

Visakha Puja – Shaking the Earth

May 26, 2021

Tonight, is Visakha Puja. “Visakha” is the name of the month; “puja” means to pay homage. We’re not paying homage to the month; we’re paying homage to events that happened this month. The tradition has it that the Buddha was born on the full-moon night of this month, then thirty-five years later he gained awakening on the full-moon night of this month, then forty-five years after that he entered total nibbana, again, on the full-moon night of this month.

So, we commemorate these events every year by paying homage to the Buddha, by paying homage to his awakening, homage to the fact that he was able to find the path to the end of suffering and teach it to others, then gained *total* release from birth, aging, illness, and death.

Those are momentous events. The tradition has it that the Earth quaked, at each one of them, because they are events that really do shape and define the world in which we live. If we lived in a world where no one had found a way to put an end to suffering, it would be a very different world from what it is. But the Buddha established that possibility and, in so doing, he changed the world. These are events that shape our lives, because they give us a new sense of what’s possible. So, we pay homage.

What we did just now is called *amisa-puja*, in which we pay homage with material things: candles, flowers, incense. But, as the Buddha said, the best way to pay him homage is through practice—*patipatti-puja*—in which we practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. In other words, we practice for the sake of dispassion.

One time, when a group of monks was going to a far distant land, they paid their respects to the Buddha. He asked them, “Have you paid your respects to Sariputta yet?” They hadn’t, so he sent them to see Sariputta. Sariputta asked them: “People in that land are intelligent. If they ask you, ‘What does your teacher teach?’ how would you answer them?” The monks took advantage of the fact that there was Sariputta who, among the Buddha’s students, was known to have the most discernment, so they asked him what he would say. He told them, “Tell them that your teacher teaches the ending of passion.”

Then he said, because they’re intelligent, they would want to know: the ending of passion for what? Which shows the big difference between people back then and people now. Nowadays if you told someone that our teacher

teaches the ending of passion, they probably wouldn't ask any further questions. But as Sariputta said, these people are intelligent, they would want to know: the ending of passion for what? The ending of passion for the five aggregates. Why? What advantage is there in dispassion for these things? Because if you cling to these things, then when they change, there's going to be sorrow. But if you have no passion for them, then no matter how much they change, there will be no sorrow. Then he went on to say: If, in developing skillful qualities, people didn't gain true happiness, the Buddha wouldn't have recommended it. But because we do gain true happiness in developing skillful qualities, that's why he taught these things.

This is how we begin our practice of Dhamma in line with the Dhamma: by trying to develop skillful qualities in the mind, as when we're meditating right now. You focus on the breath. That's called directed thought. And then you see if you can stay with the breath for long periods of time, because you're trying to develop concentration. As the Buddha once said, that's the heart of the path. All the other elements he awakened to in the path serve as its requisites, serve as its supports. The concentration itself is getting the mind to focus on one thing and then allowing that one thing to fill your awareness.

So, with the breath, you notice when it's coming in, when it's going out. You stay with it, right here, right now. Then you think of the breath energy filling the whole body—comfortable breath energy, where there's a sense of ease. You let it go through the torso, the arms, the legs, the head, so that the mind can be well established with a sense of well-being. As long as it still hasn't got rid of its passions, have some passion for the path.

That's why the Buddha put concentration there in the center because it gives you a sense of well-being. It's food for the mind. So, as you start looking at things that would pull you away from the concentration, they begin to lose a lot of their appeal. You look at the things that you used to feel passionate about and you see that they're empty. A lot of times that passion accomplishes nothing. And sometimes even worse: In other words, it accomplishes nothing and actually takes good things away. Because with so many of the things that we're passionate for, we'll do all *kinds* of things to get them, without thinking about right or wrong, skillful or unskillful. Which means we will probably do things that are wrong and things that are unskillful. That becomes our karma. That shapes the world in which we're going to live.

So, with the concentration practice, we can shape the mind so that it's not so hungry for things outside. And it can gain a sense of detachment. You're

putting yourself in a better position to do what is wise, to do what is skillful, to do what is really beneficial for you and people around you.

So, you develop dispassion for things that are outside of the path; maintain your passion for the path. That is the last type of passion you're going to let go of. It's in this way that you pay true homage to the Buddha.

Think about all he went through in order to find this path, the kind of the person he had to be: ardent, resolute, heedful. As he said, the secret to his awakening was not resting content with the skillful qualities, to say nothing of the unskillful qualities. He kept working for what was better. Even with skillful qualities, he would look for where there were still drawbacks so that the skill could become more and more refined. That was the kind of the person it took to find this path and then be able to formulate it in words so that he could teach it to other people.

After he gained his awakening, he surveyed the world, he looked at the Dhamma he had won, he thought of *all* that he had been through, and he began to wonder: Would it be worthwhile to teach this? Would there be people who would appreciate it? Would there be people who would benefit? For a while, he was inclined not to teach. Because after all, after he had gained awakening: He owed nothing to anybody any more.

The story goes that there was a brahma who saw what was going on in the Buddha's mind and he was concerned. He said, "We're lost! The world will not have a Buddha! The world will not know about the Buddha's teachings!" So he came down and invited the Buddha to teach. He said that there are those with little dust in their eyes, they will see and they will appreciate and they will benefit. The Buddha surveyed the world on his own and he said, "Yes, that's true."

So, he decided to teach.

This was *totally* a gift. He didn't *have* to teach. We somehow think that because he had aimed at becoming a teaching Buddha, then once he gained awakening he was compelled to teach. But the fact of awakening was so radical that it meant he had no debts to anybody at all.

The fact that we have this teaching was a pure gift on his part, which means that we should receive it as a gift with a sense of gratitude. So when we practice, we practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, for the sake of dispassion, but also with a very strong sense of gratitude: that it's because of the Buddha that we live in a world where the path to the end of suffering has been found, it's still being taught, it's still open. We think of all the generations it has gone through, and the times when people said, "Oh, the time is past. There's nobody

anymore who can—to say nothing about awakening—even attain right concentration.” Which means that other people had to re-discover the path, taking the cue from the fact that the Buddha really did teach these things and, as he said, that the Dhamma is timeless. They took his teachings and took them seriously. As we think of this path, we can see that it tends to overgrow with weeds every now and then, but then people come along and cut away the weeds to make it easier for us to practice. We think of the ajaans in Thailand: Without them where would we be? Totally clueless. So we think of the Buddha as our ultimate admirable friend and of all of the other admirable friends who have kept the teaching alive.

This is our opportunity. We live in this world where the path to the end of suffering has been taught. As the Buddha said, there will come a time when the Dhamma is forgotten. There have been Buddhas before him, and their teachings have been forgotten. It took the Buddha many, many lifetimes—a lot of effort, a lot of dedication—to find the path again. So here’s the opportunity. Don’t let it slip from your grasp. Take advantage of it while it’s here. In that way, you pay homage to the Buddha and you’re benefitting at the same time.

Think about it: He went through all that effort to find the path to the end of suffering and, as he said, the appropriate way to show homage, to show appreciation, is to practice the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. He didn’t benefit from the fact that people were doing this. Yet that’s the kind of homage he wanted, which shows what a magnanimous heart he had.

So we should let his teachings expand our hearts as well. He found a path that benefitted him and benefitted others. We should make sure that our practice benefits us and people around us, too. That way, we will help keep this Dhamma alive in this world.