

THE BARE BONES OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING

By Victor Byrd

THE EIGHTFOLD PATH -- RIGHT UNDERSTANDING

THE TWELVE NIDANAS

AVIJJA

Understanding avijja can be a tremendous relief to someone (like myself) who thinks that Buddhist insight depends on "being smart." Intellect is not worth a dime in the realm of truth, but an insight into what avijja really is, can profoundly open the heart of your understanding.

As we look at avijja together, I urge you to slow down and give yourself time to *be with* the material. This is a deeply significant subject. Don't try to "get it" through your intellect. Touch it (sense) and feel it (feeling function). Be open to the knowingness of it through silence (intuition), and then allow your understanding of avijja to emerge into the thinking function. Earlier, I suggested that understanding anatta, or no self, is absolutely essential to what the Buddha meant by Right Understanding. But anatta is only one wing of the eagle. The other wing is the Twelve Nidanas. Let us begin with the first Nidana, avijja.

Avijja

Avijja is the Pali word for ignorance, or delusion. It is the source of all suffering. You may remember that there are three "poisons," or contaminants of consciousness, swirling around in our minds. On the other hand, if you are deluded (which includes each and everyone of us), maybe you *don't* remember that there are three contaminants of consciousness! The three poisons are: greed, hatred and delusion (avijja). But, of the three, avijja is the tap root.

As mentioned previously, European languages simply do not capture the essence of these Sanskrit and Pali words. For example, our dictionary says that ignorance is a lack of knowledge, but the question is, what kind of knowledge is lacking? For thousands of years, the spiritual teachers of the East have taught us that the only basis for wisdom is knowledge of the Self. (A Buddhist might say that wisdom is knowledge of the emptiness of Self.)

It isn't as if the Eastern idea of self-knowledge is alien to us in the West. The famous dictum "Know Thyself," uttered by the Oracle of Delphi (or was it Socrates?), is a distant voice in our own heritage, but without a doubt that voice has been drowned out by the noise of modernity and technology.

Today, knowledge has become information and information equals power. The more information one *has* (see how the word "has" indicates how knowledge is something that we *acquire* or gain), the smarter he or she must be. So people like me, who become tongue tied as we stumble over our words, feel quite stupid. In our culture, if you're dumb, for God's sake hide it!

We have television shows that are based entirely on how much information you have in your head. If you want to win a truckload of money, all you need to do is spout the name of the Tenth Pope or the capital of Nova Scotia or a famous cheese from the north of France. And you had better say it fast, before the other contestants ring their bell.

We hear the guests on Oprah talking brilliantly about politics, or the deep meaning of a play they just saw, or the dangers of global warming. They speak eloquently about the keys to better communication between partners and how to beautify your kitchen. These people could not be filled with *avijja*, could they?

And in every sangha, there are those who astound us with insightful comments about the Vedanta or Buddhist theory. They quote Nisargadatta, Ta Hui or other great Zen masters, and make marvelous comparisons between quantum physics and the Buddha's concept of *anicca*. They couldn't be ignorant, could they?

But in the sense of *avijja*, these brilliant people could very well be ignorant, since IQ, and worldly success have *nothing* to do with *avijja*. A meditator can develop profound concentration and sit in deep states of bliss. Yet, if she has not *experienced* the truth of *anatta*, *anicca* or *dukkha*, she is ignorant, according to Buddhist teaching, as well as the teaching of Yoga or the Vedanta.

As a matter of fact, it makes complete sense that brilliant people can be ignorant, in the sense of *avijja*, while at the same time be, well, brilliant. As Chogyam Trungpa explains, *avijja* isn't even remotely dumb:

“Ignorance is not stupid and indeed can be very intelligent. It is a complete belief in one’s own projections.”

Ananda was one of the Buddha’s most brilliant disciples. It is said that he had a photographic memory. As the Buddha’s personal attendant, he got to work with his great teacher every single day. But year after year, as he watched others awaken, Ananda remained trapped by his intellect. The Buddha once admonished him, asking, “Why do you have to think before you respond to a question?” (Buddhist teachers are often very tough on thinking types!) In other words, the Buddha was saying, “why can’t you trust intuition to answer for you?”

So Ananda, one of the brightest lights in the Sangha, was lost in *avijja*. He kept thinking his wonderful thoughts, and memorizing every single word the Buddha ever said and taught. (Let’s hope so, since the Pali scriptures are based on Ananda’s prodigious memory.)

Surely Ananda must have wondered why others experienced awakening insights and he didn’t. There are different versions of Ananda’s awakening, but all agree that it did not occur until after his beloved teacher had died. According to Zen legend, for example, Ananda was desperate to awaken, but continued to rely on his intellect as the means to enlightenment. Finally, he asked Mahakashayapa, the Buddha’s successor, “Did the Buddha transmit anything else to you besides his robe?” In other words, he was asking if there were some secret teaching, some *fact* that the Buddha shared with Mahakashayapa and not him. (Don’t we all think that if we just knew one more piece of the puzzle we could figure it out?) Mahakashayapa said, “Ananda! Knock down the flag pole in front of the gate.” And Ananda, the one who perhaps loved the Buddha more than all others, awakened.

The story of Hui Neng, an illiterate boy who sold firewood on the streets of his town in China, is quite unlike Ananda’s. Hui Neng, had absolutely no book learning, and yet, when he overheard a monk chanting one of the Buddhist Sutras, Hui Neng instantly awakened. He traveled by foot to the monastery of the Fifth Patriarch, and eventually became one of the greatest Ch’an masters.

Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj, an enlightened *jnana* yogi master from India, is a modern day example of Hui Neng’s story. He too had little book knowledge, or formal education. He did not astound people with his

ability to quote scriptures, nor did he refer to the brilliant teachings of others. His guru told him to identify with the Absolute, and he did! His heart was able to trust his teacher completely, and, like Hui Neng, the “little dust” in Nisargadatta’s eyes vanished forever.

So, we face a paradox. The very intelligence that allows us the possibility of gaining encyclopedic information about everything imaginable, takes us further away from what may actually be a simple task of wiping away the dust in our eyes. Think of intelligence as a liquid that has the potential to heal. When intelligence freezes into intellect (an instrument of the ego) it becomes the greatest obstacle to opening the eye of the Dharma. But our ego refuses to accept such a revolutionary idea. It is convinced that if it can read every book ever printed, speak five different languages, take copious notes while teachers speak or listen to their enlightened dharma talks on CD, as it drives down the freeway, this dharma stuff will magically sink into its brain! *The ego is convinced that it can think its way into heaven.* In other words, “it” believes that “it” can awaken by incorporating into *itself* the wisdom of others. As Ta Hui says:

“This is what is called counting the treasure of others all day long without having half a cent of your own.”

How can an ignorant mind conceptualize ignorance? Jung described the problem this way: “In psychology, the object of knowledge is at the same time the organ of knowledge, which is true of no other science.” This is a profound conundrum. This consciousness (nidana number 3) that was dipped in the ink of avijja (nidana number 1) even *before* conception, is supposed to see its own delusion? How? If everything I see, hear, think and feel is through the mind, how can this same mind stand apart and watch itself? This is a dilemma that each of us must solve in our own spiritual practice.

In our sangha, we end our Sunday sit with a chant from the Brihadanayaka Upanishad:

Lead us from the unreal to the Real.
Lead us from darkness to the Light.
Lead us from death to the abode of Immortality.

Avijja makes us believe that unreal things are real, or to repeat Chogyam Trungpa’s definition, “It is a complete belief in one’s own projections.”

Only the Real endures forever. The unreal fades away like a dream. Here is Nisargadatta's marvelous pointer:

"To take the world as real and one's self as unreal is ignorance, the cause of sorrow. To know the self as the one reality and all else as temporal is freedom, peace and joy."

Identification

In pondering how to go deeper into the first nidana, avijja, I keep coming back to one truly fascinating convergence of Eastern and Western knowledge. You will encounter this word in page after page of Nisargadatta's teaching. For example, he says: When all the false self-identifications are thrown away, what remains is all-embracing love. This is also the Buddha's essential teaching:

"Therefore, whatsoever there is of bodily forms, of feeling, of perception, of mental formations, of consciousness, whether one's own or external, gross or subtle, lofty or low, far or near: there one should understand according to reality and true wisdom: *This does not belong to me; this am I not; this is not my Ego.*"

The Buddha is referring to all of our self-identifications: identifying with our body, with our feelings, perceptions, thoughts and consciousness.

But identification is also a vital concept in Western psychological thought. It is quite complex, involving processes such as projective identification, introjection, primary and secondary identification, and so forth. In fact, the meaning of the word changes slightly, depending on which perspective one is coming from: Freudian, Jungian, contemporary psychiatric, etc.

A few years ago I was walking down the street when I noticed a father and his little girl walking briskly by. His stride was strong and masculine. Since we were near the Port of Long Beach, I thought he might even be a Longshoreman. His little girl was six or seven years old, quite pretty, and she was actually keeping up with him, stride for stride. As they passed me, I was struck by something odd, and then it hit me. Her walk was a perfect mirror of her dad's! It was very "tough" and masculine, almost with a swagger. Had this been a boy walking with his father, I doubt that I would have paid much attention, but it was quite amazing to

see a little girl imitate her dad's body language so precisely. I realized that this was not mere imitation. She was identifying with her father.

How does a child learn, in a few short years, to walk exactly like a parent, capturing amazingly nuanced aspects of the grown up's body language? How do teenage boys transform into members of violent gangs in L.A.? How do humans become walking time bombs, climbing onto a bus with deadly explosives strapped underneath their coats? The answer is that we have this extraordinary capacity to literally *become* the outside object or belief system. Most of us take this capacity so much for granted that we don't even notice it. And yet, our consciousness is amazing! We have the ability to internalize or "copy" the image of an outside object with a mental camera so precise that the finest cameras in the world pale in comparison.

This process, which is so vital to the forming of our ego, is called *identification*. It is important to remember that identification has little to do with emulation or imitation (the highest form of flattery). Imitation is essentially a *conscious* activity. Some children spend countless hours in front of the mirror imitating their heroes and heroines, dying their hair purple, piercing their various body parts, learning how to sing like their idols. But they can (and do) shed these conscious imitations for "better" ones, like a child throwing away one toy for a new one. In other words, imitation is only skin deep. It does not penetrate into the unconscious. But identification is bone marrow deep. It is serious and primarily an unconscious process whereby we actually become the thing. According to Robert J. Campbell, author of *Psychiatric Dictionary*, identification is, "Literally, the process of making (or considering to be) the same." How do we *do* that?

There is a fascinating twist about identification that will help us understand how its extraordinary power plays out in each of our lives. We "imitate" because we are drawn toward something that attracts us. But the reasons we "identify" are far more complex. In the initial stages of psychological development when we are young, vulnerable and powerless, identification is used primarily as a *defense* mechanism. Imagine what it's like to be a small child who is trying to maintain some sense of control over an external world that seems overwhelming and threatening. Through identification, that child *incorporates* the objects that are frightening, frustrating or overpowering into himself (or herself). By doing this, he gains a sense of mastery and control over the object.

A little boy may long to be closer to his mother, but sees his dad as the frustrating object or even a rival for his mother's affection. A little girl can have a similar experience in wanting to be closer to her dad. But children *identify* with the rival and not the object of longing. This dynamic also occurs when people, who are taken as hostages, begin to identify with the perpetrators. In order to bear the terror, they imagine that the aggressors are not so horrible. They may even sympathize with the terrorists, which somehow makes their experience more tolerable. The key is that their terror has caused them to decompensate. This means that their ego becomes young and fragile, just as it was when they were small children. At this point, the door opens and identification steps in.

Identification is a process. At birth, the unformed ego begins its incredible journey from fragmentation and fusion with the collective unconscious and eventually grows into the cohesive sense of self that is characteristic of an adult. From the psychological perspective, our journey is a steady movement toward psychic health. So, as we become more conscious, we find it necessary to shed the old constricting identifications that once protected us.

Not long ago, a client told me, "Well, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em." He was referring to a recent choice he made regarding his family circumstances. My client has a particularly vicious inner voice and at times, I have wondered how he bears living with such a relentless and cruel critic. Indeed, he does break down on occasion, and turns his rage upon himself. But then the ego comes back together, and he goes on. To this day, he continues to argue in support of this harsh inner commentator saying, "My voice keeps me in line."

In truth, the voice that keeps him in line is a combination of his father and a number of other men who were terribly abusive to him as he was growing up. The only way he could deal with such a hostile and frustrating environment was to incorporate into himself the very aspects of that environment that were too overwhelming. He literally inhaled the voices, the images, the visceral sense of those aggressors and these became part of his core sense of self. Thus he gained a measure of control over his inner world, but he did so at a very high price.

His story is extreme. In most cases, the layers of identification that slowly cover us like a suit of clothes, are far more benign. We become what we have identified with, just as a talented actor completely becomes

his role. Through the process of identification, we know ourselves by what we do. Someone is an opera diva, a psychologist, a judge. We are passionate liberals or intense, patriotic conservatives. But the question is, are these simply roles that we can discard when day is done - just as an actor will do when the curtain falls - or have we identified with these roles to such an extent that they have become part of who we are?

When my brother-in-law, who is a judge, finishes his day in court, he removes his robe, drives home, and becomes a very regular guy. He goes fishing with the kids, mows the lawn, takes his wife (and sometimes me) out to dinner. In other words, he does not need an “external” role to bolster his inner sense of confidence. Even after nearly two decades, he has not *identified* himself with “being a judge.” It is what he does, not who he is. I suspect that for many of us, the temptation to “become the judge” would be enormously seductive.

Those of us who, by the grace of God (or karma), do not freeze beneath the hard bark of identification, and continue to grow psychologically and spiritually, find that our identifications eventually become too tight and constricting. This is the crucial turning point in each ego’s journey toward the Real, because if it is to grow, it must take that first fierce step away from the safety of home. Rarely, if ever, can a person let go of any identification without tremendous effort and courage because *letting go of an identification is a little death*. It means that you will have to tolerate aloneness. The collective does not support any seeker who is truly attempting to break out of jail.

One member of our sangha tells me over and over, “I don’t know anything any more!” (I doubt that he realizes that his words are music to my ears!) He has had the courage to shed many of his old identifications, and now he feels uncertain and uncomfortable with too much freedom. No wonder we resist leaving the walled safety of identification.

Gurdjieff had another name for the state of identification: crystallization. In order to grow beyond that state of crystallization (the tight fitting suit of clothes), we have to melt down, just as a caterpillar must dissolve into chemical mush before recrystallizing into a beautiful butterfly. He put his students through a very intense “melting down” process, with exercises designed to raise their level of awareness that included periods of complete isolation and meditation. The inner work that he designed was meant to help the student let go of old, rigid states of

identification. Surely, this is our spiritual journey too, a journey leading us from the unreal to the real.

Our primary identification is with the body, and Nisargadatta says that identifying with the body is nothing less than a calamity. He does not mince words! As I mentioned earlier, when one of our sangha members protested that “no self” cannot possibly be true, he pointed to his body as proof of his existence. Is this not true for most of us? We have identified our self with our body. If my body has a cold, I have a cold. If it hurts, I hurt. If it is tired, I am tired. If the hair from this head has vanished, I am bald (and old). If this body dies, I am dead. Yes? No wonder we are terrified of death. A decayed body is visible proof that matter is impermanent. If I am matter, I am finished!

What an interesting paradox! At one of our sits, I was talking about yoga and how it can help ground us as we meditate. “Are you saying that we are *supposed* to be in our bodies?” one woman asked incredulously. It was such a sweet and funny moment, and yet her question was far more cogent than some of us realize. Don’t we tend to live in a mental world of thoughts and emotions, far from the reality of our living bodies? I would add that even while doing yoga or running on the treadmill, we are usually thinking about tomorrow or last week or we are just plain zoned out. This is not living in the body! Too often, we treat the body as an inconvenience or an embarrassment, dragging it around like an old sack of potatoes.

So, even though we live as if we are not the body, we are still completely identified with the body! Only a human could manage that kind of absurdity! But really it does make sense. If I think that I am the body, and I know that the body is going to die, clearly I will do everything I can to deny the living reality of the body. I don’t want to contemplate the finite number of breaths I have left if I am terrified at the prospect of arriving at that final one. And, as mentioned before, identification is *unconscious*. So my identification with the body happens moment by moment, far below the level of conscious awareness.

This leads to another subtle aspect of identification: the attachment to our personal story. If identification with the body is a calamity (according to Nisargadatta), how much more calamitous is our identification with the relentless chatter of the mind? The Buddha said that identifying with the body does, at least, make sense. After all, the body may last as many as one hundred years. But how long does a thought last?

“That which is called thought, or mind, or mind-consciousness, is continuously, during day and night, arising as one thing and passing away as another thing.”

It is through thought and memory that we maintain and recreate our personal story, the story that we cling to and that defines who we think we are.

A client remembers sitting next to her mother on the couch, while the mother explained that the two of them would have to take care of the new baby brother together. What a huge responsibility to lay on a one year-old child. From that day forward, a part of that little girl disappeared as she became a caretaker, not only for her newborn brother, but for all the brothers and sisters that were to come. This story was “hard wired” into her brain, and until only recently, she has silently accepted the role of caretaker as *her* story. But it was never really her story. From the beginning, it was the story of a mother’s inability to do her job, pure and simple.

If letting go of constricting identifications are little deaths, letting go of our personal story feels like death itself.

Recently, I made an agreement with a client who has been ready (actually, chomping at the bit) to close our therapeutic work together. For the next eight weeks, we would revisit the events in his childhood, in earnest. In the past, he often complained that he could not even remember his childhood. He comes by this naturally since his family’s mantra is: Just Forget About It, And Get On With Your Life. Isn’t that the mantra of Western civilization?

For nearly two decades, this young man has desperately tried to “just forget about it” and get on with his life, at a tremendous expense to his psychic health. Even though he was convinced that he could not remember his childhood, when he finally was willing to “read” his personal story to me, he found, to his utter amazement, that the memories literally poured out of him, as if a dam had broken. By the way, he actually did read from a journal that he agreed to write, as part of our agreement. But I also use the word “read” to signify our willingness to separate from the personal story and read it as if it really is just a story.

At long last, he has begun to accept the reality of his childhood. Growing up, he was a very sad and lonely little boy who had no one to comfort or nurture him, and aspects of that little boy are present and functioning in his psyche today. But at long last, now there is an inner grown-up who is strong enough to accept the child's reality. How grateful that lonely little boy must be to finally feel embraced and accepted.

I sat with a client who has finally remembered abuse so unspeakable that she carefully blocked it from her conscious memory for decades. Surely, I would not glibly say to her, "Well, you need to accept that this is just your personal story and if you really want to get on with your life, you have to let the story go." To say such a thing to a woman, who only now is learning to maintain daily awareness in the presence of such psychic pain (without constantly dissociating from the world), would be stupid and insensitive. And indeed, as she has been able to tolerate the reality of what happened to her, she has gained a measure of inner space and freedom.

How hard is it to free ourselves from identification with our personal story? In *Reenchantment*, Jeffery Paine gives this account of the Chogyam Trungpa's conclusion about his American students:

"Only late in his life did he realize a psychological orientation belonged to America as much as does technology or vast geographical distance...

In any American contest between a person's psychological history and his innate goodness, Trungpa finally saw, the odds were that *personal history* will win out. After ten years teaching in America, he told a friend that Freud was more relevant that he had realized (my emphasis)."

Chogyam Trungpa's words affect me so deeply. I wonder if he meant that a Buddhist teacher from Asia needs to recognize how hung up we Americans are with our personal stories, or if, at the end of his life, with his body and mind completely ravaged by alcohol abuse, he was acknowledging that Freud had something to teach him, to teach us all, East, as well as West.

But a question still lingers for all who travel the road from the unreal to the Real: *Who are we* beyond these personal stories that too often completely obscure our true nature?

“Who am I?” This is a question that seems ridiculous to most people. By the time you are thirty, you should know who you are, what you want and how you are going to get it. The thing is, most of us in the West completely misunderstand that the question, “Who am I,” is ultimately spiritual, not psychological. The person who has the courage to ask, “Who am I?” and investigate this question deeply, has truly begun the journey towards the real.

The Buddha teaches us to look for the answer by recognizing who we are not. “Are you your body?” he asks. “Are you your thoughts?” If you are not perception, or conception, or even consciousness itself, then what is left? Who is left? The Buddha teaches us that we are not the identifications that have crystallized into a personal story. We are not the thoughts that burst like bubbles within the blink of an eye, nor this body that lasts for ten decades or less. Sometimes, drastically less. We are not the feelings that continually weave themselves through consciousness like a kaleidoscope of bright colors turning from red to blue and green to yellow.

“Who am I?” Nisargadatta answers the question: Why, you are Freedom itself. You are the ground of awareness, that which was here “long before the stars filled an empty sky” to quote the line from a song that I love. Avijja? Nisargadatta says it is nothing but a dumb mistake that we have been making since we got on the game board. “In ignorance the seer becomes the seen.” This definition of ignorance is the very same definition of identification that we quoted earlier from the *Psychiatric Dictionary*.” In other words, ignorance and identification are synonymous. Our uncanny ability to become what we identify with is also our disastrous downfall. (Who knew?)

Whatever you have identified yourself with (in my case, I identified myself as a musician from age five until forty-nine) it is not who you are! As Nisargadatta says, “To identify oneself with the particular is all the sin there is.” When all is said and done, any identification, “whether high or low,” is ignorance, or avijja.

Freedom has nothing to do with the name you were given or the story that goes along with that name. Freedom has nothing to do with waking each morning and robotically acting out our parts, like Shakespeare’s tale of an idiot. Freedom is the courage to give up our worn-out stories, and to live each moment spontaneously, without the security of

a script. Freedom is the willingness to make it up on the spot, moment by moment.

A member of our sangha has been deeply discouraged at his inability to find release from his identification with his personal story. In an e-mail, he referred to his personal story as “a mountain that I want to chew up and spit out.” Very Zen. My response was very Jung: “We cannot let go of a story we have refused to read.” Reading our story, or processing it psychologically, is what psychotherapy is all about. It is true that we can become lost in the content of our story, “reading” it over and over (“analysis interminable” to quote Freud), and that may be the greatest pitfall of long-term psychotherapy. But, we cannot begin to move beyond our story, until we have fully embraced it.

Perhaps there is a parallel danger in Eastern psychology (Buddhism, et al). No one really gets to skip the psychological track of growing up. Too often, those who have come to the West to teach the Dharma, discarded their egos long before they had developed a healthy psychological sense of self. (That instruction seems to have been omitted from all the Pali scriptures.) The consequences can be disastrous. I believe this describes Chogyam Trungpa’s life of triumph and tragedy.

From the constricted states of identification in our younger years, when we feel powerless and dependent on our parents, to a later identification with our peers in high school, we continue to grow into more “spacious” states of identification. Sometimes, a person grows to a psychological place where she no longer depends on others for her sense of well-being, which in Jungian psychology is the aim of the individuation process. But all states of identification are, at their core, avijja. From a congregation of true believers deep inside the Bible Belt to a congregation of thoughtful Unitarians in New York City; from the most dedicated Peace Corps worker to a Wall Street stock broker who lives and breathes his work 24/7; from identifying oneself as a Jungian therapist to a meditation teacher (for instance one who guides a certain sangha in Long Beach, California), if we are identified with anything less than our pure essence, or what Nisargadatta called “the Absolute,” and Buddhists call the buddha mind, we are lost in avijja.

Carl Jung describes this process of breaking free of our identifications as, “hacking through layer upon layer to that center which is the source and ultimate ground of our psychic existence - to the inner core, the Self.”

This “layer upon layer” is the crust of identification that obscures the reality of who we really are, and it is what the Buddha meant by avijja. The moment we add an object to “I am,” we have identified ourselves with something less than what we are. “I am...a Buddhist” may sound better than I am...a thief, but both are identifications. I am...a loving mother is a wonderful identification, but it is still less than who you really are. I am an African-American is still an identification, as is I am a Jew or I am a Christian. I am a musician, is an identification just as I am gay or I am straight. Can pure awareness be black, white, yellow or brown? Can it be Asian or European? Can it have a sexual orientation? Being gay describes whom you are attracted to, not who you are. Can pure awareness be male or female?

Avijja says, “I am hot. I am cold.” If you are caught in the rain, avijja says, “I am wet.” But if you really think about it, doesn’t it sound strange to say, “I am wet”? *Who* is wet? How can pure awareness, our buddha nature, be touched by water, heat, cold, hunger, delusion, lust, or hatred?

Not only is avijja the source of all our grief, confusion and suffering, understanding avijja will begin the process of purification in each of us. This is why I have discussed the first nidana at some length. In pondering how best to capture the meaning of avijja, I have explored a thoroughly Western psychological concept, the process of identification. It is a somewhat unorthodox approach, particularly from our Western perspective, since we accept the identification process as a necessary part of the process of building a healthy ego.

But at some point in our psychological journey, the healthy ego completes its first great task. Now, if it is to continue onto higher and higher ground, its path must turn inward, and in supreme irony, the ego begins to deconstruct the very walls that were originally built to safeguard its sense of fragility and vulnerability. So, rather than continuing the process of building and acquiring, the ego’s journey is one of tearing down and letting go of the identifications that once made it feel secure, because now those same identifications have become a prison. If the ego understands this, it has begun to understand the meaning of avijja.

Insight into the unreality of identification happens in a flash, and for one shining moment, the ego experiences the truth of *what is*. It has glimpsed something more vast than ever imagined. But until that moment, as long as the ego remains caught in the identifications of name and form,

it is trapped within the matrix of avijja. Unobserved by the watchful eye of mindfulness, avijja always connects with nidana number two, *sankhara*, and the chain of Twelve Nidanas continues.