

True to the Teachings

July 21, 2005

Tonight is Asalha Puja. Asalha is the name of the month whose full moon is tonight. Puja means to pay respect, to worship, to honor. What we're worshipping tonight is our memory of the Buddha's first sermon. That's because this was the night, the full moon in July, that he was able to track down the five brethren after his awakening and give his first sermon to them.

The story goes that after experiencing the bliss of awakening for seven weeks, he reflected on who he should teach. He thought first of his two teachers, the people who had first taught him meditation years back, but he realized that they had passed away and had gone to the formless realms, where they were out of reach. Then he thought of the five monks who had been his attendants throughout his many years of austerities, and who had left him when he started eating again. He realized that they were near Benares, so he walked the distance. It took him about a week. He overcame their doubts about him and gave them his first sermon, *Setting the wheel of Dhamma in Motion*, in which he taught about the noble eightfold path and the four noble truths.

One of the results of the sermon was that one of the five brethren attained the Dhamma Eye, his first glimpse of the deathless. In that glimpse of the deathless, he realized this was something that didn't arise and pass away. Everything else arises and passes away, but the deathless doesn't. That experience confirmed what the Buddha taught, so he asked to be ordained as a monk. He was the first monk who the Buddha ordained. Which means, as it says in the passages you just read, that the Triple Gem became complete that night. Prior to that time, there was just the Buddha and the Dhamma, but now there was the Sangha as well.

So we're commemorating several things tonight. One, the truth the Buddha awakened to, and two, his truth in attaining that awakening. Then there was the truth of Ven. Añña-Kondañña, who, in listening, didn't just listen, but he actually took the Buddha's teachings to heart. When the Buddha talked about suffering, he looked at the suffering in his own mind. When he talked about the cause of suffering, he looked at the cause of suffering in his own mind. When the Buddha talked about the fact that it's possible to put an end to that, Añña-Kondañña followed the path of practice, and in his particular case, he had already developed strong powers of concentration, so he worked mainly on discernment, seeing how his cravings were the causes suffering and how he could put a stop to those cravings.

So there are several levels of truth going on here. One, the four noble truths, the truths that were in the Buddha's words. But then also, the truth of the experience on which those words are based. That's the attainment. And then there was the truth of the practice that Añña-Kondañña followed that evening, taking what the Buddha taught him and putting it into practice right then and there.

That's when these three levels of truth all came together. And ever since, people have talked about the three levels of Dhamma. There's *pariyatti* Dhamma, which is the Dhamma that we read and memorize; there's *patipatti* Dhamma, the Dhamma of the practice; and then there's *pativedha* Dhamma, the Dhamma of attainment. They all came together that night.

So that's what we are paying homage to.

Now, there are two ways of paying homage. First you pay homage with material things, as we did just now, with flowers, candles, and incense. The Pali term for that *amisa-puja*. But at another time in his life, toward the end of his life, the Buddha said, that's not the true way of paying homage. The true way of paying homage is homage through the practice. In other words, you take that truths he taught and you put them into practice in your own mind, your own words, and your own deeds.

That's what we're doing now as we try to bring the mind to concentration. When the mind is concentrated, try to balance that concentration to make sure it's not just a dull stillness. Make the mind mindful and alert, so that you can actually look into your own mind to see where there's still any falseness in there—in the way the mind tends to lie to itself, not really looking at its own actions. It's when you look honestly at the actions of the mind that you begin to see, "Oh, this action is actually causing suffering; this action is putting an end to suffering." These actions are displaying their truth at all times. The Buddha once said that his truth is timeless. But we don't look, so we don't see what's going on right here all the time. We miss a very important lesson, which would be to see how we create all sorts of unnecessary suffering for ourselves, and how we can learn not to.

But when you do absorb that lesson and put it into practice, that's called paying homage to the Buddha with the practice. And as he said, that's true homage. After all, the Buddha didn't practice all those many any eons of developing his perfections simply so that people would light candles and incense in his honor, and pile up flowers in front of his statue. That wasn't his motivation. He really wanted to put an end to suffering in his own heart, and he really wanted to help other people be able to do it in theirs as well. The Buddha wasn't one for ceremony. When he gave Dhamma talks, he wasn't giving them just for ceremony.

He wanted people listening to them not to listen just in ceremony. He wanted them to really listen, to take what he taught them, and put it into practice.

This is the sort of thing that would give him satisfaction, particularly the kind of practice where you're not just practicing, but you also gain some understanding, you gain some realization, you gain some freedom for the mind.

So see what you can do tonight to bring some freedom into your mind. Try to look and see where you're causing yourself unnecessary suffering. Don't just let the mind wander around at will, thinking about things that actually burden the heart. Try to realize that you have the choice not to think those things, not to go there. When you're focusing on the breath, you're giving the mind another place to stay. You've always got that other place to stay, so learn how to make the most of it.

If you catch yourself wandering off, you can let go. Think of that as dropping one more burden from the mind. If you find yourself picking up the burning thought again, well, learn how to drop it again. Get good at dropping things. Get good at letting them go. No matter how entangling a thought may seem, it doesn't have your hands tied, doesn't have your feet tied, doesn't necessarily have your mind tied down.

There's that old story of the Gordian knot, a very complex knot that nobody could untie. Then Alexander the Great came along and just gave it on chop with his sword. That was the end of the Gordian knot. A lot of our thoughts are that way. They seem so entangled: We've got to think about this, we've got to think about that, and you really have to worry about this—but you don't have to. You just drop the thought. Give the mind a better place to stay as you work with the breath. That may not be the ultimate release the Buddha was talking about, but true release lies in that direction: catching yourself in the midst of activities based on craving that can lead to suffering, catching yourself and learning how to let go, seeing that you have the choice, and making the most of that choice.

In other words, you disband the clouds of falseness, the clouds of ignorance of the mind, as you're really true with yourself in admitting: "I'm doing this. I'm doing that. It's causing this and that suffering. And I made the choice." If you make a choice, that means you have the choice *not* to do those things as well. Once you're open and honest about this, once you're true to yourself in this way, new levels of truth will appear in the mind.

So this is why we say that on the night when the Buddha gave his first sermon, several levels of truth all came together. There was the truth of his teaching, there was the truth behind the teaching, on which it was based, and then there was the

truth of the listener who was willing to open himself up and really look in terms of the teaching the Buddha gave.

The truth of the Buddha is already there, the truth of his teaching is there, now the question is: How much truth can you bring to bear in your own mind? It's a question only you can answer for yourself. But the conditions are all ripe. And this is how we pay homage to the Buddha, by being true to ourselves.