

Visakha Puja – True Homage

May 31, 2007

It was on a night like this more than 2,600 years ago, with the full moon rising in the east, that the Buddha was born. It was on a night like this, 35 years later, again the full moon rising in the east, in the month of May or what they call Visakha in Pali, that he gained awakening. And it was on a night like this, 45 years after that, that he passed away. We commemorate these events every year, to think about where this practice we're doing came from, the sort of person who found it and established it—established it so well that the practice is still alive, even here on the other side of the Earth from where he found it.

They say that on the night of his passing away, the devas were showering him with flowers and incense, paying homage to him with music and songs, and he happened to mention to the monks that that's not the true way to pay homage to the Buddha. The true way is to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma. This is not to say that we shouldn't pay homage with candles, incense, and flowers, but we have to realize that the candles, incense, and flowers are symbolic forms of what the true homage is.

There's a tradition that the incense stands for virtue, because the scent of virtue, as the Buddha said, even goes against the wind. The scent of incense goes with the wind, but the scent of virtue, the attraction that comes when you see a virtuous person, goes against the wind. The flowers stand for concentration as the mind blooms. The candles stand for discernment that throws light on our actions, revealing to us how we cause suffering and how we can learn how not to cause suffering.

Those are the symbols, but we don't want just the symbols. We want the reality. So let's meditate. Focus on your breath. Know when the breath is coming in, know when it's going out. They say that the Buddha, on the night of his awakening, was focusing on his breath as well. So what's the difference between his breath and ours? He was able to gain awakening, but where are we?

The difference doesn't lie on the breath, it lies in the qualities of mind we bring to it. But these are qualities we can all develop. As the Buddha himself said, it wasn't because he was somebody special or that he had powers that nobody else could attain. He said it was through being resolute, ardent, and heedful that he was able to develop the powers of concentration and discernment that led to his awakening. These are all qualities we can develop, too.

So let's work on that. Be very heedful with the mind, because it might want to wander away from the breath. Be ardent, really paying very close attention to what you're doing. And be resolute: Once you've got the mind firmly planted in the breath, keep it there. This way, we practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma.

It's an important phrase. Throughout the forest tradition, they talk about how Ajaan Mun took this as one of his two most favorite topics for giving Dharma talks. The other one was the customs of the noble ones. The two principles come down together. We realize, as we're here practicing the Dhamma, that the Dhamma is bigger than we. We don't want to practice the Dhamma in line with our own defilements, in other words, we don't want to change it in line with our likes and dislikes. We have to change ourselves in line with the principles the Dhamma sets out. After all, these are principles that are true across time. Right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, right view: The rightness of these things doesn't change. And their rightness is right because it works.

So as we choose to make the Dhamma larger than ourselves, we're making it possible for us practice in a path that really does work, that really does lead to the end of suffering. It's good that we have events like this every now and then to remind ourselves that the Dharma is bigger than we are. Often when you're meditating, it's easy just to get caught up in your own stuff, or to think of the meditation simply as a way of dealing with your own personal problems. It does help with personal problems, but it's good to get a larger perspective every now and then.

For one thing, when you see all these people gathered here, it reminds you that the practice of the Dhamma is a group activity. We depend on one another for support, for guidance. This is something the monks are reminded of every day. When you go out for alms, you realize that your practice is dependent on the generosity of other people. When you eat the food they gave, it's incumbent on you to practice well. The Buddha says that one of the motivations for a person to practice, especially for a monk who's practicing, is that by attaining the noble attainments, you make it so that when people give you a gift, they get great rewards from those gifts because of your attainment. The attainment is not just your own personal issue. It spreads out and benefits other people as well. So it's a group effort that we're involved in here.

The Buddha often talks about the advantages of taking the larger view. You may know the chant that we often recite: We're subject to aging, subject to illness, subject to death, subject to separation, and we're the owners of our actions, heir to our actions. When you think of this just with regard to yourself, how this

principle applies to you, the Buddha says it helps keep you very careful about what you do and say and think, because you realize that your actions have consequences. In other words, you abandon unskillful behavior.

But he also says that it's also good to reflect on the fact that these principles apply to everybody across the board, not just you: every man, woman, child, ordained, and not ordained, devas, human beings, people in all the realms of existence. These principles apply to everybody. When you think in these larger terms, you develop a sense of samvega, and that sense of samvega, he says, gets you on that actual path to the end of suffering. You get out of your own personal narrative and you realize that larger principles are at work here.

And the Dhamma is something large as well, something that's been passed on all these years. So your practice is not simply that you benefit. You're benefiting from the practice of people who have gone before, and you have the opportunity to pass it on to the next generation by practicing the Dhamma as well.

So try to keep this larger perspective as you practice. It's not just you. You may have noticed on occasions that we've sometimes had refugees from Zen centers coming here. There they've been told that they're supposed to practice without any sense of hoping to gain anything at all for themselves. That drives them crazy, so they come here and think, "Well, these are Theravadins. We can be selfish and just practice for ourselves." But that doesn't work here, either. We do gain, but other people gain, as well.

It's good to see that larger perspective, to hold that larger perspective in mind. This is not just a practice of meditating. Generosity and virtue are part of the practice, too. Generosity is what enlarges your heart. It helps you to look around and see all that we have in common in terms of the fact we're suffering, and we all have needs. If you have the ability to help other people, you do, because that willingness to help, that willingness to give, is what allows you to practice the precepts with a lot more integrity. In other words, there will be times when holding to a precept you have to sacrifice some of your material comfort or your material advantage, but you think of it as a gift you can give to others, that you're going to maintain your principles and let go of the things that could have come to you if you had sacrificed your principles.

In the same way, your meditation is a gift. You yourself suffer less from your own greed, anger, and delusion; the people around you also suffer less from your greed, anger, and delusion. Everybody benefits.

This way, as you make the Dhamma larger than yourself, it's not that you really make it larger. You simply admit that the Dhamma is already larger than you are. It's something you can really give your life to. You sacrifice your own preferences,

sacrifice your own likes and dislikes, but you find that the rewards are more than many.

This is how we show our gratitude to the Buddha and to all of the people who've kept the teachings alive, who've kept the practice alive, all these many centuries, by paying homage through the practice, but not just any old practice: practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma, willing to learn what the Dhamma teaches and willing to submit to the training. After all, the Dhamma is not just something you read about or talk about, it's a training. As in that chant we had this evening: If you have respect for the training, that puts you right in the presence of nibbāna.