

Asalha Puja

July 24, 2021

Tonight's Asalha Puja. It was on the full moon of the Asalha month that the Buddha gave his first talk, his first Dhamma teaching. Two months earlier, he'd gained awakening on the full-moon night of Visakha, and after that he stayed there in Bodhgaya for seven weeks, experiencing the bliss of release.

At the end of the seven weeks, he considered whether he was going to teach or not. He thought of how difficult it had been to find awakening, how subtle it was, and he was inclined not to teach, thinking that it would be a lot of wasted effort.

Sahampati Brahmā saw what was going on in the Buddha's mind and was concerned. After all, the Buddha had spent all that time developing the perfections to become a teaching Buddha, and here he was changing his mind. So the Brahmā came down, got on one knee, and implored the Buddha. He said, "Please teach. There are those with little dust in their eyes. They will benefit from the Dhamma."

So the Buddha considered the world again and saw that it was true: There were those who would benefit. So he decided to teach.

This story reminds us that, after his awakening, the Buddha owed nothing to anyone. He'd gained full awakening and he was free not to teach—which meant that when he *did* teach, it was totally a gift. He wasn't compelled; he wasn't forced. It was purely out of his compassion that he taught freely.

Then he considered whom to teach. First he thought of his two earlier teachers, the ones who had taught him formless attainments. But then he realized that they had died and gone to the formless heavens where they were out of touch. He couldn't reach them.

So then he thought of the five brethren, those who had assisted him when he was undergoing his austerities for six years. He considered that they were near Varanasi in Sarnath, so he walked there. It probably took about a week, and he arrived, today basically, the full-moon day in Asalha, which is the full-moon day in July.

When the five brethren saw him coming, they were at first not inclined to receive him. After all, he'd given up his austerities; they thought he had reverted to becoming luxurious. But they couldn't help themselves. As he approached, they took his bowl, they washed his feet, but still they addressed him as "friend."

The Buddha said, "This is not appropriate anymore: I've gained awakening. You should not address me as friend." They said, "How can you have gained awakening? You gave up on your austerities." He said, "I've found the deathless. Have I ever made a claim like this before?" They realized from his truthfulness that he was not the sort of person to make idle claims, so they decided to listen.

He gave them the first talk, which we call *Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion*.

He started out with explaining the two extremes that didn't lead to awakening: one was pursuing sensual pleasures, the other was undergoing self-torture. Both of these extremes, he said, are ignoble. In other words, they're a childish approach to the question of finding true happiness. On the one hand, you follow sensual pleasures wherever they can go, and on the other, you decide that "If I endure enough pain, maybe the reward will be a higher pleasure, a higher happiness." But the Buddha said no, neither extreme works. The path that works is the middle way.

By this, he didn't mean a middling way, halfway between pleasure and pain. It was a path that involved comprehending suffering, and for using the pleasure of right concentration as an alternative to either sensual pleasure or physical pain. Right view, which was part of the path, was focused on the question of how to understand suffering. In other words—why is it that we suffer? Where is the cause?

Then he set forth four noble truths. This is the right view of the path. He said there are four noble truths. What's noble about the truths? It's not that suffering is noble or craving is noble. What's noble lies in the approach you take to the suffering and to the cause of suffering, seeing that the suffering is not something you're simply subjected to. It's something you're actively doing. You're clinging to the five aggregates: That's the suffering.

The cause is not something outside. You can't blame it on the weather or other

people. You can't blame it on the economy or politics. It's your own craving—specifically, three kinds of craving: craving for sensuality; craving for becoming, which means the desire to take on an identity in a world of experience as a means of finding happiness; and craving for non-becoming. In other words, you have a becoming already and you want to see it ended. That craving, too, can lead to clinging and create more becoming.

So those kinds of craving, the Buddha said, are the causes of suffering. What's noble about this truth is that you realize that the cause comes from within. The childish attitude is what says, "I'm suffering because of so-and-so or something outside." The noble, mature attitude is what realizes that the suffering comes from within but is something that can be changed.

It is possible to abandon the craving that's causing suffering: That's the third noble truth. And you do that by developing the path—starting with right view and going all the way through right concentration. In other words, you take on the responsibility yourself, you train yourself, and that training is what attacks the craving; puts an end to suffering. You can find the deathless that way.

The question is sometimes asked, why is this talk called Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion? And there are two reasons: One is because, after explaining the four noble truths, the Buddha sets out three levels of knowledge for each truth. He then goes through each truth, giving the three levels of knowledge for each truth.

In English, we would call that a table where you set out different variables, and run through all the permutations. In India, they called it a wheel, the idea being that you would imagine going around the horizon, identifying this permutation with that point on the horizon, that permutation with this point. Three times four, you have twelve. This is why the Dhamma wheel has twelve spokes.

There's the first noble truth, the truth of suffering, and the duty there is to comprehend it—in other words, to understand it to the point where you have no more passion, aversion, or delusion around it. The duty with regard to the second truth is to abandon it. The duty with regard to the third is to realize it, and the duty with regard to the fourth truth, which is the path, is to develop it. There are four duties, so that's the second level of knowledge for each truth. Then the third

level would be to realize that you had completed each of those duties. That, the Buddha said, is what constituted his awakening.

After hearing this talk, one of the five brethren, Ven. Kondañña, actually had an experience: He saw the deathless. It's expressed in the Pali as, *Yaṅkiñci samudaya-dhammaṃ sabbantaṃ nirodha-dhammanti*—whatever is subject to origination is also subject to passing away.

Now, that phrase would naturally occur to a mind that has experienced something that's not subject to origination, and therefore not subject to passing away. In other words, Ven. Kondañña had a glimpse of the deathless. It's called the Dhamma eye because he glimpsed it, saw it, but didn't yet fully inhabit it. That was the beginning of the noble Sangha, which is why they say that on this night the Triple Gem became complete.

The Buddha was already there. He'd already gained awakening two months earlier. The Dhamma of truth had been there forever, but the Dhamma of the teaching first happened that night, and the first member of the noble Sangha arose that night. So this was when the Triple Gem became complete.

It's important to think about that: that the right understanding of suffering is our *refuge*. We take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha because they've comprehended suffering, they've abandoned its cause, they've realized its cessation by developing the path. We take refuge in them because we believe that what they were able to do applies to us as well. If we want happiness in our lives, this is what we have to do—and we *can* do it. These are the duties.

Notice that those duties are conditional. The Buddha's not forcing them on anybody. He didn't force the five brethren to listen, but he addressed a problem that eats away at everybody's heart. It's the problem that forces us: We have to find a solution to the problem of suffering one way or another. And the Buddha provides a noble way. He provides a way that really works. That's why it's our refuge.

We're inspired by their example, and when we follow their example, we get a refuge inside.

So we show our inspiration by recalling these events every year. We have the candle circumambulation as a way of symbolizing our respect for the Buddha, the

Dhamma, and the Sangha. But as the Buddha said, the best way to show respect for him is not with material things, but through the practice.

After all, think of all those eons that he spent trying to find the deathless. He didn't do it to get more candles, incense, and flowers. He did it so that he could find a skill that was really worthwhile, that would go to the heart of the problem of suffering, and so that he would be able to teach it as well.

He had that kind of broad heart that didn't want to solve the problem only for himself. He wanted to solve it for as many people as wanted to solve it. That's why he said that the best way to pay homage to him is through the practice.

So as we sit here meditating, we're working on one of the duties. We're working on the duty of developing the path. As for anything that comes up and gets in the way of our concentration, regard that as part of the cause of suffering, and let it go.

So we're building our own Dhamma wheel here. We've heard about the truths, now it's up to us to do the duties so that someday we'll find completion. Our Dhamma wheel will be complete. It'll have twelve spokes as well.

But in the meantime, you ask yourself: How many spokes does your wheel have at the moment? Do your best to add as many as you can.