

The mastery and deceitfulness of *avijjā*

Talk on the 13th of January 2010

When we see a corpse being cremated, the skull bursting open and the brain sizzling and popping, we get disgusted, don't we? Seeing a human being on a funeral pyre can make us faint or throw up. Yet when a cow or pig is being roasted, we don't feel sick but start licking our lips in expectation of a nice meal. Why is this? It's because watching a cremation is as close as we can get to seeing our own body on the pyre. We can't bear to watch, because we know that one day the same thing will happen to our own corpse. But the body is just the body; what does it really have to do with us? When a car is scrapped, we may feel sad but we don't become afraid, so why are we afraid of losing the body? It's because we don't yet know our true self. A cremation is actually quite fascinating to watch, but *avijjā* – that power within the *citta* that drives us from life to life – doesn't want to see it. *Avijjā* doesn't want to know the truth that the body is born and dies. The *citta* itself is not afraid to know the truth for it knows all about birth and death; it has toured every one of the thirty-one realms of existence. Rather, it is *avijjā* that is afraid. *Avijjā* always thinks it is seeing everything for the first time, for it is deluded in itself.

Avijjā has the power to delude us, even to make us miss the chance of seeing things like a cremation that it doesn't want to see. This is the way it works. The *Dhamma* wants to see such things, but *avijjā* blocks it. For example, when our meditation is progressing, it puts our attention onto something other than the meditation object to make us go off track. This is how it tricks us like a master magician. Just as we are getting close to striking a blow against the *kilesas*, it performs a new trick, and we become mesmerised, forgetting all about our original intention to focus exclusively on the meditation object. Never underestimate the power of *avijjā*; it is the power which rules over the *citta*, even to the extent of persuading us that it is us! And we believe it, just as we believe a radio broadcast that we listen to all the time. We can call *avijjā* the *Kilesas Broadcasting Company* (KBC) or the *Avijjā Broadcasting Company* (ABC). It has been broadcasting in our hearts for countless lives, so how can we not believe it? The whole world believes it.

So, how can we fight this master magician? One way is to shock the *kilesas* by taking them out of their comfort zone. For example, we can look at the disgusting things the *kilesas* don't want to see and avoid looking at the beautiful things they find attractive. We can do what they don't want to do and avoid doing the things they want. In other words, we can confuse them until they don't know how to rule our hearts. Usually, the *kilesas* have a reasonably reliable set of rules about how to stop us progressing in meditation; they bring up pain or fear or disgust so that we stop practicing. But when we do the opposite of what they suggest, they get completely confused for a while and don't know how to exert their control – this means freedom for us. As we can see in the *paticca samupada*, *avijjā* is the condition for all phenomena to arise; phenomena are the condition for consciousness to arise; consciousness is the condition for name (meaning) and form to arise; and name and form are the condition for feeling to arise. So, when we go against the rules or the conditions of *avijjā* and the *kilesas*, we are “unconditioned” or free for a time.

Of course, the *kilesas* soon catch on to our tricks, as they are masters of magic themselves, and sooner or later, we find ourselves in a new pattern of thought or behaviour, a new set of conditions, through which they can exert their control. That's why we need something to hold onto – the awareness of the breath or the mental repetition of the word *buddho*, and the practice of *samādhi* or investigation with *paññā*. No matter what the *kilesas* tell us, we can all do this practice. It's very simple work, and as long as we don't forget to do it *avijjā* and the *kilesas* can have very little influence over us. If feelings, such as discomfort or anger, come up during meditation practice, this shows that we are practising correctly, that we're digging at the right spot, for the *kilesas* have reacted by bringing up unpleasant feelings to stop us practising.

Another of their tricks is to blind us to how things really are. At a cremation, for instance, the proper way of reflecting is to see ourselves on the pyre, sizzling and burning, with our own brains exploding. However, the *kilesas* make us disengage and believe that the burning body has nothing to do with us. They tell us that our bodies are beautiful and that nothing is loathsome about them. But what's really beneath the skin? Blood, pus, urine, excrement – these things are all in the body, but we don't want to see them; as soon as they come out the body, we wash them off or flush them away. We look in the mirror and fool ourselves. Remember the book *Gulliver's Travels*? When the tiny Lilliputians found Gulliver's body on the beach, they found it disgusting, a giant body with greasy oozing skin and body hairs that seemed like a filthy bamboo forest. They saw the truth, but we are just not perceptive enough. We see only nice soft skin with fine hair. We buy skin care products and use special shampoos to wash off the grease, fooling ourselves all the time without realising it.

To see the truth of the body, we must start to practice meditation on *asubha* (the loathsomeness of the body). We have to see what's really inside our own bodies and the bodies of other people. We can view the people around us as skeletons going about their daily activities; two skeletons making love is quite a bizarre image. We can also try to see the body without its skin. The truth about the body, however, is something that most people don't want to see, and the practice of *asubha* is something that most people don't want to hear about. This is why we hardly come across it, and why it isn't taught in most meditation centres across the world. In the world today, only monks in the Forest Tradition teach *asubha*, but it is a practice that comes directly from the Lord Buddha. For example, one of the disciples of the Lord Buddha fell in love with a courtesan. When she died the Lord Buddha asked this monk to stay and contemplate the loathsomeness of the body while watching her corpse decompose. The Lord Buddha also recommended *asubha* practice to his son Rahula.

In the West, however, we prefer not to see the unpleasant things. We put old people in old folks homes, so we rarely see any really decrepit people. We keep sick people in hospitals and see them relatively rarely, and we bury or cremate bodies quite quickly and never see dead bodies. Most of the people we see in the street are young, fresh and healthy. We are rarely confronted with ageing, sickness and death. If we go to a hospital and are confronted with these things, we feel very uncomfortable with the smell or the weeping of sick people, their friends or their relatives, so we try make the visit as short as possible. It's the same when we visit an old folks home; we find it very depressing because the residents don't know what to do with themselves or have no friends, and young people don't want anything to do with them, thinking of them as useless creatures. We find these places so depressing, and it's the same when we visit a cemetery.

This should tell us something, shouldn't it? It points to the fact that we are experts at avoiding everything we find unpleasant, particularly in the West where all the unpleasant things are hidden away. In India, we can still see old or sick people on the streets, and bodies being cremated on the Ganges river, but in the West we have swept these things out of sight and are rarely confronted with the ugliness of life. Only when we become sick or old ourselves do we realise this, when our own children suddenly push us into a retirement home! We might feel out of place in the home at first, but it doesn't take long to become totally helpless like the other residents. Young and healthy people enjoy their freedom out on the streets, of course, but their time will come; the old folks home awaits them too!

When it's time to die, we will end up in hospital. How many people die in a hospital every day? Probably many if it's a big hospital. You could call it a factory, a factory of sickness, pain, suffering and death, and that's why we don't like going to hospitals. Why don't we like to see these things? Because we know that sooner or later we'll find ourselves in the same situation; in five, ten, twenty or forty years, we'll be in the same place. We'll drop dead or fall sick, depending on our *kamma*. Then, we'll be cremated in the fire, just like at the cremations in Thailand, and it will be our skull cracking and our brain sizzling and popping. Try to bring up this image in your inner eyes, for one day it will happen to every one of us. This body, which we think of as "I" or "me", will be burned up one day, just like bodies on a funeral pyre. Actually, the body has nothing to do with us; the moment it dies we will be gone, and most of us won't even care what happens to it. Our family might prepare a very nice funeral, but we will have already gone, pulled towards our next rebirth. Some people do have time to stay around for a while, and their family and friends can sense that they are still there. In most cases, however, the moment people die they are drawn straight down to hell.

People don't like to hear this, but it's reality, and we should try to face up to reality, shouldn't we? In Thailand, people do face up to reality. On the front page of the Thai newspapers they show traffic accidents, such as a dead motorcyclist with his skull cracked open and the brain flowing out onto the road. This is unimaginable in the West, where such images are censored. This is because Buddhism is the main religion in Thailand and *asubha* is one of the teachings of the Lord Buddha. *Asubha* is the only practice which allows us to overcome greed and hate. I'm sorry to say it, but it is the only way, almost without exception. Of course, we don't like to be told this. We want to hear that we need only enter the first *jhāna*, then the second *jhāna*, then the third *jhāna*, then the fourth *jhāna*, reflect on our previous lives and enter *Nibbāna*. We often see this formula written in the *suttas*, and it sounds so easy that we forget about the other *suttas* which give clues to what the Lord Buddha was really teaching. For instance, he advised his bhikkhus to go alone into the forest, living in fearful places that other people avoid. He also talked about *asubha* in some *suttas*, such as when he advised a Bhikkhu to observe the decaying corpse of a courtesan with whom he had fallen in love, as I mentioned before.

Why did the Lord Buddha teach like this? Do we think we know better, that we can pick and choose which of the teachings to follow to reach *Nibbāna*? Yes, we do. We think this because we studied at university and the Lord Buddha did not, or because we've studied the *suttas* and he did not. We think we can choose which of the teachings to follow because the times have changed. The times have indeed changed, but the *kilesas* haven't changed one little bit. *Avijjā* has not changed at all; its tricks are just the same. The only thing that has changed are the toys it plays with, the objects it uses to fool us.

There are a few rare exceptions to the rule that *asubha* practice is the only method capable of overcoming greed and hate. One example in the *suttas* concerns a new Bhikkhu who was taught *asubha* practice by Venerable Sariputta but had gained no results after a long time.

He went to see the Lord Buddha who saw that the Bhikkhu had been a goldsmith in many previous lives making the most beautiful objects. The Lord Buddha told him to reflect on the impermanence of beautiful things rather than the body, and the Bhikkhu became an Arahant in no time. In another *sutta*, a very beautiful woman came to see the Lord Buddha. As she had become conceited about her beauty, the Lord Buddha, using his supernormal powers, created an image of a very beautiful girl sitting near to him. Each time the woman looked at the image, she was surprised to see that the girl had aged a little more. Finally, the girl appeared to die and her corpse became bloated and oozing. The woman was shocked by this, but she saw the impermanence of the body and entered the stream, the first of the four stages of enlightenment. These examples show that, in some people, greed and hate can be overcome by looking at the impermanence of beautiful things, but just don't imagine that you are the exception. It is, of course, beneficial for to reflect on the impermanence of beautiful things, but for most of us *asubha* is the perfect practice.

There is nothing wrong with visualising the inside of the body in meditation practice, taking out the intestines, opening them up and looking at the excrement. There's nothing wrong with it. We like to take apart all the gadgets and playthings inside our houses to see how they work, so why can't we take the body apart and see how it works? It may be because we come from Christian societies which considered the body sacred and where opening corpses was taboo; anatomical dissection was forbidden by law for many centuries. That is probably why, to this day, we still don't see dead bodies in newspapers in the West like we do in Thailand. It's because we don't want to let go of our delusion about the body that why we have to force ourselves to see reality by doing *asubha* practice. *Asubha* is something that you really have to hammer into the *citta*, for *avijjā* does not want to let us see the truth about the body. *Avijjā* won't just invite us to combat it, saying "Here are my weak points, please come and hit me". *Avijjā* disguises its weaknesses and sends us astray in our meditation practice. It can suggest that we work on a particular meditation practice for years without results, and all because *avijjā* was leading us on. If *Dhamma* leads our meditation, then we are sure to get results sooner or later.

If you have the chance, go to see a cremation for yourself. Use the experience to picture your own body on the funeral pyre, smouldering and burning. Here in Thailand, they usually keep the dead bodies in an open casket for a few days and invite the monks to come and chant for the dead. You can sometimes see from the expression on the faces of the deceased where they have most likely gone, what their destination has been. They are not smiling and peaceful; they are longing for something. It's clear from their faces that they have gone down to the lower realms. Their families have invited monks to chant for them, but their *citta* has already gone. The monks chant "...May your good deeds lead you to heaven...", but some of the dead never did a good thing in their lives. If they are still around to hear the chanting, you can feel that they can't bear to listen to it. So, what is the use of the chanting? At the moment of death, these people realise they have wasted their human birth, for they never did a good thing and were constantly breaking the five precepts.

I realise that talking like this might bring up some very uncomfortable feelings within you. If this is the case then so much the better. It shows us where our sensibilities lie and where we have to investigate in our meditation practice. If we can bring up these feelings and investigate their causes, we can overcome the problems that lie within our *citta*.

There's really nothing to this body, but we think that it belongs to us, that it is us. Get rid of this idea. The body is nothing more than a biological robot. It's just like a car; when a car is scrapped, the driver doesn't die, does he? So what has the car to do with the driver? What does the *citta* have to do with the body? Nothing. The body is one of the *khandhas*, feeling is another *khandha*, memory and association is another *khandha*, thinking is another *khandha* and consciousness is another *khandha*. These five *khandhas* have nothing to do with the *citta*. Try to see this for yourself through the practice of *samādhi*. At the stage where thinking ceases, you will get an inkling of what this means. Then, go into deep *samādhi*, where all five *khandhas* disappear completely, and you will know that something remains. This thing that remains is what we should really care about, not the body. We need only ensure that the body is healthy enough to be used as a tool, not worry if it is sick, dying or dead. It is simply a tool we can use to help us dive into the stream, the stream that leads to *Nibbāna*. Once we have entered the stream, we won't have any concerns about going down to hell, for stream enterers cannot possibly be reborn in the lower realms. They are in the stream that leads out of *dukkha*. As long as we have not entered the stream, however, we will constantly be swirled around in the thirty-one realms of existence.