

## *The Middle Way*

*July 7, 2009*

Tonight is Asalha Puja, the night we pay homage to the Buddha in commemoration of what happened on that full moon in July two months after he gained awakening. For the first seven weeks after his awakening, he stayed in the area of the Bodhi tree, experiencing the bliss of release. Then he thought about teaching. The story goes that at first he was discouraged, seeing how subtle and difficult his attainment had been, how difficult it'd be to teach it to others. The Brahma Sahampati, fearing that the Buddha wouldn't teach, appeared before him, got down on one knee, and asked him to teach, saying that there are those with little dust in their eyes. The Buddha surveyed the world with his Buddha eye and saw that that was true. So he decided to teach.

The next question was, who would he teach first? He thought first of the two teachers he'd studied with, but he realized that they had recently died. Then he thought of the five brethren who had attended to them during his period of austerities. They were now in Isipatana, which was near what is now the city of Benares. So he walked all the way from Bodhgaya to Benares. It's quite a distance. When he arrived, he told the five brethren that he'd found the deathless, he'd found the happiness he'd been looking for. At first they didn't believe him because they'd seen him give up his austerities and begin to eat food again. They thought he had fallen back into self-indulgence. But he said, no, that wasn't the case. And he repeated his claim: He'd found the deathless. He would teach it to them, and if they practiced in line with what he taught, they could find it, too. Still they didn't believe him.

Finally he said, "Look, have you heard me make this claim before?" They realized he'd been a very honest and straightforward person. So they were more inclined to listen to him. He sat down and he taught them.

He started out by talking about the middle way between two extremes: the extreme of self-indulgence and the extreme of self-torment—in other words, taking sensual pleasure as a good in and of itself, or taking pain as a good in and of itself, the two extremes by which most people live. For most of us, pain is not a good in and of itself, but there are times when, after we've been going overboard in sensual pleasures, we decide to purge ourselves by inflicting pain on ourselves. You see people who starve themselves, undergo all sorts of austerities in hopes that they can cleanse themselves that sense of being fouled by their sensual indulgence.

The Buddha said the both extremes are not noble. The noble path lies in the middle way. Now, the middle way is not half way between indulgence and torture, in other words, a middling level of pain and pleasure. It lies outside of that continuum. It's able to see pain and pleasure as tools—not as ends in and of themselves, but as things you can use. Or you can think of the middle way as the hub of a wheel: The mind tends to circle around, first going for pleasure, then going for pain. The middle way lies right at the still point in the middle of the hub that doesn't cycle around after these things. It's something separate. In other words, we use pleasure—not the pleasure of sensuality, but the pleasure of a concentrated mind—as a foundation for the mind, and then we investigate pain from that perspective so that we can understand it. It's only when you understand it that you see what causes it.

This is an important aspect of insight. It's not just seeing that there's pain. You have to see what it is, i.e., the clinging, and you have to see where the causes are, what you're doing that's creating unnecessary clinging and suffering right now. You see that there are movements in the mind, decisions you're making right now, that take the raw material of the present moment and turn it into pain, turn it into suffering. Then you look to see how you can stop doing that.

All this comes under right view, which is the first factor in the path. And this is the factor the Buddha explained most completely that night. After going through a list of the different factors of this middle way—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration—he focused on right view. He focused on explaining exactly what is the kind of suffering he's talking about here: specifically, the suffering that comes from craving, the suffering in clinging to the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness. All the different kinds of suffering in world that really weigh on the mind come down to clinging to any one of these five aggregates or any combination of them.

So when you see the suffering simply as that—an example of clinging, an example of the aggregates—it takes away a lot of the appeal. Because there is an appeal in the suffering. We sometimes romanticize our sufferings, cling to them as part of our identity. For a lot of people, the way they suffer is who they are. But when you can see the suffering as just a heap of these things—it's your clinging, it's not something that has unjustly been imposed on you from outside—it loses a lot of its appeal. You're more inclined to be willing to let go. How do you let go? You look and see what's causing it. There's ignorance and craving that are combined with the clinging.

So when the suffering loses its appeal, and when the objects that cause suffering lose their appeal, then it's a lot easier to let go of craving. But you've got to get the mind in the right place to see this. That's what the path is all about. It starts with right view, but it doesn't end with right view. You see that your actions play a huge role in giving rise to suffering, so you have to resolve to act in ways that are skillful. And you actually follow through, in terms of your speech, your actions, your livelihood. Then you start focusing more directly on the mind, because the mind is where all these actions come from. You look at the qualities of mind, and if you see that there are any unskillful qualities, you generate the desire to get rid of them. As for skillful qualities, you generate the desire to give rise to them. Once they're there, you try to develop them.

This gets you more firmly focused on the mind, because you realize that what it's doing right here, right now, is taking the raw material of the senses and turning it into suffering. So you try to anchor your mind right here, right now to see this more clearly. This is why the Buddha has you develop mindfulness of the body, feelings, mind states, or mental qualities in and of themselves, as they're present so that you can watch them. Mindfulness is also a matter of getting the mind still, bringing it to right concentration.

In some places it's taught that simply observing the body, observing the mind, is insight in and of itself. But to begin with, there has to be concentration, and these establishings of mindfulness are the topics or themes of concentration. You've got to get the mind anchored so that you can watch things consistently. Only when you watch things consistently can you see where the causes are connected to the effects.

If you stay focused skillfully, it gives rise to a sense of ease, well-being, fullness, as you're not pushing things in one direction or squeezing them in another. You just want to be right there, secluded from unskillful qualities, with a sense of ease and refreshment. That's the beginning of right concentration. It gives you the energy you need, gives you the nourishment you need, in order to look at things more carefully. A lot of lessons of discernment involve seeing how you've been foolish, how you've been unskillful: things you don't like to see. All too often we want to push the responsibility for our sufferings off on somebody else. It's because of this person or that person, this group or that group. But as the Buddha points out, the ignorance and the craving, where do they come from? They don't come from people outside. They come from within your own mind. You can't blame anybody else. But it's not a question of blame, it's simply noticing where the responsibility lies and where the opportunity lies for learning how to be more skillful.

But to accept that responsibility, the mind needs to be in a good state of well-being, nourishment, stability, not feeling threatened by these lessons. As Ajaan Suwat would often point out, once the mind really gets still with that sense of well-being, then the idea of running after the kind of pleasure you used to get out of greed and aversion and delusion just loses its appeal. You can see that it's pointless effort.

This put you in the right frame of mind to look in to see exactly where the clinging comes from, how it starts, and how you can let it go, how you're attached to your craving, how you're attached all the other things that lead to suffering. As they begin to lose their appeal, there's a strong sense of dispassion that leads to no longer wanting to create that stress, that suffering, because you see that that's what it is. Before you saw it as something else. You saw it as attractive. You saw it as appealing. You identified with it. This was your identity, something that belonged to you that you really held on to. But once it loses appeal, you no longer want to hold on. You no longer give rise to that suffering. That leads to cessation, and so on to release.

These are the factors of the path that the Buddha taught that night. Tonight as we gather together, we pay homage to the fact that the Buddha through this teaching was able to lead others to awakening. Kondañña, one of the five brethren, gained the Dharma eye, seeing that all that's subject to origination is subject to cessation. It's just not seeing whatever arises passes away, it's whatever arises *based on a cause*. When you remove the cause, it ceases.

So it's not just seeing arising and passing, it's seeing the causal connection and then getting the mind to a place that lies outside of those causal connections. That's the only place where the Dhamma eye would see things in those terms. As the texts say, someone who's reached the stream, as Ven. Kondañña did that night, has also seen the deathless. And from that perspective, he looked back and could see, "Oh, everything else is caused, and anything that's caused ceases" because he'd seen what wasn't caused and didn't pass away.

This event is what proved that the Buddha was not just a private Buddha, awakening just for himself. He could actually formulate the Dhamma in such a way that other people could gain awakening as well. It was a momentous night. They say there was an earthquake that went from the depths of the Earth all the way to the Brahma worlds.

So tonight we honor that event through our homage. As the Buddha said, there are two kinds: There's homage through material things, as we did with the flowers, candles, and incense just now, walking around keeping our right to the Buddha image, as a way of showing respect, the incense representing virtue, the

flowers concentration, and the candles discernment. As you may have noticed, there was a breeze tonight. Candles can blow out very easily. Our discernment has a way of blowing out very easily, too, as the winds of the world keep buffeting it. So every year on the full moon night of July, every time this night comes around, we try remind ourselves we have to maintain that candle of discernment, that light of discernment in spite of the winds of the world. If we don't remind ourselves of this, the flame of that light blows out and it stays out. That's the symbolism of homage through material things.

But then there's homage through the practice, like we're doing right now, concentrating the mind on the breath, trying to give rise to right mindfulness, right concentration. This, as the Buddha said, is genuine homage. That's why he taught to begin with. He didn't want candles and incense. He wanted to lead others to the same Dhamma that he had realized as well. So as we practice, we're showing respect for his intentions.

One way of thinking about this night is that this is the night Buddhism began as a religion. Before, there was the Dhamma, but there was no religion. But when the Buddha opened his mouth and started teaching the Dhamma, that was the beginning of the Dhamma as a religion.

As we practice, we keep that religion alive. The Dhamma will always be here in the world, but it takes people to practice in order to keep the teaching alive so that we can benefit from it. When others can see us benefiting from it, they'll want to practice as well. This is how the Dhamma wheel keeps rolling along.