

Visakha Puja

May 12, 2006

Stay focused on the breath. When the breath comes in, know it's coming in; when it goes out, know it's going out—all the way through the in breath, all the way through the out.

On the night of his awakening, the Buddha watched his breath. So this is one way of commemorating his awakening: by focusing on your breath, to see what you can find here. He found awakening. He found an end to suffering. He found the deathless here. His breath is the same as your breath—the difference, of course, is the difference in the mind.

Tonight is Visakha Puja. It's the night on which we commemorate three important events in the Buddha's life, three important events in the history of the world. The first was his birth, which was on the full moon in May; and then his awakening, which is also the full moon in May, 35 years later; and then his passing away, which is on the full moon in May, 45 years after that.

The most important of the events, though, was his awakening. This is what gives meaning to the others. So the question is, why was it that the Buddha was able to attain awakening just by watching his breath? Let's look at our breath to see what's there. Of course, it wasn't just the breath that the Buddha was watching. He was watching his mind as well, and brought a lot of good qualities of mind to his practice—concentration, ardency, and resolution, all of which are related to willpower, and also the element of discernment: seeing things in terms of cause and effect, what's happening right now. The big question he addressed, which is a big question for everybody, was: Is it possible through human effort to attain true happiness?

That's a question that doesn't depend on anybody's culture or language. It's central to every person's life. Everything we do is for the sake of happiness. But the problem, of course, is that we don't get the happiness we want. We get little bits and snatches, but then they go away and turn into something else.

So the question is: Is that all the happiness we can find as human beings? Putting all this effort into our lives, all that effort into this quest for happiness, and then seeing it slip through our fingers like water: Is that all there is? Young Prince Siddhartha was told that that's all there was. When he replied that he wanted a happiness that didn't change, a happiness that didn't fall subject to aging, illness, and death, his friends all said, "Oh, that's impossible. All the great people in human history have finally had to submit to the fact that things change.

No happiness is ever really lasting.” But the young prince wasn’t satisfied with that. He wanted to find out for himself.

So he left his home, went out into the wilderness, learned what he could from the teachers in those days, and found that it still wasn’t enough. Then he went off and practiced austerities for six years, until he was ready to admit that that, too, wasn’t the way out. Eventually he found a way that worked: the middle way, which essentially is composed of three things—virtue, concentration, and discernment.

The symbolism of our circumambulation right now relates to that. The incense relates to virtue. There’s a saying that the scent of incense can’t go against the wind, but that the fragrance of a person’s virtues *does* go against the wind. In other words, the appeal of a virtuous person goes in all directions. No matter what you look like, no matter how young or old you are, if you have virtue, you’re attractive to other people. They can trust you. So incense is a symbol for virtue.

The flowers are symbol for concentration, as the mind blooms by settling down in one object and staying there, allowing its range of awareness to expand to fill the body, just as a flower opens when it blooms.

The candles, of course, stand for discernment: the light of discernment that drives away the darkness of ignorance, particularly the ignorance that causes us to act in ways that are harmful to ourselves, creating suffering even though we want happiness.

Those are the symbols. These symbols have meaning, though, only when they refer to something real. And the reality is the actual practice we’re doing right here: trying to develop these qualities in the mind.

So what are the qualities we’re trying to develop? When you think of the Buddha’s virtues, there are basically three: wisdom, compassion, and purity.

Wisdom begins with the question: What when I do will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?—with the emphasis on the “long-term.” Short-term happiness, everybody knows. All you have to do, if you itch, is to scratch your itch. If you’re hungry, you find food. If you’re sleepy, you lie down. That’s short-term happiness. Everybody can find it. Even common animals can find it. Long-term happiness, though, is something else entirely.

From that realization, you consider the fact that just as you want long-term happiness, other people want long-term happiness, too. If your happiness depends on their suffering, they’re going to do everything they can to put an end your happiness. So you can’t think just of your own happiness, you have to take their happiness into consideration as well. This is the beginning of compassion.

And finally there's purity. Purity here means acting in ways that are not only wise and compassionate, but also show integrity. The Buddha says you develop purity first by looking at your intentions before you act. If they seem harmful, you don't act on them. You're true to yourself in that way. You're true to your intentions in that way. If they seem harmless, you can act on them.

While you're acting, you have to watch the results that are coming, because sometimes what seems like a good intention may not be a skillful intention. And there's no way you can know unless you watch what actually comes about as a result of the action. You can't simply trust that "Because I have good intentions, that takes care of everything." It doesn't. Your intentions have to be skillful as well, because all too often, good intentions can be ignorant. So you watch the results of your actions while you do them. If you see harmful things coming up—either harming yourself or other people—you stop. If you don't see any harm, you can continue.

When you've done with the action, you look at the long-term results, because sometimes the results of an action don't come out until quite a while later. If you see long-term harm coming from your actions, one, you go talk it over with someone else who is also on the path to figure out what you should have done; and then, two, you resolve not to make that mistake again. In other words, you don't let your ego or pride get in the way of admitting a mistake. You learn from your mistakes. If, on the other hand, you see that what you did was harmless, then you can take joy in the fact that you're on the path. You're learning how to create a happiness that really does last for a long time. And you keep on practicing.

So notice how these three qualities—wisdom, compassion and purity—are based on our desire for true happiness. The Buddha doesn't say that it's wrong to want to be happy. He doesn't say that it's selfish. He says that if you act on that desire wisely, with purity, and with compassion, you'll find a true happiness that's totally harmless. At the same time, wisdom, purity, and compassion come from really taking your desire for happiness seriously.

So those are the qualities that the Buddha brought to his quest for happiness. That's how he did it, by looking at his actions—not only his external actions but also the actions in the mind—seeing what was skillful, what was unskillful, seeing where his actions were causing harm, even subtle harm in the mind, even a subtle sense of stress, disturbance, a weight in the mind. He saw that as a problem and resolved to learn how to develop greater skill by being mindful, by being alert, and really looking seriously in every little thing that happened in his mind to see what its impact was. When he could see the cause for suffering, then no matter how

much he liked doing it, he was willing to stop. He was willing to develop the quality he called disenchantment. *Nibbida* is the Pali word.

We don't hear that word much. Even in Buddhist circles, people don't talk about it that much. We want the Dhamma to be life-affirming, and here the Buddha is saying to develop a sense of disenchantment: disenchantment with all your unskillful ways of thinking, all your unskillful ways of trying to define who you are, realizing that they're stressful, they give a happiness that's inconstant, and you really can't really control them. Even with strong states of concentration or great insights, there comes a point where you have to let them go as well. You use them and then you let them go. Without this sense of disenchantment, you won't let go. You'll hold on.

The night of his passing away, the Buddha said that the true way of showing respect to him was to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. What does that mean? You practice for the sake of disenchantment. Anything that causes the slightest bit of stress, you try to learn to go beyond it. In other words, you grow up, like a child growing up. When you're young, you can play with little toys and be thoroughly engrossed in them. But as you grow older, you begin to see there's really nothing there. You get disenchanted with your toys and you find more satisfying pursuits.

And it's the same with the practice: There has to come a point where you get disenchanted with the way you identify with your body, the way you identify with your feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, even your sensory consciousness, seeing that these things are inconstant. You can't really depend on them. They're stressful. They can't provide the true happiness you want. And they're not-self: They're not totally under your control. So you look for something better.

The Buddha is not just being negative or aversive, he's just saying that these things are not enough to satisfy the heart, because the heart's true desire is for a happiness that lasts. The basic message of his life is that that desire is something worth respecting. Don't get disenchanted with that desire. It's something you want to hold on to. It takes you all the way to true happiness. So allow yourself to get disenchanted with anything that doesn't measure up to true happiness. Learn how to go beyond it.

And there *is* a beyond. That's the other message of the Buddha's life. If there hadn't been that message, he would have gone off in to the wilderness, and we never would have been heard from him again. But he came back and said, "Look, true happiness is possible. Develop this path—this middle way of virtue, concentration, and discernment—take your desire for happiness seriously, so that it's not just a selfish thing, it becomes a quality that gives rise to wisdom,

compassion, purity. Then you take these qualities and bring them to the present moment, look what's going on in the mind right now, so that you can develop disenchantment with its old ways, and learn new ways that are more effective, that really do provide the happiness you want.”

So we just finished what they call *amisa-puja*, which is showing homage through material things: the symbolism of the incense, the flowers, and the candles. Now is the time to show homage through the practice: practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. That way, not only do you show homage to the Buddha, remembering the example of his life, but you also apply his example to your own behavior. That's when you really benefit from the homage.

This is how we benefit from keeping these old traditions alive. They connect us back to a person who found true happiness, even though it was more than 2,500 years ago. We've got that connection right here with the breath, and the qualities of mind we bring to the breath.

These customs remind us of that. They give us energy on the path.