The Beginning of the Vas Period and Spiritual Development

Posted on

Vas, or the rain retreat, begins on Esala Pōya. It is observed with much dedication and spiritual involvement.

Esala Po¯ya is a period of practicing fundamental Vinaya rules (discipline rules) among Buddhists in the world, east and west. That is called ‘Vas Viseema’ (in Sinhala) or ‘Vas observance’ or rain retreat, for three months, from July to October, in connection with the annual rainy season. Some Buddhist countries call it ‘Vassa’. As the Vesak is a supreme day for the whole world, the Vas season is also a significant period for all Buddhists in the world, as it is beneficial to practice Dharma for Buddhists to develop their spirituality and wisdom. Therefore, what does Vas observance mean? It is significant for reviewing the Vas observance.

We know that rain is very essential for human beings and animals, as well as the whole plant world, as without water, all beings and plants would die on this planet.

But, on the other hand, sometimes, as we can see, it is very harmful to some areas in the world, causing floods and mudslide disasters. The same thing, which is very helpful to us, unfortunately, would be detrimental to us occasionally. This is a different side of the same coin.

Anyhow, according to the observance of Vas, monks observe only one precept, saying this sentence three times. “I observe Vas in this temple; I observe Vas here, in these three months.” This is like a determination, but this period is beneficial to both monks and laymen in developing their spirituality by listening to sermons, observing precepts (sil), sacrificing pu¯ja¯s, arms giving, engaging in Dharma discussions, and practicing meditation can be done during this vas period. So, how does the Vas observance commence? When the rainy season starts, monks sermonize the ‘Vinaya’ to clean their Vinaya or discipline rules at special premises called ‘seema¯ ma¯lakaya’ on the Esala Full moon Po¯ya day (premises, like the prominent one in the ‘Beira veva’ in Colombo 2, which belongs to Ganga¯ra¯maya, in Hunupitiya. It may be situated in the water or on the land.) However, observance of Vas will take place on the second day, and it will be continued for three months till the Full moon Po¯ya day in October. But this is not an essential Vinaya rule as it could be observed willingly. According to that, all higher ordained monks: except Sa¯mane¯ra Bhikku¯ or novice monks, are bound by the request of the Buddha for the observance of the Vas in the rainy season annually. On this occasion, in most temples, devotees invite the monks for the Vas. But, if they are not invited, they observe Vas independently.

So, what does the observance of Vas mean? Its main rule is avoid going out of the temple premises in the rainy season. In case they should go out, there is a way to do that, according to the ‘satta¯ha karani¯ ’ Vinaya rule. Any Bhikkhu who leaves the temple during the rainy season must return to the same location or temple where he was staying before the seventh day’s midnight. He must also keep that in mind before leaving the place. If he cannot come before seven days, he has no entitlement to continue the Vas period, and he cannot observe Vas again in the same year. Therefore, ‘it is easier to say than done.’

Since we always talk about meditation, this period is the most suitable time for practicing meditation, teaching Dharma, and discussing the Dharma, better than other rituals like pu¯ja, perahera (procession), or almsgiving.

On the other hand, why do we always talk about meditation? What’s the purpose of practicing meditation? Most people who do meditation regularly worldwide know the

benefits of it. There are so many internationally erudite meditation teachers who teach meditation scientifically in some western countries. A few are Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, Professor Mark Williams, Michael Anderson, Hanka echová, Rachel Byer, Christoph Willi, Mahasti Mohammadi, Anno O. Massion, Jean Kristeller, and William R. Lenderking. It is said that Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn is the pioneer who introduced mindfulness meditation, as psychotherapy, to western countries.

First, he had learned meditation for a few years. After that, he has done some experiments on the results of the meditation in laboratories, using brain scanning methods like CT, MRI, or EEG while participants meditate.

According to his experiments, he has introduced meditation as a 'mindfulness technique' from kindergarten to higher schools and to medical colleges (1989) for the well-being of the students. They recommend meditation as a remedy, not only for anxiety and depression but also for severe mental illnesses. According to his workshop done at Oslo University Hospital, Norway, under the topic of 'Mindfulness in Medicine and Health Care' – "… the immune system, the brain, and other organs are all unified and all work together to maintain and sustain our life,'' (Mindfulness in Medicine and Health Care, part 1. An introduction.)

Most mindfulness teachers use Mindfulness-Base Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness Base Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). Meanwhile, a Sri Lankan doctor introducing the result of meditation points out that "Depression, Anxiety, Phobias, Obsessive Disorders, Behavioral Disorders, Psychosocial Problems, Stress, and Tension can be healed by meditation" (Dr. T.N. Settinayake, Healing of Diseases by Buddhist Meditation, 01p.) He confirms that "some diseases like cancers, ischemic heart disease, hypertension, various neurological disorders, and psychiatric patients could also be healed by meditation."

Some people like to give Da¯na (alms giving) or donations to be happy. One can use a Po¯ja also for mental well-being. If they can do it regularly and systematically, it creates mental power in mind, as it concentrates on the mind. Therefore, sometimes it might be a form of meditation as well. Not only that, the chanting of Paritta or pirith is also believed to be a meditation. They use selected discourses for a recital as Paritta in Pa¯li. Principally, it means protection, and it protects always. The practice of reciting and listening to Paritta began very early in the history of Buddhism. They believed these recitals produced mental well-being and protection.

For psychotherapy, they use Paritta as a form of mental therapy to get mental relief

and blessings. As the Paritta Dharma is actual meditation, it has the mental power to remove mental disorders like mental stress, anxiety, and depression. Not only that, but if used as a meditation and a blessing, it may be able to alleviate some of the more severe mental disorders. It is believed the Parita is a powerful meditation for concentration.

There are ‘Ten reflecting methods’ among the forty meditation methods (sama satalis karmasthna¯). Three of them are The Buddha, Dhamma, and San . gha. There is a su¯tra name Ratana, which means gem; it mentions the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, and San. gha (Theruwan or the three jewels.) As an example, reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha is a meditation, and it is called Buddha¯nussati.

On the other hand, psychology says many problems are mind-centered. Psychologically, it is said today that the mind and the body are one. So, the conflicting thoughts in mind will be reflected in the body. And we all usually have agitation, frustration, irritation, impatience, and pain or stress. If one cannot control them, he may get many problems. So, by concentrating on the meditation object-like qualities of The Buddha, you can control your mind and get mental relief. Therefore, it is called Bhesajja or medicine. Accordingly, the Paritta means meditation and medicine as well as protection. That is why some wise people call The Buddha a ‘Bhesajja Guru’ or a doctor. Other than that, some western philosophers name The Buddha as a great scientist, a philosopher, or a psychologist. But there is no problem with Buddhism if you can benefit from practicing meditation. You are not too late; give it a try today, not tomorrow. Let me end by wishing everybody a happy, prosperous, and peaceful life.

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