

A talk offered by Philip Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 05-17-2016.

On Friday, May 20th, the Theravāda branch of the Buddhist world will be observing Vesākha, also known as Vesak and Wesak.¹ This is the day on which the Buddha's birth, Awakening, and his final passing or unbinding are celebrated. So I thought we might acknowledge these events by recalling the purpose of the Buddha's life. And then after the break doing a little bit of chanting before ending tonight with a little more silent meditation.

A relatively short way of describing the Buddha's purpose, beyond his own Awakening, is found in these two paragraphs:

"And what have I declared? 'This is *dukkha*' [unsatisfactoriness, stress, and suffering] —I have declared. 'This is the origin of *dukkha*' —I have declared. 'This is the cessation of *dukkha*' —I have declared. 'This is the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha*' —I have declared.

"Why have I declared that? Because it is beneficial, it belongs to the fundamentals of the holy life, it leads to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna. That is why I have declared it."²

Everything that the Buddha did and taught after his own Awakening was oriented to helping others find their way to that experience of cooling the passions of greed and hatred and piercing the fog of delusion.

In the Majjhima Nikāya sutta 29, called the Greater Discourse on the Simile of the Heartwood³, the Buddha compares different stages on the path of spiritual development with a person going to a tree in search of the heartwood. This sutta is one of the many ways that the Buddha expanded on the pithy declaration of the Four Noble Truths. He did this to guide us through the misunderstandings and pitfalls of practice, so that we could find the heartwood of our own Awakening.

The sutta develops like this: If that person were to take twigs and leaves of a tree, that would not fulfill his need for the heartwood. In a similar way, simply making a commitment to begin meditation, yoga, prayer, tai chi, or some other spiritual practice may make us feel good, may lead to a kind of happiness, at least for a while. But if we settle for

that, if we decide it is enough, then we fail to directly experience for ourselves the heartwood and the happiness that the Buddha found in his own life and pointed us towards.

If the person were to take the external bark of the tree, that would not fulfill his need for the heartwood either. In a similar way, training in virtue and coming to lead a life that is highly ethical, highly virtuous can lead to a degree of happiness, and certainly more happiness than simply making a beginning commitment to spiritual development. But if we settle for that happiness, then we are still failing to experience the true heartwood.

If the person searching for the heartwood of a tree were to take the inner bark, that would not fulfill his need for the heartwood either. In a similar way, if a person experienced the happiness of committing to a spiritual path, the happiness of leading a virtuous life, and the happiness of a concentrated mind, and settles for that degree of happiness, then that person is still failing to experience the true heartwood of the practice.

If the person searching for the heartwood of a tree were to take the sapwood, that also would not fulfill his need for the heartwood. In a similar way, if a person experienced the happiness of committing to a spiritual path, the happiness of leading a virtuous life, the happiness of a concentrated mind, and the happiness of Knowledge and Vision, and settles for that degree of happiness, then that person is still failing to experience the true heartwood of the practice.

The traditional Theravāda commentary on this sutta suggests that the phrase "Knowledge and Vision" is used in this particular sutta to refer to the development of psychic powers such as seeing subtle forms that aren't visible to normal vision. Powers such as these are said to develop from mastery of deep states of concentration. I believe that in most suttas, though, Knowledge and Vision generally is used to refer to having direct insight into the nature of things. Developing psychic powers fits more for the themes of this sutta.

But, if the person searching for the heartwood of a tree were to take the heartwood, then his search would be fulfilled. In a similar way, if a person experienced the happiness of committing to a spiritual path, the happiness of leading a virtuous life, the happiness of a concentrated mind, the happiness of Knowledge and Vision, and the happiness of "perpetual liberation, perpetual deliverance", then that person's search would be fulfilled. The phrase "perpetual liberation, perpetual deliverance" isn't one that I've seen very often, but it is clearly pointing to the direct experience of Awakening.

Some of the things that I like about this particular sutta are that it acknowledges that there are a variety of levels of happiness that we can experience as we train our minds and hearts while also is a reminding us that getting comfortable with any of these levels of happiness short of the heartwood leaves us with less than is possible.

The great 20th century Thai master, Ajahn Chah, summed this all up, in his usual direct and clear way:

If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you will know complete peace and freedom. Your struggles with the world will have come to an end.⁴

Celebrating Vesak gives us an opportunity to reflect on the truth of this teaching, what our own aspiration is, and whether we are practicing in a way to make that aspiration a reality.

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Notes

1. Vesākha is the *Pāli* word, Vesak is the Sri Lankan version and Wesak is, perhaps, the Thai pronunciation of the Sri Lankan word. For more history see on these terms see http://sdhammika.blogspot.com/2016/05/celebrating-vesakha_99.html.

2. MN 63.9-10; I 431, adapted from Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, p. 536.

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Note: Changed the word "suffering" in the first paragraph to *dukkha* with bracketed English definitions, to capture the range of the Pāli.

3. Majjhima Nikāya 29, Ñāṇamoli Bhikkhu & Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*, Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995, pp.

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4. Kornfield, Jack & Paul Breiter, eds. *A Still Forest Pool*, Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1985, p. 73