

Practicing for Dispassion

May 6, 2020

Tonight is Visakha Puja, the full moon in May. The tradition is that it was on a full moon in May that the Buddha was born; then thirty-five years later, on a full moon in May, he gained awakening; then forty-five years after that, on the full moon in May, he entered total nibbana.

So we're commemorating three events tonight. It was on that last night, the night of his paranibbana, when devas were paying homage to the Buddha with flowers, music, incense, that the Buddha told the monks, "That's not how you pay homage to the Buddha. The true way to pay homage is to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma." So tonight, let's practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma.

What that means is two things. One is practicing for the sake of dispassion. That's what the Dhamma is all about. There was one time when some monks were going to be leaving to go to a foreign country, and the Buddha said to them when they came to pay their respects to him, "Have you paid your respects to Sariputta yet?" They said, "No." He said, "Go see Sariputta."

When they did, Sariputta asked them, "Suppose someone asks you, 'What does your teacher teach?' How would you explain?" They said, "We'd come for a long way to hear how you would explain that." So Sariputta started out by saying, "Our teacher teaches the end of passion." He said, "If those people are intelligent, they'll ask, 'the end of passion for what?' The answer is, 'the end of passion for the aggregates.' Why would he teach the end of passion? Because when you have passion for the aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness, and then those things change, you suffer. If you have no passion for them, then even though they change, there will be no suffering."

It's interesting: Sariputta didn't start with the four noble truths. He didn't start with three characteristics. He started with the goal of the practice—which is dispassion. In Thai, they have a way of putting two words together to make paired concepts, and the word they tend to pair with Dhamma is *attha*: the goal, the meaning, the purpose. So we have the Dhamma, which are fabrications that the Buddha left behind, his verbal fabrications, his instructions on how to practice, but then he also made it very clear what the *attha* of the Dhamma was: It was so that we could train our minds to find the true peace that comes with dispassion.

Now, a lot of people don't like the idea of dispassion. Nowadays, if someone asked, "What does the Buddha teach?" And you said, "The end of passion," they probably wouldn't ask anything further. We have to realize that dispassion is not a dead, lifeless state. It's a growing up. A sobering up. We've been intoxicated for who knows how long by the processes of becoming. We like to take on identities in different worlds of experience, because of what? Because of our passion. A desire becomes attractive, and then we take on an identity around that desire: We become the person who will benefit from fulfilling that

desire and also the person who can do something to bring it about. Then there's a place where those desires can be met, which means that when we take on an identity, there's a world that goes with that.

We're fascinated with this kind of experience. We do it all the time in the mind. The thing is, when we do it in the mind, it doesn't stop there. It's not just an act in the imagination. It can lead us to act and to being reborn on all kinds of different levels.

Think about the knowledges the Buddha gained on the night of his awakening. The first was knowledge of the many, many lifetimes he had been through. When we sit down to meditate, sometimes we have narratives coming up from the day, or narratives from the more distant past. You can imagine what it would be like if we had eons of narratives: all different kinds of levels of being, all different kinds of identities. That was the Buddha's knowledge of the first watch of the night.

In the second watch, the question was: Was this true only of him? There was also the question of why births would go up and down like that. Just looking at his own lifetimes was not enough to see an overall pattern. So he broadened his perspective. He saw that beings everywhere were going through the same process, and it basically came down to their actions. The actions were determined by their views, and their views were determined by who they listened to, who they respected. If they respected people who didn't believe in the principle of karma, didn't believe that doing unskillful things would create problems, or that doing skillful things would have benefits, then they were going to suffer. They'd become low-level beings and living in low-level worlds. But if they listened to the noble ones with respect and believed in the principle of karma, they would go to high levels based on their actions that came from the views that they picked up from those noble people. But even beings on those high levels would fall.

So the next question was: Is there some way to train the mind so that it doesn't have to continue in this up and down, up and down? That was when he gained the third knowledge, which was seeing things in terms of the four noble truths, first seeing exactly what suffering is. So many people say that the Buddha teaches that everything is suffering or that life is suffering, but that's not what he said. He said that clinging is suffering. And there's a cause for the clinging: craving—craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, and then, paradoxically, craving for non-becoming, when you've developed a particular becoming but then want to see it destroyed. That's not the escape from becoming. It actually creates a new type of becoming.

That presented the Buddha with a dilemma. Any becoming that you create is going to involve passion and delight, which is the clinging that's going to involve suffering. If you try to destroy it, the passion and delight you find in destroying it is another type of clinging and creates another type of becoming. The solution that the Buddha discovered was to see things, as he said, as they've come to be—in other words, simply as the raw material from which we create these becomings—and to develop dispassion for the raw material before it had a chance to form a becoming. That was going to be the way out. He discovered that it was possible to do that, and that when you develop dispassion for the craving and for the

objects of craving, that would be the cessation of suffering.

He also discovered that there's something you could do to get there. That was the fourth noble truth, which basically comes down to three main factors: virtue, concentration, and discernment. So we practice virtue for the sake of dispassion, we practice concentration for the sake of dispassion, discernment for the sake of dispassion. That's what turns these things from simple activities that would lead to more becoming into something that leads beyond becoming.

So what would that mean: virtue for the sake of dispassion? In the beginning, you do have to hold on to your precepts. As you're holding on to the precepts, you'll see the impulses in the mind that would pull you away to do something else that would break the precepts. The only way you're going to hold to the precepts is to develop dispassion for the things that would pull you away. As the Buddha said, among those things can be health, wealth, even your relatives. Say that your relatives want you to lie for their sake or to kill for their sake: You have to say No, realizing that there may be some short-term benefit from breaking the precepts, but a lot of long-term pain. And your relatives can't be there to protect you from that long-term pain. So we practice the precepts to gain dispassion for the things that pull people back into the cycle of rebirth.

The same with concentration: You're sitting here and all kinds of thoughts will come up—thoughts of sensuality, thoughts of ill will, restlessness, anxiety, sleepiness, the desire to rest, uncertainty. You have to develop dispassion for them. Otherwise, they pull you away. This is why we have the contemplation of the body to act as a tool for dealing with sensual desire. We develop thoughts of goodwill, thoughts of equanimity to cut through ill will. We work with all the techniques for giving rise to energy when we're sleepy, and ways of talking to ourselves when we feel restless or anxious or overcome with uncertainty. We have to realize that no matter what's going to happen in the future, things are very uncertain. You can't nail down your plans, but you can expect that there will be things in the future that'll be unusual or un-thought of. If you have a lot of mindfulness and alertness, you'll be in a better position to deal with them. So the best way to prepare for the unexpected is to develop those qualities through practicing concentration.

So you use concentration as a foundation for developing dispassion for these distractions. The concentration not only makes you more clear-sighted, but also gives you a sense of well-being, something you can feed on so that you can stop feeding on things that would pull you away.

The same with the discernment: The Buddha's very clear about the fact that the aggregates do have their appeal. As he said, if they didn't have any appeal, people wouldn't fall for them. However, they also have their drawbacks. It's the acts of discernment focused on the drawbacks that help give rise to dispassion for all the things that would pull you back, pull you back.

So we practice virtue, concentration, and discernment, for the sake of dispassion. That's when we're using them rightly. We don't practice virtues to think that we're going to be better than other people, we don't practice concentration to gain power over other people,

and we don't develop discernment to show how smart we are. These things have their noble purpose, which is dispassion. And as the ajaans have said again and again and again, they're like tools. Suppose that you're working on making a chair or a table. As long as you're working on the project, you've got to hold on to your tools. When the project is done, you can put the tools down.

In other words, you have to eventually let go of virtue, concentration, and discernment, so that your dispassion will be total. As the Buddha points out, the factors of the path, too, have their drawbacks. After all, they're built out of aggregates, they're inconstant, so you can't rest with them. You have to let them go.

That's when dispassion shows its real rewards, when it goes on to total release. That's the *attha* of the teaching. Now, this letting go doesn't mean that after a people have gained awakening they come back out and don't have any virtue or concentration or discernment. They still have those qualities. As Ajaan Lee points out, you look at the Buddha's life: He was still a virtuous person, he still used his powers of concentration and his discernment in order to teach, but his relationship to these things was different.

As the Buddha himself said, once you gain full awakening, you can still use these things, but you're disjoined from them. You don't have to feed on them anymore. There's nothing more that needs to be done for the sake of cleansing the mind, finding purity, finding release. But as long as you're still alive, there's still work you can do. And it's good work. You can help other people find the way to dispassion and release as well.

It's at the end of the arahant's life: That's when you put everything down. Like the Buddha on the night of his total nibbāna: He'd been teaching for 45 years, using all the good qualities he'd developed prior to his awakening, walking all over northern India. Wherever there was someone who he knew was ready to receive the teaching, he would go. Even on the last day of his life, there was one more person he had to teach. So even though he was suffering dysentery that day, he walked many miles, finally lay down between two trees near Kusinara, and taught that one last person. Then he could let go totally. All the duties of the Buddha—finding the path, teaching the path, establishing the Dhamma and Vinaya—were done. His work was complete, and he entered nibbāna, as they say, “with no fuel remaining.”

This image is of a fire going out. On the night of his awakening, he became a fire that had stopped burning but whose coals were still warm. In other words, he still experienced pleasure and pain, but his mind was not affected by them. But there was still work to be done. The night of his total nibbāna: That's when the fire went totally out with no glowing embers remaining. The coals were all cold. For a lot of us, the image may seem really negative, but you have to remember the early Buddhist belief about fire was that while it was burning it was agitated, clinging, and trapped. When it went out, it was released. No more agitation, no more clinging. Cool, free, and at peace. And it went out not because the fuel released it, but because it released the fuel. That's how it became free. That's the image we should keep in mind.

The reason we're still stuck on these processes of becoming, weaving them again and

again and again, is not because of the becoming. *We're* the ones that are stuck because we're holding on. Ajaan Lee's image is of eating food. The food isn't attached to us. If we don't eat the food in the morning, it's not going to cry. *We're* the ones who are upset when there's no food. In the same way, we're attached to becoming; we're passionate about becoming. It's for that reason that we're stuck. When we can develop dispassion and let go, then we're freed.

This is what it means to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, and this is what it means to pay homage to the Buddha through the practice. He didn't teach the Dhamma so that we could have nice monasteries, and have a pleasant time in the monastery. He taught the Dhamma so that we could find dispassion, develop dispassion, and then gain the rewards of that dispassion. That, he said, was the highest of all Dhammas: the Dhamma for the sake of which every other Dhamma is taught. So make that the "for the sake of" in your practice. You'll be paying homage to the Buddha in the way that's right. And only then will you understand the true meaning of the Dhamma and how worthwhile the goal is.