach. He said there are beings with little dust in their eyes. They will see the Dhamma. The Buddha confirmed that fact with his own knowledge, so he went out to teach for 45 years. And when he passed away—again, on a full moon night in May, or so the tradition tells us—he was free from the cycle of rebirth, experiencing total freedom.

So those are the events we commemorate on this night. What's important about all this is how the Buddha's narrative touches the narrative of our lives. As we keep coming around year after year after year, his story presents a challenge: What are you doing with your life? What's important in your life? What are you preparing for in your life? We know that human life has a lot of suffering, and we've seen that it has pleasures, too. Are you going to go running for the pleasures? What kinds of pleasures? What kind of happiness are you going to go running for? As the Buddha said, the desire for happiness is something to be honored, something you should take seriously—not in a grim way, but in a concerted, thoughtful, and intelligent way. What kind of happiness will satisfy you? When we're practicing, what are we aiming at? And what are the dangers we see around us? As the knowledges the Buddha gained on the night of his awakening suggest, our story is not just this one story of being born, growing up, growing old, and then dying. That's just one little chapter in a long, long narrative. Are you prepared for that?

Because those moments between the chapters are the tough part of the narrative. When you die, there's no guarantee that everything will be peaceful and calm and serene. It's often just the other way around. Your body is getting to the point where you can't live in it anymore. If there are any people around you, they're getting hysterical. You have a lot of unfinished business from this particular chapter, and your mind is racing around about what could have been done. And then there's the big question: What's going to happen next? And in the midst of all that, you've got to make wise choices. So do you think you're ready for that? That's one of the questions that the Buddha's narrative raises for you.

So it would be a good use of your time now to get prepared, because when you do that, you're not just preparing for death, you're preparing for your life as well. How can you live in such a way that you don't suffer or cause harm to others? Often we gain the pleasures of relationships, we gain the pleasures of material things, only to see them slip through our fingers. It's like trying to hold water in your hands. And if your happiness is based on that, what will there be left? And especially when you consider that the things that we do in order to get happiness are so often very unskillful. What you are ending up with nothing but unreliable memories and the karmic results of what you've done.

So you have to think carefully about where you're going to look for happiness, reminding yourself that, as the Buddha said, it is through our efforts that happiness is found. And there is a true happiness that can be found if we are really focused and consistent in our efforts. Ordinarily, there are times when we act in ways that suggest that we really do believe our actions have consequences, and that they're important. Other times, though, we act in ways suggesting that we'd rather not have our actions have consequences. We're just doing it for the pleasure of the moment, hoping that there will be no long-term results. This inconsistency is what makes the narratives of our lives so jagged, ragged, jumping around, with no clear purpose, no clear motive, no clear direction.

So it's good that at least once a year that the narrative of our lives touches the narrative of the Buddha's life, because the narrative of our own lives is often shaped on other people's narratives—people we admire, sometimes people we're jealous of. We see that they have something and we want it. So it's good to ask ourselves whose narratives we're patterning our narratives on, and whether we might do well to pattern our lives on the narrative of the Buddha's life, to take the challenge offered by his life as a serious challenge to ours, so that perhaps we too can taste the happiness he found, the freedom he found.

So think on these things. And see which parts of the narrative of your life you'd like to change—because you do have that in your power. The arc of the narrative up to the present moment is something you can't go back and change, but you can make whatever adjustments you want now, many more than you might have imagined. All too often we go through life on automatic pilot without realizing that we do have the potential for change. So wake up to the possibilities suggested by the Buddha's life, and see what lessons you can learn from his life so that you can make a better narrative for yourself.