

Esala poya –Āsālhā uposatha (July)

The Noble Buddha delivered his first discourse on the day called *Āsālhā uposatha*.

History

Āsālhā uposatha is another important day in Buddhism. It falls on the fifteenth waxing moon of the eighth lunar month. In the time of our Buddha, the following four events took place:



1. The Noble One delivered the first discourse to the five ascetics, in the *Isipatana* forest near *Vārāṇasī*.
2. The Venerable *Aññā Kondañña*, while Buddha reciting the Discourse, attained the first stage of enlightenment (*sotāpanna*).
3. After becoming a *sotāpanna*, he asked to be admitted to the monastic order. The Noble Buddha ordained him, and *Aññā Koṇḍañña* thus became his first disciple and monk (*bhikkhu*).

4. The birth of the Triple Jewel, which includes the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. The first testimony of the Buddha's enlightenment was thus materialized, and the Buddha consummated his Buddhahood. This means that after attaining enlightenment he did not keep his knowledge to himself, as is the case with the *Paccekabuddha* (independently awakened).

Āsālhā uposatha had its beginning as described below. After his enlightenment, the Buddha spent seven weeks immersed in bliss (*vimutti sukha*). After this blissful period, he was concerned that his knowledge of the awakened mind was so profound that it would be difficult for beings with deep impurities to understand it.

Meeting with Brahmā Sahampati

The heavenly king *Brahmā Sahampati* knew of the Buddha's concerns and asked him to transmit his teachings, for there are still beings who have less dust in their eyes.

"Those accomplished, venerable ones who were fully enlightened in the past lived in such a way that they cherished this very Dhamma and worshipped this very Dhamma. Even those perfected ones of the future will live by cherishing this very Dhamma and worshipping this very Dhamma. Venerable, let the now Noble, Perfect, Fully Enlightened One also live by cherishing this very Dhamma and worshipping this very Dhamma."



This was said by *Brahmā Sahampati*, and when he said it, he spoke even further:

"Those who have been enlightened in the past, those enlightened in the future, and those enlightened in the present who dispel the sorrow of many – all have lived, will live, and are living by worshipping the true Dhamma. This is the nature of Buddhas. Therefore, one who desires his own good and has hope for his own greatness should certainly worship the true Dhamma, remembering the messages of the Buddhas."

Due to His great compassion (*karuṇā*), the Noble One used His Buddha-vision and saw all the beings of the three worlds trapped. In his vision he saw creatures who had little



or much dust in their eyes, who were of keen intellect or hard to understand, with good or bad features, creatures who could be taught easily or with difficulty, and the few who live in such a way that they regard sins as a source of fear for the other world. As in the pond with the blue, red, and white lotuses, some lotuses born in water grow in water, remain immersed in water, and thrive immersed in water; some are

born in water, grow in water, and remain on the surface of water; some others are born in water, grow in water, and remain emerging from water, undefiled by water. Just so, when the Noble One surveyed the world with his spiritual sight, he saw creatures who had little or much dust in their eyes, who were of keen intellect or hard to understand, with good or bad traits, creatures who are easy to teach or with difficulty, and few who live in such a way that they regard sins as a source of fear for the other world. After this he addressed *Brahma Sahampati* in verse as follows:

"The door is open for them to the state of not dying. Let those who have hearing take confidence. Aware of the difficulty, Brahma, I have not taught people this sublime Dhamma."

The Decision to Teach the Dhamma

After accepting the call to teach the Dhamma, the first thought that occurred to the Buddha before he embarked on his great mission was: *"Who will I teach the Dhamma to first? Who will understand the Dhamma quickly? Well, it will be Alāra Kālāma, who is learned, knowledgeable, wise, and has long had little dust in his eyes. Suppose I teach him the Dhamma first. He will understand the Dhamma quickly."*

At this a divine being appeared before the Buddha and said, *"Venerable sir, Alāra Kālāma died a week ago."* With his extraordinary vision he observed that this was so. Then he thought of *Uddaka Rāmaputta*. He was immediately informed by that divine being that he had died the previous evening. By his extraordinary vision he saw that this was so. The Buddha thought that this was



indeed their great misfortune, for if they could hear the Dhamma, they would immediately understand it. Finally the Buddha thought of the five determined ascetics who had once treated him very well. They had practiced with him when he was still a *bodhisatta*.



By means of his supernatural vision, he observed that they were staying at Obora near *Isipatana*, close to Benaras. When the Buddha stayed at Uruvela, he set out in succession towards Benāres and decided to visit them in the forest where they were staying.

When these ascetics saw the Buddha from afar, they agreed among themselves that they would not show him the proper respect, since they misinterpreted his interruption of strict asceticism. They said to each other, *"Friends, the ascetic Gotama is coming. He is lusting after luxury and has returned to a life of comfort. We should not greet and serve him. We should not take away his bowl and robe. However, a seat should be prepared. If he wishes, let him sit."*

As the Buddha gradually came nearer, however, his majestic personality impressed them so that they were forced to receive him with due respect. One came forward and removed his alms-bowl and robes, another prepared a place to sit, and another prepared water to wash his feet. Nevertheless, they addressed him by his name and called him friend (*āvuso*), which was the common form used to address the younger ones or equals.

The Blessed One admonished them, saying: *"Do not address the Tathāgata, monks, by name or by the word āvuso; the Exalted One is a monk, a Tathāgata. He is fully awakened. Give ear, monks! Undying (amata) has been attained! I will teach, I will expound the Dhamma. If you will act according to my instruction, you will attain your own intuitive wisdom before long, in this life of yours, that for which the sons of noble families rightly go homeless, namely, the supreme and incomparable consummation of pure life."*

Then the five ascetics replied, *"By that action of yours, āvuso Gotama, by that discipline, by that painful asceticism, you have not attained any special superhuman knowledge and insight worthy of ariya (sublime). How could you attain this when thou hast become lusty of luxury, thou hast given up striving and returned to a life of comfort?"*

As an explanation, the Buddha repeated what he had already said. And the second time the prejudiced ascetics expressed their disappointment in the same way. When the stubborn ascetics who refused to believe him expressed their opinion a third time, the Buddha asked them: *"Do you know, monks, of a case where I have ever spoken to you in this way?"* *"Verily, no, venerable sir!"* So the Buddha reiterated for the third time that he had attained enlightenment and that they too could attain the truth if they acted on his instruction.



Delivering the first debate – Dhammacakkappavattana sutta

Educated ascetics, though implacable in their views, were then fully convinced of the Buddha's great achievements and of his right to act as their moral leader and teacher. They believed his words and sat quietly to listen to his noble teachings.



Two of the ascetics were taught by the Buddha, while three left for alms. With what the three ascetics brought from their errand for alms, the six lived. Three ascetics taught while two went out for alms. With what the two brought, the six lived.

And the five ascetics, thus exhorted and instructed by the Buddha, themselves subject to birth, aging, sickness, sorrow, and defilements, realized the true nature of life, and seeking exemption from birth, exemption from aging, free from disease, free from sorrow and free from defilements, seeking the incomparable supreme peace, *nibbāna*, they attained the incomparable security, *nibbāna*, which is free from birth, aging, disease, death, sorrow and defilements. They realized that their liberation was irreversible, that this was their last birth, and that nothing further would come of this state.

The *Dhammacakkappavattana sutta*, which discusses the Four Noble Truths, was the first discourse the Buddha gave on them. When the eldest of them, *Añña Koṇḍañña*, heard it, he attained the first stage of enlightenment. When they received further instruction, the other four later attained *sotāpatti*. When they heard the *Anattalakkhaṇa sutta*, which deals with the nonexistence of the permanent self, all five attained arahathood, the ultimate state of perfection.

The first five disciples

The five learned monks who thus attained arahatship and became the Buddha's first disciples were *Koṇḍañña*, *Bhaddiya*, *Vappa*, *Mahānāma*, and *Assaji* of the brahmanical lineage. *Koṇḍañña* was the youngest and the most brilliant of the eight brahmanas called by King *Suddhodana* to give names to his grandchild. The other four were the sons of those elder brahmanas. Venerable *Koṇḍañña* became the first arahat and the oldest member of the saṅgha. It was *Assaji*, one of the five, who gained as a follower the great *Sāriputta*, the chief disciple of the Buddha.



Āsāḷha Poya day is the day of the birth of the Triple Jewel, which includes the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. As a result of the Buddha's first discourse, the celestial beings in every realm from the land of gnomes to the Brahma realm all sang praises to the Buddha. The sound resonated through tens of thousands of

universes, and incomparable brightness permeated everywhere as a result of the heavenly power.

How to practice for the day Āsālha uposatha

Now we have learned something about the day of *Āsālha uposatha*. How to practice on this day? Each of us Buddhists should deepen our faith in the Triple Jewel and be more committed to the practice of meditation until we reach the final awakening, *nibbāna*.

Because of the importance of the day of *Āsālha uposatha*, our predecessors realized that if they wanted to study any subject well and understand it deeply, they had to understand the core of the subject. For example, if they wanted to study advanced mathematics, they had to memorize the multiplication tables. Similarly, if they wanted to study the Dhamma well, they had to learn the *Dhammacakkappavattana sutta*.

Buddhists should go to the monastery on this day to offer *dāna* for the *Saṅgha*, observe the eight precepts of training, and meditate. Our predecessors understood these things well, prepared for it, and on this important day they would come to the monasteries and listen to the *Dhammacakkappavattana sutta*, the first discourse of the Buddha that introduces us to the Noble Eightfold Path, and try to understand and realize its meaning.

Another aspect of what we do, whether for personal or public benefit, is that we must have clear principles, and those principles should correspond with the Dhamma and the principles of the Buddha's teachings. We should practice them until they become our good habit, which will benefit us as well as our whole society, and our nation will flourish and be filled with peace.

Āsālha uposatha Day is also called "Dhamma Day," and we commemorate it on this day by paying homage to the greatness of the Noble Buddha, his immeasurable qualities, and the gift of the Dhamma, especially in the contents of the *Dhammacakkappavattana sutta*, which is the Noble Eightfold Path.



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Quotations used from Joseph Marx's book *Buddha and His Teachings*