

BEAUTY IS CONCEIT

By Bhikkhu Piyananda

Once during the Buddha's time there was a most beautiful lady whose name was Rupa-Nanda (Rupa means beauty). One day, Rupa-Nanda decided to become a nun. She did not have any strong faith in the Buddha; still, she wanted to be a nun so she could follow after her relations: her mother had become a nun; her husband and her son had become monks. "So I might as well be a nun" thought Rupa-Nanda to herself.

Then one day Rupa-Nanda overheard some people talking about a sermon that the Buddha had preached. She heard that the Buddha said, "Beauty of form is impermanent. It leads to suffering. It is unreal."

"Well, in that case," thought Rupa-Nanda "The Buddha will only find fault with me because I am so very beautiful. My form (body) is very attractive to see. I will avoid meeting the Buddha."

But Rupa-Nanda could not help always hearing how wonderful the Buddha was. After listening to the Dhamma (Teaching), the lay people and nuns returned to the city. As they entered the city, they praised the virtues of the Buddha. Rupa-Nanda listened to them recite endless praise of the Buddha. Soon she became very curious to see this great Master. One day, she decided to go and hear Him preach the Law.

"I will not let him see me," she thought as she walked towards the temple.

Inside the temple, the Buddha was thinking, "Today, Rupa-Nanda will come to see me. What kind of lesson will do her the most good?" Buddha knew that Rupa-Nanda was deeply attached to the beauty of her own body. He knew he could help her by taking away her great pride in her own beauty. With his super-normal power, the Buddha created the image of a beautiful, young woman. She was dressed in crimson and adorned with the finest ornaments. She stood before the Buddha slowly swinging her fan back and forth.

Rupa-Nanda entered the temple and took her seat among the other nuns. When she glanced up to catch a glimpse of the great Teacher, she saw this most beautiful woman (phantom) fanning the Buddha. Rupa-Nanda's eyes rolled in amazement. "O, how beautiful!" She exclaimed as she gazed at the woman, "Such beautiful hair. And her forehead is so beautiful." Rupa-Nanda grew fascinated with the beauty of this woman. She wanted so much to have the same kind of beauty in herself. Then the Buddha began to teach her a very good lesson:

First he changed the beautiful young woman into a woman who had given birth to a child. Next he changed her into a decrepit old woman. Rupa-Nanda watched all the stages of these changes. She stared at the old woman, broken teeth, grey hair, bent body, forced to lean on a cane, trembling in every limb. Rupa-Nanda was filled with utter disgust.

Then the Buddha caused disease to overcome the woman. She cast away her cane and her palm-leaf fan. She screamed loudly. She fell on the ground and rolled over and over in the dirt. Rupa-Nanda stared at her and was filled with complete disgust. Then the Buddha showed the death of the woman: her body began to bloat. From the nine openings of the body, puss oozed in the shape of lamp-wicks. Crows and dogs began to devour the corpse.

“This is most horrible,” thought Rupa-Nanda, “before my very eyes, this woman has become old, diseased, and died. And my body is just like hers. My body will come to old age, disease, and death.” By thinking in this way, Rupa-Nanda came to understand the changing nature of her body. She understood the suffering that is her body. She understood how unreal her body was.

Suddenly her life seemed like a house that was set on fire. She wanted to get out and escape from the flames. She began to think and to meditate.

“Consider this thing we call a body,” said the Buddha to Rupa-Nanda “It is diseased, impure and putrid. Look at it in all its emptiness. Don’t go back to the world. Cast away your desire for existence and you will walk in calm and peace.”

Rupa-Nanda listened most carefully to the words of the Buddha. “Rupa-Nanda,” continued the Buddha, “this body is like a city of bones. Old age and death and pride and deceit live in this city.”

At the end of this lesson, Rupa-Nanda attained sainthood. The others present in the temple also learned much from this lesson.

