

Lesson 18 – AVOID VANITY

Opening chants, meditation and review of last lesson.

Question to think about before the story: How do you feel when you look in the mirror?

Story: The Order of Nuns, Khema and Nanda

When the Buddha went again to visit Kapilavasthu, his father, King Suddhōdana had become sick and then died as an Arahant. Queen Gautami was then alone. She went to visit the Buddha and said, “Bhante, it would be good if women could leave the householder life and be ordained into the Dharma and Discipline taught by you.” The Buddha said, “Gautami, do not ask for women to leave the householder life and be ordained.” She asked three times, but he would not agree. Queen Gautami bowed and left, feeling sad. She cut off her hair anyway and put on a robe like the monks. Several other women from the palace did the same, including Yashōdhara, who had been the wife of Prince Siddhartha.

After the Buddha left Kapilavasthu, Queen Gautami and the other women, with their hair shaven and wearing robes, walked the long distance to where the Buddha was staying. When they arrived, Queen Gautami stood on the porch, her feet swollen and covered with dust. She was feeling very sad, with tears rolling down her cheeks. Ven. Ananda saw her and felt great compassion for her, and gently asked why she was standing there. She explained that the Buddha would not allow women to be ordained into his Dharma and Discipline. Ven. Ananda asked her to wait, and he went inside to the Buddha, saying, “Bhante, it would be good if women could be ordained into the Dharma and Discipline taught by you.” The Buddha would not agree. Ven. Ananda said, “Bhante, after women become ordained into Dharma and Discipline taught by you, are they able to become Arahants?” The Buddha said, “They are, Ananda.” Ven. Ananda said, “If they are, then since Gautami was extremely helpful to you by being your foster mother when your own mother Queen Mahamaya died, it would be good if women could be ordained.” The Buddha said, “If Gautami accepts eight major rules, that will be her full ordination.” Then he gave eight rules for women to be ordained as nuns, called bhikkshunis. These eight rules were to make sure that the bhikkshunis fully respected the bhikkshus.

Ven. Ananda then returned to Gautami and told her what the Buddha had said. She responded very happily, accepting the eight rules like a person would accept a garland of flowers on her head. Ven. Ananda told the Buddha that Gautami, now Ven. Gautami, had accepted the rules. The other women who traveled with Ven. Gautami were ordained by the monks. The Sangha of Bhikkshunis was now formed.

Nanda, the daughter of Ven. Gautami was extremely beautiful. She knew that the Buddha teaches that beauty is not important, and that he does not speak well about beauty, so she did not want to visit him. So, she listened to the Buddha’s

teachings from others telling her what they heard. The Buddha one day said that a person should come personally to listen to his advice. When Nanda heard that, she went to see the Buddha for the first time. When she arrived, she saw a beautiful woman fanning the Buddha. This woman was an image created by the Buddha's powers for Nanda to see. The woman's appearance started to change. She started looking tired, then she looked older, wrinkles formed on her face, and her hair started to turn grey. Then she started looking extremely old and feeble. Nanda stared at her in disbelief, wondering about the Buddha's powers to create that image. Then she started to think deeply about getting old and losing beauty. She understood how attached she was to her beauty, and how painful it will be to lose her beauty, and she learned that to avoid that pain, she should not be so concerned about beauty.

A similar experience happened to Queen Khema, the wife of King Bimbisara. She had golden skin, and a perfect face and body. She was very proud of her beauty, and like Nanda, she did not want to visit the Buddha when she heard that he does not say good things about beauty. But she wanted to see the beautiful Bamboo Grove, so she went to see it. There she heard the Buddha's voice, a relaxed, kind and loving voice. She pulled a scarf over her face so she wouldn't be noticed, and she sat in the back of the crowd of people listening to Buddha teaching. The Buddha created an image of a most beautiful young lady fanning him. "That young lady is more beautiful than I am," Queen Khema thought. But the image changed, and her beauty started to fade; she became wrinkled, grey-haired, and bent. Her smile turned into a toothless grin, she became thin and feeble, and finally she fell on the floor and died. Her body became decayed and then only the bones could be seen, and then the bones turned into dust. Queen Khema was shocked by the image. She thought about how she would get old and die, too. She understood how her beauty was only temporary, she would surely lose it, so all the beauty that she was so proud of is ultimately useless. She learned that she must find a better focus in life than her beauty. So, she asked her husband, King Bimbisara, for permission to be a nun. The good king agreed, so she shaved her head, wore a robe and became ordained as a bhikkshuni, to dedicate her life to learning the Dharma from the Buddha.

Questions after the story:

1. What is a bhikkshuni?
2. Who was the first bhikkshuni?
3. Why did Nanda and Khema not want to see the Buddha at first?
4. What did they see when they went to visit the Buddha?
5. Why did the Buddha make those images?
6. What did Nanda and Khema learn?

Quotation of Buddha about the moral of the story:

"Passa cittakatam bimbam, arukayam samussitam, aturam bahusankappam, yassa natthi dhavam tithi."

"See this dressed up beautiful body, but it is a mass of sores, held up by bones, it gets illnesses, and it is not permanent."

Application of the moral(s) in the story to our daily lives:

In today's world, the beauty of the body is considered so important. People who have money spend a lot of time and money shopping for new clothes, jewelry and shoes, exercising and getting new haircuts and beauty treatments. It is good to exercise, be healthy, groom ourselves and dress neatly. But many teenagers, and even some younger students, are too concerned about how they look.

Nanda and Khema were very vain. What does "vain" or "vanity" mean? Vanity means being proud of the way we appear, or being too concerned about how we look. It means not only feeling proud when we look attractive, but also feeling upset if we don't look so attractive; worrying and spending a lot of time thinking about how we look and comparing ourselves with how others look; wanting to look better than others, more fashionable, wealthier, more fit, so people will notice and admire us; criticizing how others look; and maybe even spending a lot of time and money to look more attractive.

The Buddha teaches us that when we are young, we should know that the beauty of the body is only temporary, and that inside the body we are not pretty at all! We are all full of bones, blood and other very unpleasant things. At any time we can get an illness, injury or disease that may make our body look unattractive. And if we live long, how will we look? Old and wrinkled, with grey hair, fat, baldness, or spotty and saggy skin. If we remember this, then we don't feel so attached to our looks, so we don't have so much vanity, like Nanda and Khema. Then, we don't get upset when we don't look so handsome or beautiful anymore - we can still be happy regardless of how we look.

Buddhist nuns (bhikkshunis) have shaven heads, which looks unusual on a woman. By shaving their heads and wearing robes, they are making sure they don't have vanity. They don't have to style their hair, shop, or think about what to wear. They don't have to worry about having a bad hair day! So, they can spend their time thinking wholesome thoughts and purifying their minds.

If we are not always thinking and worrying about how we look, then we don't spend too much money and time going shopping, we don't worry and waste time looking in the mirror and comparing ourselves with others. Then, we can have happier thoughts and have more money and time to spend on things that are more important. Can you think of some things that are more important?

Is it wrong to look beautiful or handsome? No, of course not. Even the Buddha was very attractive. People liked to look at his beautiful peaceful and loving face, because he had an *inner* beauty. Similarly, before Ven. Moggallana and Ven. Sariputta met the Buddha, they saw the serenity in the face of Ven. Assaji, and the graceful and disciplined way that he walked, and they were attracted to that inner beauty. That is different than *outer* beauty, such as the beauty of Mara's daughters, who had beautiful faces and bodies, but evil minds.

When people have *inner* beauty, they have a smile that makes you happy and want to smile back. Their eyes sparkle with peace and friendliness, and their face glows with happiness. Someone with only *outer* beauty has a beautifully formed face, but it may often look arrogant, angry, aggressive, jealous, suspicious, gloomy, bored, mischievous, insecure, or not genuine. The smile may be a fake smile, an impish smile, a flirting smile, or a smirk. People with outer beauty are often popular, but if they don't have strong virtues, they cannot have inner beauty.

Other people may be jealous of someone with a peaceful inner beauty. But genuinely good people will always be attracted to someone with inner beauty. So, we can be popular with *good* people if we cultivate our *inner* beauty by practicing Dharma.

Activity to reinforce the lesson: Word Search - Find 12 words from the lesson:

K E N N A B Q G E
H I M A G E S F I
E N U N Y A V A N
M O L D C U A N N
A O P A D T I M E
V A N I T Y N I R
P O P U L A R N O

Word Box:

KHEMA	NUN	BEAUTY	VANITY	TIME	FAN
VAIN	POPULAR	NANDA	IMAGE	INNER	OLD

Closing chant: Sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhitattā! May all beings have happy minds!