

## *Homage Through the Practice*

*July 31, 2004*

Okay, let's sit and meditate.

Tonight's Asalha Puja. *Asalha* is the name of the month in Pali. *Puja* means homage. It was on the full moon of this month, right after his awakening, that the Buddha gave his first sermon, "Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion." So we're commemorating that event tonight.

It was at the end of this sermon that one of the listeners, Añña Kondañña, gained the Dhamma Eye, the first taste of awakening. So he was the first member of the Noble Sangha.

This is why they commemorate this as the date when the Triple Gem became complete. They already had the Buddha; this was the day that he started teaching the Dhamma and began the Noble Sangha. So it's an important date in the Buddhist calendar.

As for homage, the Buddha said there are two kinds: homage with material things and homage through the practice. What we did just now with the circumambulation of the candles, the incense, the flowers, walking around with our right to the Buddha image: That's an old tradition, a way of showing respect for someone. You walk around them, keeping your right side to them, three times. All that's homage with material things.

But the Buddha said that the true homage is homage through the practice. In other words, you think of all those eons that the Buddha practiced to become the Buddha. Did he do it for flowers, candles, and incense? No. He did it for the Dhamma, the Dhamma that would show people the way to bring an end to suffering. He practiced this way, developing all the qualities he needed as a Buddha, so that other people would take his teachings and put them into practice. When we practice in line with that intention, we're showing true respect for him.

That's what we're doing now. Focus on your breath. And be mindful of the breathing. In other words, keep the breath in mind. Then be alert to what's going on with the breathing. When the breath comes in, know it's coming in. When it goes out, know it's going out. If it's comfortable or not, notice that, too.

The word "breath" here means the whole process of breathing. Your whole body is involved in the breathing—it's not just at the nose. You need the lungs, you need the ribcage, you need all the different parts of your nervous system for the breath to be complete.

So you can focus on any part of the body where you notice: Now it feels

comfortable with the breath coming in, now it feels comfortable with the breath going out, and where you can gauge whether the breath is too long or too short. All of this comes under the quality of alertness.

And then finally the third quality the Buddha recommended applying to the meditation is ardency. You really stick with it. You don't just stay with a couple of breaths and then wander off and do something else and then come back and check on the breath after five minutes. You keep right at the breath again and again and again. Because this quality of keeping at something is what allows you to see it truly for what it is.

You can also catch a lot of the movements of the mind. When the mind leaves the breath, why is it leaving? Don't just let it leave. Bring it back. That way, you begin to see how your mind acts.

Oftentimes the first lesson you learn in meditation is how untrained your mind is. It's like a puppy dog. You bring it home when it's not yet house-trained, and it creates a mess all over the place. So we're here to house-train the mind, so that when you tell it to stay put, it stays put. When you tell it to look here, it looks here.

Because the mind is *the* big factor in your life. It's going to shape your life. And if this factor is out of control, your whole life is out of control. You can't trust anything in your life if you can't trust this part.

And why are we doing this? Well, as the Buddha pointed out, there's suffering in our lives, there's stress, there's pain. Part of it is built-in to having a body, but a lot of it comes from the way the mind reacts to things. And that's not necessary.

The pains of having a body: You can't avoid those. But the suffering that the mind piles on itself through its ignorance and through its craving: That can be changed. In fact, it's in changing those habits of the mind that you bring the mind to a point where the pains of the body and the pains of the outside world don't matter—because you're not bringing them in to burn the mind.

This is why we have to practice. We have to train the mind. As the Buddha said, the mind well-trained brings happiness. The untrained mind brings all kinds of suffering. So we train it in virtue, concentration, and discernment.

Virtue means normalcy. You bring the mind to a state of normalcy where it's not wanting to harm itself, not wanting to harm anybody else. The desire to harm is abnormal. The desire to wish for your own happiness, to wish for the happiness of others: That's normal. So keep your mind in a state of normalcy.

Then, in maintaining it there, the next step is concentration. Concentration actually means keeping the mind centered so that it's stable. When the mind is centered and stable, there's a sense of well-being.

And even though it's dependent on conditions, this well-being is very, very useful. This center inside is very useful. The more you can develop this center inside, the more clearly you can see things going on in the mind—and the more sensitive you are to even the slightest bit of stress and suffering that you cause for yourself.

Once the mind is quiet, you can begin to see your habits: running around here, running around there, stepping on this, stepping on that, holding on to this, holding on to that, pushing this away: all these things the mind does that cause stress and suffering.

If you didn't stop, you'd think this was the normal way the mind has to be. Look around you: This is the way everybody else's minds are, so you begin to think, "Well this is the way it has to be." But it doesn't have to be.

As you get the mind more and more still, you begin to realize: You can choose to stay right here or to move. If you're going to move—and if you're wise—you ask yourself, "Where are you going? What's this going to accomplish?"

Often the places where the mind moves are old territory, places you've been many, many times before. Old movies. If you actually took the movies of the mind and projected them up on a screen, nobody would pay to come. You yourself wouldn't pay to come.

It's only rarely that the movements of the mind are really useful. So it's a good skill to have: to be able to bring your mind to stillness. That way, you can choose: Is this a good time to think? If not, you've got a good place to rest with the breath.

Once you have this center, then as you go through your life, your mind isn't so hungry. When the mind is hungry, it'll go out and feed on anything. As the Buddha said, this is the essence of suffering: this tendency to feed, to be hungry. The hunger is the craving and then the feeding is the suffering. You feed on sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, your relationship to this person, your relationship to this thing. That's food for the mind, but it's junk food. And the act of feeding is pretty miserable.

The ideal state would be if the mind was totally independent, didn't need anything at all.

So first you give it good food to feed inside on, as you get the breath comfortable with this sense of being centered inside. That way, when it's well-fed inside, you don't grab on to the words other people say, the things they do, thinking that you might get some nourishment out of them. Actually, those things don't give any real nourishment at all. The real nourishment has to come from within.

When the mind is nourished like this, it can begin to look more carefully at its

own habits. It begins to see where it creates unnecessary suffering.

This is the third part of the path, which is discernment: noticing how suffering comes, how it goes, especially the kind of suffering that's based on your craving and your ignorance. Normally, we don't like to see our craving and ignorance. We don't like to see the stupid things we do. We pretend they're not there. But pretending they're not there doesn't solve the problem. It just covers it up with more and more layers of ignorance.

Once the mind is well-nourished with a sense of strength, a sense of well-being inside, then it's more willing to look at its old habits and can begin to see where they're really unnecessary, where they really do cause suffering: You don't have to follow through with them. You can learn how to let them go.

What this leads to is release. The mind sees something that's not dependent on conditions. Like the insight of Añña Kondañña on that first night, "Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation." That's half of the insight. The other half of the insight was the non-verbal part, which showed that there was something that was *not* subject to origination, *not* subject to cessation. That was the release: something that doesn't have to feed on anything, something that's not dependent on anything at all. It's just there. Yet it can be touched in the mind when you learn to let go of all your craving and ignorance.

Our problem is that we hold on to these things because we think they're going to provide happiness. We all have our strategies for making ourselves happy. And some of them work to some extent. But for most of us our strategies are, one, ignoring the suffering we're causing for ourselves, and two, holding on to things that we think belong to us: our sense of self, our sense of things that belong to our self.

Now, in the Buddha's path there's an extent to which he encourages you to develop a strong sense of self and self-reliance. But then he says that ignoring suffering does not solve the problem. Clinging to things is the problem. So you learn to look at your suffering to see where the clinging is and let go of its cause.

Basically what he's saying is that your desire for happiness is something that should be honored. But you have to look at your strategies for going about it. Learn to look at the suffering you're actually causing yourself when you think you're creating happiness. And then learn how to let it go of its cause.

This is the hard part of the teaching for us because it goes so much against the grain of the strategies we've been holding on to for so long. But he says that if you look really carefully and you see that your strategies are not working, why hold onto them? There's something better. There's a better way to go about it.

This is why he focuses his teaching on the issue of suffering and stress. He said

that if you solve this one problem, you've solved all of the mind's problems. Some people complain that the teaching sounds very narrow—just focusing on suffering when there are so many other bigger issues in life—but the question is, are the big issues really the big issues? We're driven so much by suffering in our lives.

As the Buddha said, the main reaction to suffering is bewilderment. We're so bewildered by the suffering in our lives that we can't even ask the right questions, much less find the right answers.

This is why he recommends developing the qualities of mind that bring it to calm, bring it to peace, bring it to clarity so that it can begin to see for itself, so that it's not constantly pushed around by suffering, not constantly bewildered by suffering. The only way you can prevent yourself from being bewildered by suffering is by learning to look at it carefully. That's why he said that your duty with regard to suffering is to comprehend it, to see it for what it really is. And then when you understand it, that's when you can let it go.

We were talking today about the pain that comes from going to a dentist. If you actually sit with the pain and realize just what the pain is—as opposed to your fears about it, your reactions to it, your anticipations—it's something very different from what you might anticipate. It's much more manageable.

You begin to see how often issues are created by the mind's anticipations—which come out of what? They come out of craving and ignorance. But you don't see these things unless you're really willing to look at the pain for what it is.

Once that issue is taken care of, then, he says, all your other issues in life unravel. So if you focus on this one issue, stay focused here, you'd be amazed at what other issues get unraveled in the mind as well. Either you see that they weren't really issues to begin with at all, or you really see how you can solve them.

So the Buddha's solution is very elegant. It goes right to the heart of the problem. Once the heart of the problem is solved, he said, there are no more problems. The job is done.

That's what's meant by the line in the chant we recited tonight: “capable of making an end.” So many of the jobs of the world never get finished. Can't be finished. But this is one job that can. And it's the most worthwhile skill, the most worthwhile issue you can focus on in your life.

So the Buddha's teachings are a challenge. He says there's a deathless happiness that can be found through the practice. You look at the happiness that the rest of the world has to offer: It's certainly not deathless. Sometimes it's not really happiness, just one disappointment after another, after another. There's a lot of struggle and a lot of pain in getting these things and then you find that they're not what you thought they'd be.

But the Buddha says you can find a true happiness by developing qualities in your mind that you can be proud of—again, unlike so much in the world where in order to be happy they say you have to learn how to cheat this person and be sneaky here and do other things that you're not really proud of. But in the practice you develop qualities you can be proud of—which is why they say the practice is good in the beginning, good in the middle, especially good in the end.

So that's his challenge. You've got this human life. How do you want to spend it? What paths do you want to explore? Choose them wisely because there's not that much time.