Visakha Puja
by
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Translator's note: Upasika Arun Abhivanna took notes during Ajaan Lee's talk at Wat Asokaram on May 24, 1956, and later wrote out this synopsis of the talk. It was printed, with Ajaan Lee's approval, as part of the book, Four Years' Sermons.

Puja ca pujaniyanam
Etammangalamuttamam

Homage to those deserving homage:
This is the highest blessing.

I'm now going to give a Dhamma talk, discussing the teachings of the Buddha, as an adornment to the mindfulness and discernment of all those gathered here to listen, so that you will take the Dhamma and put it into practice as a way of achieving the benefits that are supposed to come from listening to the Dhamma.

Today, Visakha Puja, is an extremely important day in the Buddhist tradition, for it was on this day that the Buddha was born, and 35 years later awoke to the unexcelled right self-awakening, and another 45 years later passed away into total nibbana. In each case, these events took place on the full-moon day in May, when the moon is in the Visakha asterism, which is why the day is called Visakha Puja.

Every year when this important day comes around again, we Buddhists take the opportunity to pay homage to the Buddha as a way of expressing our gratitude for his goodness. We sacrifice our daily affairs to make merit in a skillful way by doing such things as practicing generosity, observing the precepts, and listening to the Dhamma. This is called paying homage to the virtues of the Triple Gem: the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. The Buddha is like our father, while the Dhamma is like our mother — in that it's what gives birth to our knowledge of the Buddha's teachings. At present our father has passed away, leaving only our mother still alive. Both of them have been protecting us, looking after us, so that we've been able to stay free and happy up to the present. We're thus greatly in their debt and should find a way of showing our gratitude in keeping with the fact that we are their children.

Ordinarily, when people's parents die, they have to cry and lament, wear black, etc., as a
way of showing their mourning. On Visakha Puja — which is the anniversary of the day on which our father, the Buddha, passed away — we show our mourning too, but we do it in a different way. Instead of crying, we chant the passages reflecting on the virtues of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. Instead of dressing up in black, we take off our pretty jewels, go without perfume and cologne, and dress very simply. As for the comfortable beds and mattresses on which we normally lie, we abstain from them. Instead of eating three or four times a day, as we normally like to do, we cut back to only two times or one. We have to give up our habitual pleasures if we’re going to show our mourning for the Buddha — our father — in a sincere and genuine way.

In addition to this, we bring flowers, candles, and incense to offer in homage to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. This is called amisa-puja, or material homage. This is a form of practice on the external level — a matter of our words and deeds. It comes under the headings of generosity and virtue, but doesn't count as the highest form of homage. There's still another level of homage — patipatti-puja, or homage through the practice — which the Buddha said was supreme: i.e., meditation, or the development of the mind so that it can stand firmly in its own inner goodness, independent of any and all outside objects. This is the crucial point that the Buddha wanted us to focus on as much as possible, for this kind of practice was what enabled him to reach the highest attainment, becoming a Rightly Self-awakened Buddha, and enabled many of his noble disciples to become arahants as well. So we should all take an interest and set our minds on following their example, as a way of following the footsteps of our father and mother. In this way we can be called their grateful, loyal heirs, because we listen respectfully to our parents' teachings and put them into practice.

The verse from the Mangala Sutta that I quoted at the beginning of the talk, Puja ca pujaniyanam etammangalamuttamam, means "Homage to those deserving homage: This is the highest blessing." There are two kinds of homage, as we’ve already mentioned: material homage and homage through the practice. And along with these two kinds of homage, people aim their hopes at two kinds of happiness. Some of them practice for the sake of continuing in the cycle of death and rebirth, for the sake of worldly happiness. This kind of practice is called vattagamini-kusala, or skillfulness leading into the cycle. For instance, they observe the precepts so that they'll be reborn as beautiful or handsome human beings, or as devas in the heavenly realms. They practice generosity so that they won't have to be poor, so that they can be reborn wealthy, as bankers or kings. This kind of skillfulness goes only as far as the qualifications for human or heavenly rebirths. It keeps spinning around in the world without ever getting anywhere at all.

The other reason that people can have for paying homage is so that they will gain release from suffering. They don't want to keep spinning through death and rebirth in the world. This is called vivattagamini-kusala, skillfulness leading out of the cycle.

In both kinds of practice, the aim is at happiness, but one kind of happiness is the pleasure found in the world, and the other is the happiness that lies above and beyond the world. When we pay homage to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, it's not the case that we have to take the results of our practice and try to push the Triple Gem any higher. Actually, what we're doing is to give rise to goodness that will benefit ourselves. So in searching for goodness for our own sakes, we have to keep yet another point in mind, as the Buddha taught us: Asevana ca balanam panditanañca sevana, which means, "Don't
associate with fools. Associate only with wise people." Only then will we be safe and happy.

"Fools" here means people whose minds and actions are shoddy and evil. They behave shoddily in their actions — killing, stealing, having illicit sex — and shoddily in their words: telling lies, creating disharmony, deceiving other people. In other words, they act as enemies to the society of good people at large. That's what we mean by fools. If you associate with people of this sort, it's as if you're letting them pull you into a cave where there's nothing but darkness. The deeper you go, the darker it gets, to the point where you can't see any light at all. There's no way out. The more you associate with fools, the stupider you get, and you find yourself slipping into ways that lead to nothing but pain and suffering. But if you associate with wise people and sages, they'll bring you back out into the light, so that you'll be able to become more intelligent. You'll have the eyes to see what's good, what's bad, what's right, what's wrong. You'll be able to help yourself gain freedom from suffering and turmoil, and will meet with nothing but happiness, progress, and peace. This is why we're taught to associate only with good people and to avoid associating with bad.

If we associate with bad people, we'll meet up with trouble and pain. If we associate with good people, we'll meet up with happiness. This is a way of giving a protective blessing to ourselves. This sort of protective blessing is something we can provide for ourselves at any time, at any place at all. We'll gain protection wherever, whenever, we provide it. For this reason we should provide a protective blessing for ourselves at all times and all places for the sake of our own security and well-being.

As for things deserving homage: whether they're the sorts of things that deserve material homage or homage through the practice, the act of homage provides a protective blessing in the same way. It provides happiness in the same way. The happiness that lies in the world, that depends on people and external things, has to suffer death and rebirth; but the happiness of the Dhamma is an internal happiness that depends entirely on the mind. It's a release from suffering and stress that doesn't require us to return to any more death and rebirth in the world ever again. These two forms of happiness come from material homage and homage through the practice, things that can either make us come back to be reborn or free us from having to be reborn. The difference lies in one little thing: whether we want to be reborn or not.

If we create long, drawn-out causes, the results will have to be long and drawn-out as well. If we create short causes, the results will have to be short, too. Long, drawn-out results are those that involve death and rebirth without end. This refers to the mind whose defilements haven't been polished away, the mind that has cravings and attachments fastened on the good and bad actions of people and things in the world. If people die when their minds are like this, they have to come back and be reborn in the world. To create short causes, though, means to cut through and destroy the process of becoming and birth so as never to give rise to the process again. This refers to the mind whose inner defilements have been polished off and washed away. This comes from examining the faults and forms of darkness that arise in our own hearts, keeping in mind the virtues of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, or any of the 40 meditation topics that are set out in the texts, to the point where we can see through all mental fabrications in line with their nature as events. In other words, we see them as arising, remaining, and
then disintegrating. We keep the range of our awareness short and close to home — our own body, from head to foot — without latching onto any of the good or bad actions of anyone or anything in the world. We look for a solid foundation for the mind, so that it can stay fixed and secure entirely within itself, with no attachment at all, even for the body. When we've reached this state, then when we die we won't have to come swimming back to be reborn in the world ever again.

Whether we give material homage or homage through the practice, if we pull the focal point of the mind out and place it in our actions — i.e., if we get attached to our good actions, as in practicing virtue, generosity, etc. — then that's called vattagamini-kusala, skillfulness leading into the cycle. The mind isn't free. It has to become the slave of this or that thing, this or that action, this or that preoccupation. This is a long, drawn-out cause that will force us to come back and be reborn. But if we take the results of our good actions in terms of virtue, generosity, etc., and bring them into the mind's inner foundation, so that they're stashed away in the mind, without letting the mind run out after external causes, this is going to help cut down on our states of becoming and birth so that eventually we don't have to come back and be reborn. This is vivattagamini-kusala, skillfulness leading out of the cycle. This is the difference between these two forms of skillfulness.

The human mind is like a bael fruit. When it's fully ripe it can no longer stay on the tree. It has to fall off, hit the ground, and eventually decay into the soil. Then, when it's been exposed to the right amount of air and water, the seed gradually sprouts again into a trunk with branches, flowers, and fruit containing all its ancestry in the seeds. Eventually the fruit falls to the ground and sprouts as yet another tree. It keeps going around and around in this way, without ever getting annihilated. If we don't destroy the juices in the seeds that allow them to germinate, they'll have to keep their genetic inheritance alive for an eon.

If we want to gain release from suffering and stress, we have to make our minds shoot out of the world, instead of letting them fall back into the world the way bael fruits do. When the mind shoots out of the world, it will find its landing spot in a place that won't let it come back and be reborn. It will stay there aloft in total freedom, free from attachment of any sort.

Freedom here means sovereignty. The mind is sovereign within itself. In charge of itself. It doesn't have to depend on anyone, and doesn't have to fall slave to anything at all. Within ourselves we find the mind paired with the body. The body isn't all that important, because it doesn't last. When it dies, the various elements — earth, water, wind, and fire — fall apart and return to their original condition. The mind, though, is very important, because it lasts. It's the truly elemental thing residing in the body. It's what gives rise to states of becoming and birth. It's what experiences pleasure and pain. It doesn't disintegrate along with the body. It remains in existence, but as something amazing that can't be seen. It's like the flame of a lit candle: When the candle goes out, the fire element is still there, but it doesn't give off any light. Only when we light a new candle will the fire appear and give light again.

When we take the body — composed of elements, aggregates, sense media, and its 32 parts — and the mind — or awareness itself — and simplify them to their most basic
terms, we're left with name and form \textit{(nama, rupa)}. Form is another term for the body made up of the four elements. Name is a term for the mind residing in the body, the element that creates the body. If we want to cut back on states of becoming and birth, we should take as our frame of reference just these two things — name and form — as they're experienced in the present. How does form — the body — stay alive? It stays alive because of the breath. Thus the breath is the most important thing in life. As soon as the breath stops, the body has to die. If the breath comes in without going out, we have to die. If it goes out without coming back in, we have to die.

So think about the breath in this way with every moment, at all times, regardless of whether you're sitting, standing, walking, or lying down. Don't let the body breathe without your mind getting some good use out of it. A person who doesn't know his or her own breath is said to be dead. Heedless. Lacking in mindfulness. As the Buddha said, heedlessness is the path to danger, to death. We can't let our minds run out and get stuck on external preoccupations, i.e., thoughts of past or future, whether they're good or bad. We have to keep our awareness right in the present, at the breath coming in and out. This is called singleness of preoccupation \textit{(ekaggataramman)}. We can't let the mind slip off into any other thoughts or preoccupations at all. Our mindfulness has to be firmly established in our awareness of the present. The mind will then be able to develop strength, able to withstand any preoccupations that come striking against it, giving rise to feelings of good, bad, liking, and disliking — the hindrances that would defile the mind.

We have to keep our awareness exclusively in the present, alert and quick to sense the arising and passing away of preoccupations, letting go of both good and bad preoccupations without getting attached to them. When the mind stays firmly focused in its one preoccupation — the breath — it will give rise to concentration, to the point where the eye of inner knowledge appears. For example, it might give rise to powers of clairvoyance or clairaudience, enabling us to see events past and future, near and far. Or it might give rise to knowledge of previous lives, so that we can know how we and other beings have been born, died, come, and gone, and how all these things have come about from good and bad actions. This will give rise to a sense of dismay and disenchantment with states of becoming and birth, and will dissuade us from ever wanting to create bad kamma ever again.

This kind of disenchantment is something useful and good, without any drawbacks. It's not the same thing as its near cousin, weariness. Weariness is what happens when a person, say, eats today to the point of getting so full that the thought of eating any more makes him weary. But tomorrow, his weariness will wear off and he'll feel like eating again. Disenchantment, though, doesn't wear off. You'll never again see any pleasure in the objects of your disenchantment. You see birth, aging, illness, and death as stress and suffering, and so you don't ever want to give rise to the conditions that will force you to come back and undergo birth, aging, illness, and death ever again.

The important factors for anyone practicing to gain release from all stress and suffering are persistence and endurance, for every kind of goodness has to have obstacles blocking the way, always ready to destroy it. Even when the Buddha himself was putting his effort into the practice, the armies of Mara were right on his heels, pestering him all the time, trying to keep him from attaining his goal. Still, he never wavered, never got discouraged, never abandoned his efforts. He took his perfection of truthfulness and used it to drive
away the forces of Mara until they were utterly defeated. He was willing to put his life on
the line in order to do battle with the forces of Mara, his heart solid, unflinching, and
brave. This was why he was eventually able to attain a glorious victory, realizing the
unexcelled right self-awakening, becoming our Buddha. This is an important example that
he as our "father" set for his descendants to see and to take to heart.

So when we're intent on training our minds to be good, there are bound to be obstacles —
the forces of Mara — just as in the case of the Buddha, but we simply have to slash our
way through them, using our powers of endurance and the full extent of our abilities to
fight them off. It's only normal that when we have something good, there are going to be
other people who want what we've got, in the same way that sweet fruit tends to have
worms and insects trying to eat it. A person walking along the road empty-handed doesn't
attract anyone's attention, but if we're carrying something of value, there are sure to be
others who will want what we've got, and will even try to steal it from us. If we're carrying
food in our hand, dogs or cats will try to snatch it. But if we don't have any food in our
hand, they won't pounce on us.

It's the same way when we practice. When we do good, we have to contend with
obstacles if we want to succeed. We have to make our hearts hard and solid like diamond
or rock, which don't burn when you try to set them on fire. Even when they get smashed,
the pieces maintain their hardness as diamond and rock. The Buddha made his heart so
hard and solid that when his body was cremated, parts of it didn't burn and still remain as
relics for us to admire even today. This was through the power of his purity and
truthfulness.

So we should set our minds on purifying our bodies and minds until they become so truly
 elemental that fire won't burn them, just like the Buddha's relics. Even if we can't get
them to be that hard, at least we should make them like tamarind seeds in their casing:
even if insects bore through the casing and eat all the flesh of the tamarind fruit, they
can't do anything to the seeds, which maintain their hardness as always.

So, to summarize: Cutting down on states of becoming and birth means retracting our
awareness inward. We have to take the mind's foundation and plant it firmly in the body,
without getting attached to any outside activity at all. We have to let go of every thing of
every sort that follows the laws of events, arising and passing away in line with its nature.
We do good, but don't let the mind go running out after the good. We have to let the
results of our goodness come running into the mind. We pull in every thing of every sort
to stash it away in our mind, and don't let the mind get scattered outside, getting happy
or sad over the results of its actions or anything else external. We do this in the same way
that the bael fruit keeps the trunk, branches, flowers, and leaves of the bael tree curled
up inside the seed. If we can then prevent outside conditions of soil and water from
combining with the inside potential of the seed, it won't be able to unfurl into a new bael
tree.

Whoever practices in the way I've discussed here is paying homage to our lord Buddha in
the correct way. Such a person will be endowed with blessings providing happiness
throughout time.

Here I've discussed some verses from the Mangala Sutta as a way of developing our
discernment, so that we will take these lessons and put them into practice as a way of paying homage to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha on this Visakha Puja day.

That's enough for now, so I'll stop here.

_Evam._