

1. Avijjā - Not-Knowing

Bhante Bodhidhamma · DhammaBytes · 8:24

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-enlightened one.

The word I'd like to tackle tonight is this word *avijjā*. It's one of these core words. *Ā* means not and *vijjā* means knowledge, and it's translated unfortunately as ignorance. But the word ignorance has a sort of pejorative feel about it, like you're stupid or you're culpable. But this is just basically not-knowing. I did come across a word in the dictionary and I thought I might use that, but I don't think everybody knows it. So it's this quality of not-knowing right at the beginning.

I mean, what do we know as children? As a baby, what do we know? We don't know anything. And then it all piles in: the culture, the language, the habits of our parents, then the school, and everything just piles in. And is it any wonder that we presume that this is what we are? This is definitely, phenomenally what we are.

But let me give you an example of what this ignorance is, because what it does is it presumes. We've got to be careful here—it's not an evil thing. It's just a simple matter of, well, this must be right.

I had a hut in the monastery I was at. I call it a *kuti*. A hut, unfortunately, doesn't give you the right impression—it was a proper brick-built little building with its own toilet. And one year, somehow these little flies came in called *hopatua*. Tiny little flies. And the disturbing thing about them was that they got through the mosquito net. And when they bit, they left this little pimple that itched for about three days, or it did for me. And it slowly drives you mad, even though you're meditating—it slowly drives you mad.

And I used to regularly evict all the spiders from my room. But then it occurred to me that, no, I need these spiders. They, in fact, would eat these flies. So I allowed the spiders to come in. And I ended up with lots of these spider webs, and some of them were big spiders. And to my horror, the place got more and more filled with these little flies. And it came to a point when I was actually considering leaving and going to another monastery. It was just becoming unbearable.

And there was another monk in the western room, a Canadian, staying at the monastery, been there for longer than me. And he came along one day and I told him, I said, I'm on the point of leaving. I can't handle these flies. And he looked around and he said, "It's these cobwebs. They breed on cobwebs." So I of course immediately evicted all the spiders and burnt joss sticks, and the whole situation became bearable again.

But that for me was a prime example of what happens when you don't know and you presume, and you

end up with more suffering than you expected.

So this *avijjā*, this *avijjā* that we suffer from is just a very simple state of not-knowing. And then we move into this position of given knowledge and there's a presumption that this is what we are, what I believe, this is me, this is mine. And it's a mistake—it's just a mistake. And because we begin from that position of not-knowing, from an intellectual or from an understanding point of view, from the heart's point of view we begin from a position of innocence. So it's just a mistake, an innocent mistake.

But unfortunately, it does end up with depression, anxiety, guilt, shame, and all the rest of the whole gamut of human suffering. And at some point, one says, "I've got to meditate." So you end up in a meditation hall trying to get rid of this stuff.

And then the process comes back on itself. The process comes back on itself, where you realize—as you go deeper and deeper into yourself, you're getting close to the original mistake, which is to do with an identity, an identity of being a human being. That's what we think we are. As we undo that, there are two processes going on.

The process of *vipassanā* is a process of understanding where the mistake lies. So that's why we're looking at this business of impermanence, the business of how we relate to things by way of grasping or owning, wanting and identifying, and how we have a deeper identity with what we're experiencing. And by undoing that, we're beginning to understand what we really are. But the other process that's going on is that we're having to deal with all these emotional states that come up. And we begin to realize that by just allowing them to express themselves as mental states, as emotional states, they're actually exhausting themselves. That's why we come off the dream, because it's through dreams that they develop.

And so these two processes—of the understanding is undermining this original mistake, and the process of purification is undermining and going back upon the product of that mistake, even though it was done innocently. So the end process that we're moving towards is a point of understanding, which we call wisdom. And from the heart's point of view, the purification takes us back to the beginning of that innocence. But it's now not an ignorant and not-knowing innocence. It's now a wisdom within a purified heart, an immaculate heart. And that's the end of the process when we reach death.

So the process that we're going through, or have been through, is from a point of ignorance into a mistake which has caused us problems. And we undo those problems and come to a point of wisdom. From the heart's point of view, we've innocently made a mistake, and we have all the problems that come from that mistake, including guilt and shame and all that. And then as we undermine that, we return to a purified heart. This purified heart is then an energy, a form of energy, which then reconnects with the world. And that reconnection we call love. And that love has its various forms of compassion and joy.

So we should be hopeful. We should practice with joy, knowing that there is an end to this process. So I hope my words have been of some use to you. May you be fully liberated sooner rather than later.

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