

## *Asalha Puja*

*July 30, 2015*

Tonight is Asalha Puja. *Asalha* is the name of the month. *Puja* means homage. Of course, we're not paying homage to the month, we're recalling an event that happened on this full moon night soon after the Buddha's awakening.

He'd spent seven weeks experiencing the bliss of awakening, and then the question came to his mind: Is there anyone out there whom he could teach to find awakening as well? At first he was a little discouraged because it was a very subtle thing—it'd taken all of his effort, all of his intelligence to find it, and he was afraid that trying to teach other people would be a waste of time. But there was a Brahma who read what was going on in the Buddha's mind and he was concerned—after all, the Buddha had gone to all that trouble to become Buddha and here he was going to give up on teaching—so he came down and invited the Buddha, saying, "There are beings with little dust in their eyes: They will understand the Dhamma." As the Buddha reflected, he realized that this was true, so he decided to teach.

His first thought was to teach his two previous teachers, but he realized that both of them had passed away and gone to the formless realms, where they were beyond reach. So the next thought was to teach the five brethren who had helped him when he was going through his period of austerities. So from Bodhgaya he walked all the way to Sarnath—it must've taken about a week. When he arrived there, the five brethren had decided that he had given up on the practice—he had begun eating again after many years of starving himself—they thought he had gone into a phase of luxury, so at first they weren't interested in listening to what he had to say. But he told them, "Look, I've found the deathless and I've never said anything like this before, have I?" They realized that, No, he had never made that claim before, so they were more willing to listen.

He gave his first talk—it's called "Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion"—and as a result of the talk, it turned out that, yes, one of those brethren did have little dust in his eyes. Ven. Añña Kondañña—his name originally was just Kondañña—got what is called the Dhamma Eye, seeing that whatever is subject to origination—in other words whatever has causes—is also subject to passing away.

Now, that understanding comes from seeing what *doesn't* arise and is *not* caused, and therefore doesn't pass away: That was the deathless. So, in seeing the deathless, Ven. Añña Kondañña became the first member of the noble Sangha. This is why we say that that event was when the Triple Gem became

complete. The Dhamma, of course, was always already there, the Buddha had become a refuge on the night of his awakening, and now we had the Sangha.

So tonight we're celebrating many things—the fact that the Buddha's Dhamma was effective, and that there have been people who have carried it on from that time to the present moment, both by memorizing the teachings and by putting them into practice. This is why we're paying homage to the events of that night and also the continuity that's kept that memory alive, that's kept that practice alive, because one of the purposes of paying homage here is so that we can continue to keep that practice alive ourselves.

That phrase, "Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion," comes from a part of the talk where the Buddha talks about the four noble truths. He starts out originally by talking about the noble eightfold path, and he starts explaining right view, which is seeing things in terms of the four noble truths. Then he explains that there are actually three levels of knowledge with regard to each of those truths, and he goes through each of the levels for each truth.

First there's the knowledge of what that truth is. The first truth is *dukkha*, suffering, stress. The Buddha gives examples: birth, aging, and illness are stress, not getting what you want is stress, having to be with what you don't like is stress, having to be separated from what you *do* like is stress. Then he summarizes all forms of stress, saying that the five aggregates, when you cling to them, are stress. The *clinging* to the aggregates is the stress. That's knowing the truth.

The second level of knowledge is knowing that there is a *duty* with regard to the truth—you don't just *know* these things, you actually *act* on them. In this case, you try to comprehend stress, when there actually is stress—and by comprehending, we're not talking about comprehending the words, we're talking about the actual experience of stress and suffering in the mind. If you want to get beyond it, you have to comprehend that experience for what it is.

Most of us don't care about comprehending stress. We just want to get away from it. You can see why the Buddha was a little discouraged about teaching because he's teaching people to go against the grain. Most of us don't want to deal with mental pain, we don't want to deal with suffering, we either push it away or run away from it, but he says we've got to stay with it long enough to comprehend it—in other words, seeing that it's just clinging to any of these five things: the form of your body, your feelings, your perceptions, mental fabrications, or consciousness. The fact that we cling there: *That's* the suffering.

The third level of knowledge is when you know that you've completed the duty: In this case, you've comprehended the suffering *fully*. Now, that level of knowledge doesn't come until you've completed the duties for the other three noble truths as well—in fact all of them come together at that point.

The second noble truth, the cause of suffering, comes from craving, specifically the kinds of craving that lead to forms of becoming—taking on an identity in a world of experience, seeing that you have a desire in this particular world and you’ve got the identity in this world that’s going to try to fulfil that desire and enjoy it. You take on that identity either from craving for sensuality or from the simple desire to take on an identity, or when you decide you don’t like the identity you have, you want to destroy it, you become a destroyer, and that’s taking on an identity, too. That’s something you want to abandon. That’s the duty with regard to the second level of knowledge for the second truth: to abandon it.

The third level of knowledge, of course, would be knowing that you had abandoned it fully.

The third noble truth is the cessation of stress and suffering, and that comes from totally abandoning and relinquishing any of the cravings that would lead to suffering—in other words, you attack the problem by attacking the cause. This is something you want to fully realize. In other words, you have to *see* it happening, because all too often we drop one craving simply because we want to go to another one. We don’t really realize what’s going on. So again, this is something that goes against the grain.

Finally, there’s the path to the end of suffering, the noble eightfold path, and that’s to be developed. As you work on comprehending suffering, you need to develop the path, because the path includes right mindfulness and right concentration. Without the stability that comes from right concentration, without the clarity that comes from right mindfulness, you wouldn’t be able to stay with suffering for long enough to comprehend it.

So these truths, as you work on their duties, begin to come together, and finally they all become one, like the spokes of a wheel coming in to join at a hub.

This is called a wheel because in those days whenever you had different sets of variables that you ran against each other, and you went through all the permutations, they would call that a wheel. It was like going around the horizon, covering all the alternatives. In this case, the Buddha listed the four noble truths and the three levels of knowledge with regard to each—twelve permutations altogether. That’s the wheel of Dhamma.

The important point here is that these are truths that carry *duties*—you don’t just know them and figure out that that’s enough, because the truth of stress, the truth of suffering, is something that eats away at the mind. It doesn’t let you just sit there and know about it. This is why the Buddha said our duty is to comprehend it. So as you learn these truths, you try to figure out how you can implement the appropriate duty.

Usually, the first focus is developing the path, like we're doing right now. We're trying to develop right concentration, taking themes of right mindfulness in terms of the body, feelings, or mind states, focusing on these in and of themselves, not worried about the world outside—just focusing on what it's like to have a body, what it's like to have feelings, and mind states.

When you look at these things directly, you begin to see that some feelings, for example, are skillful and some are not—in other words, pursuing a particular feeling would be skillful if it nurtures the good qualities of the mind. Some pleasures, when you pursue them, are good for the mind; some pleasures are bad. Some pains when you pursue them are bad for the mind, some are good. So you need the discernment to figure out which is which.

The same with different mind states: If your mind is scattered all over the place, that's something you want to abandon; if it's sluggish and sleepy, you want to abandon that, too. There's a *duty* with regard to them, and you do that duty with ardency. Ardency here is the wisdom factor—realizing that you don't just sit here and let these things happen. The wise thing to do is to try to abandon unskillful qualities and to develop skillful ones.

When the Buddha mentioned his categorical teachings, there were only two: One is the four noble truths; the other is the principle that skillful qualities are to be developed and unskillful ones are to be abandoned. In both cases, there are duties involved—you don't just know about these things. You realize that the unskillful qualities and the suffering they cause are eating away at the mind and you don't want to just leave it there, you want to find some way to get out.

This is the inspiring part of the Buddha's teaching: his unwillingness to just sit there with what most people accept. They say, "Well, aging, illness, death: That's just the way things are. Try to find happiness in the world as it is. Don't try too hard. You could wear yourself out"—that kind of thing. The Buddha was unwilling to accept that as a noble life. He saw that if it's possible for human beings, through their efforts, to find a noble happiness, then it's a waste of your life not to do that. Even in his case, when he didn't have any guarantees, or no examples that this could be done, he said that at least *trying* would be a noble activity.

Now, of course, we have his example. We have the example of the Noble Sangha, and the Dhamma has been taught to us in a lot of detail. So are we going to follow through? Are we going to take on the duties that the Dhamma recommends? That's our choice. If you want your life to be a noble life, then you follow the Buddha's example.

That's another reason why we try to recollect these events every year: to make sure that our compass is pointing in the right direction. We don't give up and say, "Well, I'd just rather go halfway, or take the easy path"—because what

we call the easy path is really hard. Think of all the suffering that comes for beings who don't follow the noble path.

The Dhamma Eye that Añña Kondañña gained that night: As the Buddha said, once you've had that experience, the amount of suffering left for you in the round of rebirth is like the dirt under your fingernails, compared with the dirt in the entire world, which is the amount of suffering facing people who haven't had that experience. Even just that glimpse of the deathless is truly liberating. And it's something that's not only for monks, it's for all people who have decided they've had enough of the sufferings of the ordinary way of living in the world, who have gained a sense of what the Buddha calls *samvega* or terror over the sufferings that are involved if you just take what you think is the easy way.

The truly pleasant way is the noble path. Even when it's difficult, it's pleasant in asking you to do things that are noble.

So we want to keep these things in mind. That's the *anusaranta* in the chant we had just now—we're recollecting these things to make sure that our lives are lived in light of the Buddha's discovery, and in light of the fact that not only did he discover the end of suffering, he was able to teach it to others, and others were able to practice and gain the promised results.

These are things that should inform our own practice, to help us make sure that we're on the right track and we don't fall off.