

## CHAPTER EIGHT THE FIRST THREE NIDANAS avijja, sankhara, vinnana

The story of ten blind men describing an elephant is a perfect simile for our study of the nidanas. At least the blind men had a huge animal to touch. We are trying to understand an invisible process that occurred before we were born. There is a much more daunting problem facing us. Since we cannot see or touch the nidanas, the only instrument we can use to understand them is the mind itself. The problem is, if avijja is a kind of drug or anesthesia that intoxicates the mind, how on earth can the mind see its own deluded nature? How can delusion understand delusion? How can a pilot chart a course and land a large airplane if his instrument panel is damaged?

The short answer is that the plane is bound to crash; a longer answer is that the pilot may be able to use his damaged instruments if he can continually remember that they are imperfect. Let us remember the words of Bhikkhu Khantipalo, quoted at the end of the previous chapter:

The not-understanding of Dependent Arising is the root of all sorrows experienced by all beings. It is also the most important of formulations of Lord Buddha's Enlightenment.

What do we do with this assertion? When in doubt, ignore? Perhaps we listen as a teacher explains the twelve nidanas, but we don't really hear the meaning. "All these concepts and theories must have come later after the Buddha *thought* about what he had experienced," we muse. "And, after all, what do the twelve nidanas have to do with meditation?" I have heard that one many times.

What is it in each of us that seems so certain that the twelve nidanas are irrelevant to the process of awakening? What says, "this is not for me?" If delusion precedes the meeting of sperm and egg in a mother's womb, who among us is without delusion? Khantipalo says, that for a Buddhist, "It is therefore most necessary to see into the heart of this for oneself." Can we dismiss his words so easily? If we do sincerely want to see into the heart of this, one thing is for certain, we must remember that the instrument panel in our cockpit is damaged. At least, this gives us a

fighting chance.

One might wonder why this is so important; why does it matter that all phenomena are empty of any independent existence? It matters, Buddha teaches, because one who clearly understands the true nature of emptiness will be liberated, released completely from all suffering. So how then do we go about understanding it? In the twelve links of dependent origination, it is said that the root of unenlightened existence lies in the first link, our basic ignorance of the empty nature of reality (from *Essence of the Heart Sutra* by the Dalai Lama).

## Avijja

Previously, we said that whatever it is, avijja is hardly dumb or stupid. Our English translation of avijja as “ignorance” is unfortunate since we tend to think of ignorance as something dumb or stupid, but even a genius of the highest order can be lost in avijja. In fact, someone with an average IQ may be far less lost in avijja. Chogyam Trungpa says ignorance “is not stupid and indeed can be very intelligent. It is a complete belief in one’s own projections.”

Trungpa’s description is eminently psychological. Therapists the world over will tell us that a good therapy prognosis is based on a person’s capacity to think psychologically. A client who totally believes his own projections is not likely to be capable of much insight into his situation. Paradoxically, the most brilliant client may be the most wounded because she will use her intelligence to support and defend her unconscious agenda. The intellect can become an almost insurmountable wall, blocking seeing what is real, what is true. Once the intellect becomes the ally of avijja we are completely trapped in certitude.

We can go further with Trungpa’s definition of avijja. Could it be that avijja and the psychological process of identification are the same thing seen from different perspectives? How does a child learn to walk and talk exactly like a parent in a few short years, capturing amazingly nuanced aspects of the grown up’s body language? How do teenagers transform into members of violent gangs in L.A.? How do humans become walking time bombs, walking into a busy marketplace with deadly explosives strapped underneath their coats, or, at the other end of the spectrum,

transform into devoted disciples of a spiritual master? The answer is that we have an 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. Yet, this process is amazing. We have the ability to internalize or "copy" the image of an outside object with a mental camera that is precise beyond the most sophisticated computer. The object becomes a living image within our psyche.

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; dyeing their hair purple, piercing their various body parts; and learning how to sing like their idols with uncanny precision. But they can, and do, shed these conscious imitations for "better" ones, like a child throwing away one toy for a new one. Imitation is only skin deep; it does not penetrate into the unconscious. Identification is bone marrow deep; it is a serious, primarily unconscious process whereby we actually become the thing observed.

At birth, the unformed ego begins its incredible journey from fusion with the collective unconscious to an increasingly more cohesive and reality-based sense of itself. It is a process of separation but not necessarily of individuation. Inevitably, most of us begin to fixate, or freeze at some stage in the process of creating a cohesive ego. The process slowly ends and gradually the ego solidifies, or to use Gurdjieff's word, it crystallizes. The end result for so many of us is a belief that reality, life, exists "outside," and we are merely the observers of reality. Thus it is common to hear someone say with sad resignation, "life is passing me by."

Nisargadatta nails it completely:

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.

To take the world as real and one's self as unreal is *avijja*. My favorite Nisargadatta truth is: "To identify oneself with the particular is all the sin there is." As hard as it may be to accept, according to Nisargadatta, any identification, from Hitler to the Buddha, is still ignorance of true self. This

is why Krishnamurti rebelled against the idea of “Krishnamurtites,” followers who tried to become his disciples, making him their guru. He understood that his students would only be trading one identification for another.

The Buddha saw this truth so long ago. Suffering comes from living in a cage of identifications: some egregiously false, some less toxic, some rather sublime, but all ultimately false. As the Dalai Lama said, it comes from unenlightened existence. When the chain reaction of the nidanas is complete, the ego has completely solidified, like the bark on a tree. Because of avijja, it has succeeded in alienating its “self” from true self.

The Buddha said,

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’s teaching is extraordinary. He asserts that we are something other than this bodily form. He makes a more subtle assertion: neither are we our feelings. And more subtly, he says that we are not our perceptions, nor the stories and scripts that we live out like actors on a stage. Finally, after the outside layers of false identification have been stripped away, all that is left is consciousness. The Buddha says we are not even that. None of this is who we are. “This does not belong to me; this am I not; this is not my Ego.”

We have been conditioned with the precision of a Swiss clock to believe that we are bodily form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness (the ninth nidana). Our conditioning began with avijja, an unknowable entity that stretches back to beginningless time. “Unenlightened existence” is like a giant assembly line stretching beyond sight in both directions. Somehow, you and I have landed on the assembly line at a certain point in the production schedule, and if we don’t get off, we will take a little break and get back on the assembly line further down the road.

I once sat in a psychoanalytic seminar with a brilliant professor who

asked us, “Why do you think Freud insisted that all his students had to undergo psychoanalysis before they could presume to be therapists?” We went around the room, each of us offering fairly intelligent guesses, but to each answer, our teacher shook her head vigorously. Finally, she leaned forward, as if she were telling us the deepest secret ever told, and in an intense voice said, “Because he knew that this was the only way his students would realize the reality of the unconscious!” It rang like a bell. So obvious, and yet none of us had guessed her answer.

This is a truth that the Buddha understood as profoundly as Freud. One can imagine his asking a similar question: “Why do we need to undergo the intensive meditation process (a practice as difficult as any psychoanalytic process)?” His answer is probably as obvious as my professor’s: “We do this in order to experience the reality of avijja.” We can never really *know* avijja any more than consciousness can know the unconscious, but we can grasp its presence, and we can cultivate an attitude of humility and awe in the face of its enormous power in our lives. We can get up in the morning, look in the mirror with lovingkindness, some lightness of heart, and say: Good Morning avijja!

The Pali scriptures say: Avijja – paccaya sankhara. “Delusion conditions formations.”

## Sankhara

Avijja is invisible; it has no form or shape. It has no human quality; it is neither good nor bad. In fact, it is remarkably similar to the way Freud described the unconscious. In a sense it is an urge with no means of release or expression, that is, until it links up with formations.

What are formations? They are “resultants” – predispositions – inclinations. In a sense, sankhara has more “mass” than avijja, and unlike avijja, sankhara has a beginning. Anything that is a resultant must have an antecedent. Buddhism teaches that every action done with intention (volition) inevitably will bear some future fruit, good, neutral or bad. That is the meaning of karma according to Buddhist teaching. Karma is an intentional action. It is common for most of us to say that someone has good karma or bad karma, but this is not based upon the literal meaning of the word. What we actually mean is that someone has experienced good results or bad results from their karma.

Let us suppose that someone is sitting in the meditation hall and suddenly feels the sting of a mosquito bite. Thwack! He may instinctively splatter the little critter to smithereens. Was this an intentional action? Probably not, and if not, it cannot be called karma. Thus, no future result. Conversely, let's suppose that someone has been sitting for an hour in meditation, perhaps for many days, and mindfulness has become quite powerful. It is safe to say that the stronger the mindfulness the more aware the meditator has become of intention. Now the same thing happens. He feels the sting of the mosquito, and notices a flash of anger toward the insect. Thwack! This is probably a karmic act.

Sankhara are the formations that arise from karma (actions). This is why the second nidana is frequently called "karma formations." Formations do not disappear with the death of the physical being. The resultant energies of our volitional actions, good, neutral or bad, continue. They linger as energy formations waiting for an appropriate vehicle in order to release their charge. I imagine sankhara as an energy field lingering like a ghost after each karmic act. In this sense, there really are good ghosts and bad ghosts.

Once these two fields link, sankhara is dipped into the dye of avijja. Now, karma formations are not simply charged with positive, neutral or negative energy, they are conditioned by delusion. The ancient urge of avijja combines with distinct predispositions, and the power of two reaches toward the power of three.

Sankhara – paccaya vinnana. Karma formations condition consciousness.

## Vinnana

Vinnana is the Pali word for consciousness and it is the third nidana. When we try to imagine what the Buddha means by vinnana, we need to remember that he is talking about something incredibly ancient. Earth is said to be 4.5 billion years old; how old is vinnana? We said earlier that vinnana is similar to the Sanskrit word "ahamkhara," the "I thought." In *The Doctrine of Awakening*, Julius Evola describes it as "the germ of all that will eventually appear as individuality, as individual consciousness."

We said that the sankhara (karma formations) are like predispositions,

that determine the direction of avijja. But the first two nidanas, avijja and karma formations, are only in the realm of potentiality until they link up with vinnana. When the three are linked together, something more palpable emerges. Something has now separated from the collective, some instinct seeks expression in physical form. And the plot thickens.

Earlier, I suggested that it may not be too far afield to imagine avijja as analogous to our Western concept of the unconscious, at least as a way for us to get our Western psychological minds around the subject. To add a Jungian slant to the model, we might call avijja a collective unconscious that stretches back through endless time. From the Buddhist perspective, we might call vinnana samsaric consciousness. The karma formations are primitive instincts or charges of energy that exist within the container of avijja. Vinnana is the individuating factor that moves the nidanas closer to incarnation - physical form.

Remember that this individuating consciousness called vinnana will move toward incarnation based on the karma formations. According to Buddhist teaching, the particular karma formations *predispose* vinnana (individuating consciousness) toward rebirth in one of the six realms: hell, hungry ghost, animal, human, titan, or deva. As a reminder, Theravada Buddhism combines the titan and deva realms, so it only recognizes five realms of existence.

Let us imagine this together: Avijja is a state of unknowing. The Dalai Lama says that it is a state of unenlightened existence. But avijja is not static: it actively and inexorably moves in the direction of not knowing, not seeing, not recognizing reality. That is its job one. This is a huge qualification. It is one thing to compare avijja to the unconscious, imagining that our job is to help avijja become conscious as in psychoanalysis. It is quite more complicated, interesting and fascinating to think of avijja as an essence at the foundation of consciousness utterly and actively opposed to seeing reality. In other words, consciousness is contaminated from the get go. That is why it is hard to comprehend how delusion can understand delusion. According to the Dalai Lama, the truth underlying what the Buddha taught is sunyata, emptiness. There is no personal entity that exists in phenomena. Avijja is the ancient opponent of this truth.

Avijja aligns itself with karmic formations that have been created by

unenlightened existence from time immemorial. And these two essences combine with an individuating consciousness that feels itself to be a separate entity. Notice that I did not say “thinks” itself to be separate. Indeed, how could one even say “feels” at this primitive stage? Thinking or feeling require a brain – or at least a rudimentary nervous system. Otherwise there is no sentient being. So let’s try again: These two essences combine with an individuating consciousness that moves toward physical manifestation. As the Scarecrow sang in the *Wizard of Oz*, “If I only had a brain.” This is soon to happen as the three nidanas finally find a physical/mental home in the fourth nidana.