

## *The Heart of the Teachings*

*February 8, 2020*

We're commemorating an event that happened in the month of Magha—which corresponds to February or early March—in the first year of the Buddha's teaching career. This was after he had given the Fire Sermon and a thousand monks became arahants, and after Sariputta and Moggallana had come with their 250 followers and they had all become arahants. On the afternoon of the full moon in Magha, 1,250 monks, all arahants, came to see the Buddha. They hadn't been invited. The gathering was spontaneous, and it was time for the Buddha to send them off to teach. So on that afternoon he gave them a talk. It's called the Ovadaparimokkha. We don't have a full record of the talk. All we have is the verse that the Buddha gave at the end, as a summary.

It's an important event because this was when he laid out the basic teachings. After all, even though all those monks had become arahants, many of them had become fully awakened after hearing only one Dhamma talk. The Buddha decided to teach them a full range of teachings from the most basic up to the most advanced as a guide for what they should teach others. So we're paying homage to this event. That's what the word *puja* means: homage.

As the Buddha said, there are two kinds of homage. There's homage through material things—a homage, a *puja*, as we did just now: taking candles, flowers, and incense, and circumambulating the hall. That's homage through material things. But that's not the best form of homage. The Buddha said the best form is to practice. That's how you show genuine homage to the Buddha: Pay honor to his original intention to find awakening through all those many, many years in which he followed that intention. He didn't gain awakening in order to have people present him with candles, incense, or flowers, or to circumambulate him. He did it so that he could find the way to the end of suffering, and teach it to others so that *they* could find the end of suffering as well. So in putting his teaching in practice, we're honoring his intention. At the same time, we're benefitting.

So focus on your breath, because that's one of the Buddha's teachings. Focus on the breath and then notice how to breathe in a way that's calming, breathe in a way that's energizing, and see what you need right now. Try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. And after you've been sufficiently energized by whole-body breathing, allow the breath to grow calm.

As we practice, we're not simply practicing and paying homage to the Buddha. We're practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. That means practicing for the sake of dispassion, practicing for the sake of disenchantment that leads to release. In other words, we aim high. But we have to start where we are. As part of that summary, probably the most famous lines are what are sometimes called the heart of the Buddha's teachings: the non-doing of any evil, the perfection of what is skillful, and the cleansing of the mind. These are the Buddhas' teachings. That's what we're doing for the sake of dispassion.

These three basic principles apply to every level of the practice, to all three parts of what the Buddha called the Triple Training: training in heightened virtue, heightened concentration, and heightened discernment. For example, when you're practicing the precepts, you have to avoid ever possible evil by being very scrupulous. As the Buddha said, you have to see danger in the slightest faults because you realize your actions are important. They determine the course of your life. They determine the present moment and on into the future. If you're sloppy in your actions, then your life is going to be sloppy. If you're more meticulous, more scrupulous, more circumspect in how you act, then the results are going to be more in line with what you would really want.

Then you try to be even more and more skillful in your observance of the precepts, learning to hold the precepts in ways that don't harm anybody, because there are some times when you hold blindly to the precepts, you can create harm. This doesn't mean that you don't hold to them. It means you learn how to hold them skillfully. For instance, if you know you have some information that other people would misuse, you do your best to avoid divulging the information. You don't lie about it. You just don't tell it. That means you have to use your discernment to get more and more skillful in how you observe the precepts.

Perfecting skill in virtue also means developing the positive virtues that correspond to the precepts: It's not that you simply don't kill. You also show kindness and gentleness to living beings. It's not that you simply don't steal. You also help to protect other people's belongings, and so on.

And then you cleanse your intentions. Any intention that would go against the precepts, you learn how to say No—to the point where observing the precepts becomes a non-issue. There's no question. Any intention that would go against the precepts, you immediately say No. That's how you cleanse your mind on that level.

In the practice of concentration, the same principles apply. Don't let any unskillful thoughts come into the mind, any thoughts that would pull you away from the breath. And then try to fully develop your skill in how you focus on the

breath. One time, when the Buddha said that the monks should practice breath meditation, one monk said, "I already practice breath meditation." And the Buddha asked him, "Well, how do you do that?" And the monk replied, "I put aside all desires for the past, put aside all desires for the future, and learn to be equanimous in the present moment, breathing in and breathing out." The Buddha said, "Well, there is that kind of breath meditation, but it doesn't give the best results."

Then he laid out sixteen steps. The first four are: breathing in and out, noticing when the breath is short, when it's long, the effect that it has on the body. Breathing aware of the whole body, and then calming that effect. The other steps include breathing in and out sensitive to pleasure, breathing in and out sensitive to rapture, breathing in and out sensitive to what are called mental fabrication: the way feelings and perceptions shape your mind. And then calming that effect. Breathing in and out sensitive to the mind, and then noticing if the mind is out of balance, what you need to do to bring it into balance. Either gladdening it if it's dull, steadying it if it's too restless, or releasing it when it's burdened with things.

And then there are the steps in how you release it. At first you pay attention to what's inconstant about what's burdening the mind. In seeing its inconstancy, you also see where it's stressful, where it's not-self, where it's not worth holding onto, not worth identifying with. And so you develop dispassion for it. From dispassion, there's the cessation of that particular problem. And then you abandon the entire issue. This is a pattern that you follow from the very beginning all the way through.

You'll notice that the steps are very proactive. Breath meditation is not just a matter of being calm about the breath and putting aside thoughts of the past and the future. You actually shape the breath. You learn how to breathe in certain ways that have a good effect on the mind, so that the mind is ready to let go of the things that it's been holding onto. It's in this way that developing the skill in your concentration purifies the mind on one level.

And then it goes deeper as you apply the same process to more and more subtle things that are invading the mind, until finally even the state of concentration itself becomes something you want to let go of. You see that it, too, is inconstant, stressful, and not-self, so you let go of it for the sake of what's absolutely pure: the deathless. In the process of that, your discernment has been avoiding what is unskillful, developing fully what is skillful and cleansing the mind. So this is why these three principles are called the heart of the Buddha's teachings because they're useful with regard to all three parts of the Triple Training in virtue, concentration, and discernment, and on all levels of the practice of each.

So we're scrupulous not simply for the sake of abiding by rules. It's because we know that if we aren't scrupulous, the mind will find ways of slipping past our attention and getting off the path. We try to fully develop our skills because we learn about the mind in the process. We learn about how the breath has an effect on the mind, and then how that effect can be used to train the mind.

We're getting more and more sensitive to what's going on in the mind, and that allows us to purify it, to see any place where it's creating unnecessary harm, unnecessary stress, unnecessary disturbance, seeing why we're doing that, and that it's really not worth our while to keep on doing those things. And then we let go, because that's when the mind is fully pure.

There was a famous monk in Thailand who once said that this heart of the Buddha's teaching isn't what the teachings were all about. The ultimate teaching is all about how all things are unworthy of attachment. Now, that's true on the final steps of the path, but to get there, you have to follow this heart, and apply these principles at all times. Any place where your behavior could be criticized for a lack of circumspection, you take it to heart. You're training your internal teacher. So if you're internalizing the Buddha's message by avoiding the slightest harm, trying to develop your skills to the fullest level possible, that's what's going to cleanse the mind.

This is a teaching that's been passed down from that one afternoon more than 2,600 years ago. It's good that we remember it every year. Even though homage through material things may not be the ideal homage that the Buddha requested, still it's a reminder. The mind does need to have concrete reminders every now and then. And it's good to remember that we're the beneficiaries of a long tradition: It's not just us sitting here. As the Buddha said, as long as his teachings are being practiced well, the world will not be empty of arahants. Ajaan Suwat once said that part of the realization of arahantship is that the world has not been empty of arahants since the time of the Buddha.

In addition to the arahants, there have been people practicing all along, realizing that these teachings are valuable and passing them along to the next generation and then the next. Right now we're the beneficiaries of what the previous generations have done. And the best way to pass the teachings on, of course, is to practice them. So you're not only paying homage to the past; you're also setting a good example for the future. And having special days like this helps to remind us that we're all in this together. We have something valuable that's been passed on to us. We're paying homage not only to the Buddha, but to all those who passed the Dhamma on as we practice. So as you sit and meditate, as you practice, remember you're not alone. It's not just you. There were people

before you and there will be people after you. So try to pass this along intact by being scrupulous, by trying to develop your skill to the fullest level, and by cleansing and purifying your mind.