

## *Magha Puja*

*February 11, 2017*

Tonight is Magha Puja. *Magha* is the name of the month. It's the full moon usually in February, sometimes in March. *Puja* means to pay homage. But we're not paying homage to the month or to the moon. We're paying homage to the Buddha and to his disciples, because it was on this day in the first year of his teaching career, the full moon of this month, that 1,250 of his arahant disciples all came uninvited and he gave them a talk called the Ovāda-Pāṭimokkha, which is a summary of the main points of the teaching. Then he sent them out to teach.

Those 1,250 arahants probably were the thousand arahants who became arahants simply on hearing the Fire Sermon, plus the two hundred fifty who were fellow students of Sariputta and Moggallana. They, too, for the most part, became arahants on hearing only one Dhamma teaching. So the Buddha wanted to make sure they had a rounded view of how to teach the Dhamma before he sent them out. They themselves didn't need any more teaching for their own sake, but he did this for the sake of the rest of us, to make sure that this teaching would spread far and wide, and be a complete, solid teaching.

In the talk, the Buddha taught everything from basic things like patience, not having ill will to other people, and not saying harsh, hateful things to other people, all the way up to what he called being committed to the heightened mind or purifying the mind. It was the whole range of teachings. We don't have a record of the whole talk. We do have a record, though, of the main points, and of them probably the most famous is the set of verses:

*Sabba-pāpassa akaraṇaṃ,  
Kusalass'ūpasampadā,  
Sacitta-pariyodapanam,  
Etaṃ buddhāna-sāsaṇam.*

“Not doing any evil.

“Developing your skillfulness to consummation.

“Cleansing the mind until it's bright and clear.

“This is the teaching of all the Buddhas.”

That last line is to remind us that there hasn't been just one Buddha. There have been many. Their Dhamma is always the same. No matter how many Buddhas gain awakening, this is the Dhamma they all teach. Sometimes you hear the idea that the Buddha said that everything changes, therefore the Dhamma has

to change, too. But he never said that. Fabricated things change. That's true. But the way of the Dhamma never changes, which is why it's a teaching that's as relevant now as it was back then.

It starts with that verse on not doing any evil at all. This refers to your thoughts, your words, your deeds, and it means you really have to be on top of yourself, because it's so easy to say, "Well, I can slack off a little bit today. Maybe I don't have to push myself so hard. I can do a little evil thinking or a little evil speech. It's not going to be too bad. I've got lots of good stuff that'll balance out the account." But that's not the attitude of the Buddha. The Buddha says you want to be very careful about everything that goes through your mind—everything you say, everything you do—because those are your real treasures, your real belongings. Your physical belongings are yours only for a while, but your actions: Those are yours for a long time to come. Of course, you want nothing but good in terms of the results, which means that you have to make sure you don't give rise to any bad causes in any way.

The same principle applies to bringing your skillfulness to a high level of consummation: You want to keep asking yourself, "What more can I do in my thoughts, words, and deeds that would make them more skillful?" The Buddha said his own awakening was due to the fact that he never let himself rest content with the level of skillfulness he'd attained. If there was more to learn, more to do, he was willing to do it. If you want to identify with anything, identify with that desire: to be always willing to learn.

Then finally, cleansing the mind: Whatever in the mind would make you want to do something unskillful or would get in the way of doing what is skillful, you want to cleanse those qualities away. Like right now as you're meditating: If any sensual desires come up, you want to put them to the side. Any ill will—put it to the side. Any drowsiness, torpor—wake yourself up. You can't let these things take over the mind. You have to recognize that they're hindrances. The same for restlessness and anxiety—worries about the future—and uncertainty.

Uncertainty here means not being certain about the path. What does the path have you do? It's pretty simple—just stay with the breath. Try to be at ease with the breath. Find a level of breathing that feels soothing and energizing at the same time, one that goes deep down and refreshes the entire body and refreshes the mind.

As Ajaan Fuang once said, if you're going to doubt anything, at least don't doubt the breath. As long as you know it's coming in, it's going out, you've got something you can hang on to. This is something you know is happening, and as

your mind begins to gather around that, you begin to know the mind as well. Otherwise, the mind, when it's not trained, is scattered all over the place.

This is one of the reasons why it needs to be cleaned, because as it gets scattered all over the place, it just splashes around and gets itself muddy. When you're not taking that much care about what you're doing, it's obvious that greed, aversion, and delusion are going to slip in. It's when you gather the mind together: That's when you begin to see, "Oh, this is the state of my mind right now."

Some people say they can't meditate because their minds are too scattered or they have too many defilements. It's like saying, "I can't go see the doctor right now. I'm too sick." If you're sick, you've got to see the doctor no matter what. You have to face your symptoms in order to get well. The same with a mind that hasn't been well cared for: You have to put up with the fact that you're going to see a lot of your own defilements. Your greed comes up, your aversion comes up, so you sit with those things for a while. But then in the midst of that, you try to hold on to the breath. As you do, you begin to realize that there's a part of the mind that's clear, that's still, in spite of all these other things.

So you hold on to that and use whatever determination and whatever discernment you can to weaken the things that would pull you away. It's when you get the mind gathered together here that you can cleanse it. That's when you can make it bright. If it's scattered around, who knows what the different thoughts are getting into? You clean up one set of thoughts and you find another's gone out playing in the mud again. When you've got everybody right here, that's when you really can cleanse the mind.

This leads to that other teaching about the mind: lifting the mind so that it's heightened. This refers to getting the mind into concentration but also to lifting it above its ordinary concerns, seeing that a lot of the things that you're concerned with out in the world are really not worth that much time and effort after all. They're not worth getting worked up about, certainly not worth getting involved in in a way that's going to give rise to more greed, aversion, or delusion. So you learn how to use your discernment to lift the mind, to realize that the things that would pull it away are not nearly as important as this quality of having the mind clear and clean and still here in the present moment. It's from this inner stillness and clarity that you can see things clearly and have a sense of what's right, what's wrong, what should be done, what shouldn't be done. When you have that sense, then you can depend on yourself.

Before that time, you have to depend on other people. This is why the Buddha said that admirable friendship is an important part of the path. In fact, without it you can't practice. But you can't depend on your friends to be telling you

everything. No matter how admirable they are, no matter how wise and compassionate, they can't be on your case all the time. You've got to learn to be on your own case. That means you have to learn how to take delight in abandoning and take delight in developing, i.e., abandoning unskillful qualities, developing skillful qualities. The more you can find joy in that, the more you can depend on yourself.

It's the joy of learning skillfulness. That's what brightens the mind, cleans the mind, because otherwise you're going to go back and find delight in greed, aversion, and delusion again. You'll go back to your old ways—or even worse. But if you really can find delight in concentration, you realize that it's a much higher form of well-being, a much more satisfying, gratifying form of happiness, one that feels good all the way down.

This way, you develop a mind that you can respect: your own mind that's been trained and cleansed and lifted up beyond its ordinary concerns. You begin to see, as the mind gets cleansed, that it's capable of a lot more good than you would have imagined, and it can bring a lot more happiness. As the Buddha said, if it were the case that developing skillful qualities of the mind brought unhappiness or pain, he wouldn't teach them. But it's because the skillful qualities of the mind bring true happiness, that's why he taught them. And if it were impossible to develop skillful qualities, again he wouldn't teach them. But it is possible.

This means that true happiness is possible. Learn to look at your thoughts, words, and deeds, and if there's anything in there that's unskillful—harmful to yourself, harmful to other people—try to clean it away, clean it away. Develop all the good skillful qualities of the mind, all the good potentials you have inside. Those two activities will help you cleanse the mind, so that the mind will be bright, a light to itself, filled with the light of discernment.

Those candles that we were carrying around the sala tonight: Those stand for discernment. The flowers stand for concentration, the mind that blooms. The incense stands for virtue. As the texts say, the fragrance of virtue is greater than any other fragrance in the world because it can go against the wind. Other fragrances can only go downwind, but this one goes against the wind. A person who's virtuous is attractive to other people no matter where they are.

So the incense stands for virtue, the flowers stand for concentration, and the light of the candles for discernment. When we're offering these things to the Buddha, we're reminding ourselves that the things they symbolize are the things the Buddha really wants us to do in homage. As he said, true homage to him means practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma.

So for the rest of the hour, pay homage to the Buddha and his noble disciples by practicing the way they did—or as close as you can to the way they did. We take refuge in them so that we can learn how to develop the qualities inside that enable us to take refuge in ourselves: that brightened quality of the mind that we can attain by training it.