

The Lightened Mind

February 26, 2021

Tonight's Magha Puja. Magha is the name of the month. Puja means homage. We're paying homage to an event that happened in the first year of the Buddha's teaching career in the month of Magha. On the afternoon of the full-moon day, 1,250 of his arahant disciples all came to see him. There hadn't been an invitation, there hadn't been any planned meeting, but they all came spontaneously. The Buddha gave them a teaching and then sent them off to teach others.

The reason why he taught them when they were already arahants probably had to do with the fact that they had heard only one or two Dhamma talks from him and gained awakening. He wanted to fill them in on the details of what they should say if they were teaching people who were not nearly as advanced as they were. Of those 1,250 arahants, it's assumed that 1,000 of them were the three Kassapa brothers and their disciples. And the remaining 250 were Ven. Sariputta, Ven. Moggallana, and their following.

We don't have a record of the talk as a whole. But we do have the verses with which the Buddha concluded the talk. This was one of his standard ways of helping people remember things. He would give a talk, and then have a verse at the end that went through the main points.

The very first line of the verse has to do with the highest austerity. These arahants had all been ascetics before they met the Buddha. We don't know what ascetic practices Sariputta and Moggallana had practiced before meeting the Buddha, but we do have a record of the Kassapa brothers and their following. They worshiped fire, they bathed in the river, even in the coldest nights of the cold season, in hopes of sensual pleasures in heaven.

So, at the very beginning of the talk, the Buddha talked about what was the highest austerity. It wasn't any of the practices like that. It was developing patience and endurance within the mind. In the very next line, the Buddha said the highest goal is not heaven. It's unbinding. Of course, they knew this.

But with patience, it's like the teaching he gave to Rahula before he taught him how to meditate on the breath, which is to make the mind like earth. You train your mind to be non-reactive—not as a goal in and of itself, but as a means for seeing things clearly.

The question is: How do you get from that solid earth-like state to unbinding, which is total freedom? That's what the rest of the talk was about.

Two passages in the verses are well-known. One comes right in the middle. *Sabba-pāpassa akaraṇaṃ, Kusalassūpasampadā, Sacitta-pariyodapanam: Etaṃ buddhāna-sāsanam.* “Not doing any evil, developing your skillfulness to the

highest level, and then cleansing the mind so that it's totally clean. This is the teachings of the Buddhas." That's how you get from patience and endurance to unbinding. That message is then boiled down to one line at the very end of the last verse: *Adhicitte ca āyogo: Etam buddhāna-sāsananti*: being committed to the heightened mind. This is the teachings of the Buddhas.

You heighten the mind by lightening it. We can see this in the Triple Training that the Buddha taught: training in heightened virtue, in the heightened mind—i.e., concentration—and training in heightened discernment. Each aspect of the training deals with all three principles mentioned in the earlier verse.

For example, with virtue, you start out by avoiding anything that's going to be harmful. Then you develop the good qualities that go along with those virtues. Instead of just not telling lies, you actually devote yourself to telling the truth. You don't just abstain from killing, but you also help beings that are in danger. You're kind to them, gentle with them. In other words, you develop the positive qualities that go along with the precepts. The precepts basically tell you what not to do. Then you develop the positive qualities that develop along with them. That's developing your skillfulness.

And then cleansing the mind. This is where you bring virtue to a higher level, what the Buddha calls virtues pleasing to the noble ones. You're strict in your observance of the precepts but, at the same time, you observe them in such a way that you don't grasp at them. In other words, you don't develop any pride around them. And you practice them in a way that's conducive to concentration. This requires skill, because a lot of people, when they're strict about the precepts, get very obsessed, anxious, afraid that they've done something wrong. Yet the Buddha says you want to practice scrupulously in a way that's conducive to concentration.

So you stick with the precepts. That's conducive to concentration in that you don't do things that you're going to regret. But you also learn to have an attitude of lightness. You realise that the big issue in observing the precepts is not outside, it's in observing your intentions, looking after your intentions. As the Buddha said, as long as your intentions are pure, then you don't have to worry about your words or your deeds. So, this is where you work directly on the mind as part of virtue. And that leads, of course, to concentration.

Here again, you apply those same three principles. You drop the hindrances. In other words, you realize that you don't want to side with your sensual desires, ill will, sloth and drowsiness, restlessness and anxiety, or uncertainty. There is a side of the mind that likes to side with these things, but you realize that you've got to see these things not as your friends, but as obstacles to what's really good in life.

Then you develop the qualities of concentration, mindfulness, and what the Buddha calls analysis of qualities. You look at the breath and you evaluate it. Is this a breath that you can settle down with? If not, what you can do to change? How about the state of your mind? Is this a mind ready to settle down? If not, what you can let go of? Then as you work at that, you develop a sense of rapture because you look at the mind and you can see that it's not dealing in anything that's going to weigh you down. This is how you begin to lighten the mind.

Even in just the ordinary practice of concentration, you're letting go of things that hold you down. It's like riding a hot-air balloon. You drop all the heavy weights, and the balloon can rise higher and higher. You come to a state of calm, concentration, equanimity. You develop the mind in skillfulness.

Then you cleanse it. This is where the Buddha says you learn how to have the theme of your concentration well in hand. Ajaan Fuang would call this lifting the mind above its object. You're focused on your object, but you've lifted your awareness up a little bit, just enough so that you can observe the mind itself as it relates to the object.

This, the Buddha said, is how you begin to develop discernment within the practice of concentration so that the concentration itself isn't heavy. It gets lighter and lighter as you drop away the various factors of the lower levels of right concentration and go to the higher ones. You see where there's unnecessary stress in the mind, and that it's not there because of anything anyone is imposing it on you. You're imposing it on yourself. And you're free to let it go.

This gets into the practice of discernment. Here we have the same three principles. First you let go of whatever is wrong view. The big wrong view is that if there's anything weighing the mind down, it's coming from outside: people outside, situations outside. You realize that if these things weigh you down, it's because you let them, not because they impose themselves. Think of what the Buddha said about reacting to sounds, unpleasant sounds. You just tell yourself, "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear." That's it. It goes only that far. That's as far as a sound can go: into the ear. But we pull in our thoughts around the sound. Then we let them reverberate through the mind.

So if our attitude is that we're suffering because of things outside, we've got to drop that attitude, not because we're trying to absolve other people of any wrong-doing, but because we have the choice. The things they may say may be really unpleasant sounds. The things they do may be unpleasant actions. But we have the freedom not to let ourselves be weighed down by them. As you realize that, you develop the mind higher and higher in discernment, developing your skillfulness in terms of discernment.

Then as the Buddha says, you lighten the mind even further by seeing that the discernment itself has its limitations. It, too, has its drawbacks in that it's fabricated. There's a line of thought that says the path culminates in discernment or wisdom, but that's not the case. The path culminates in release. Here release means release from all things fabricated, including the discernment that gets you there. This is how you ultimately lighten the mind. That's when the mind is brought to its highest state. That's when it's totally free.

So these are the stages in how you get from just learning to teach the mind how to be solid, to the goal which is totally unlimited. We heighten the mind by lightening it, and we lighten it by first making sure that we don't do anything that's unskillful, evil, even in the least little bit of way. We develop the mind so that it brings its skillfulness to its ultimate degree. And then we cleanse the mind all around, in our practice of virtue, concentration, discernment.

That's the teaching that the Buddha gave. Then he told the arahants to go out and teach for the well-being of all human and divine beings. They had already completed their work in the practice. From this point on, all of their teachings were for free. They were gifts.

It's because they were able to give that gift that has since been passed on that we're now the recipients of that gift. So, it's good on events like this to stop and show some gratitude. Pay homage to the fact that there were people who were able to do this, and it's been passed on all these many, many generations. That will give more energy to our own practice, so that we, too, can find out what it's like to be totally free, how we can heighten our minds by lightening them step by step along the path.