

15 March 2021

The Fourth Vow - No Social or Beauty Discrimination

Oh Blessed One, may I not come to the complete awakening if, when I have done so, there should, in my Pure Land, be any discrimination of regard or privilege between humans and devas or between different individuals on such grounds as colour, relative beauty or other criteria, save the harmless kind of discrimination that is necessary for naming and keeping count of things.

As long as we are *bombu* we will discriminate. It is in our nature to react positively to things that are similar to us, and negatively to things that are different to us. We fear the unknown. We feel uncomfortable if we are surrounded by unfamiliar things. We learn to distinguish friend from foe from a very early age. We are designed to discriminate as an instinct for survival.

I know from my own experience of having children, that babies explore the world through their senses; hearing, touching, seeing, smelling, and tasting. Spend time in any playgroup and you will hear mothers saying, “No. Not in your mouth. Dirty.” I’ve done it myself. Out of fear that they will pick up something horrible, we teach babies not to do the thing that is most natural to them. Babies don’t discriminate, they put everything and anything in their mouths. As they grow from babies to toddlers then we start to see changes in how they behave. Some will have learned that if they put something that they shouldn’t in their mouths, then they will be told off. Some may reject food their mothers gave them as babies and look at new food stuffs with fear and suspicion. Others will learn that they like to put sweets into their mouths.

At a very basic level, we discriminate between things that are like us and things that aren’t like us. In a way, we are in a trance but we think that we aren’t because we can discriminate. The psychotherapist Milton Erickson used hypnosis and would put people in a particular kind of ‘sleep’ trance, but he also taught that we wouldn’t even know if we were in an ordinary trance. The ordinary trance is different from being put in a trance, and this is how most of us live our lives.

The ordinary trance can be explained by the teachings of the skandha cycle. This cycle shows how our sense of self comes into being. There are 5 skandhas: rupa, vedana, samjna, samskara, and vijnana and they are all connected together, with one element of the skandhas leading to the next and so on, similar to the cycle of dependent origination.

Rupas are objects. They can be animate or inanimate. They can be seen in our internal landscape or externally. They can be people, animals, and things. If we identify as anything, then we will find rupas to support it. Rupas will lead to a visceral reaction (vedana), in us which will lead to a kind of narrative or story that we tell ourselves (samjna), which will lead to a habitual behaviour (samskara), which will lead to a creation of self that is separate from the world around us (vijnana), which will lead us to perceive an object in a certain light (rupa), which will lead to vedana, and the cycle repeats.

Without even realising it our attention is grabbed by rupas that support our prejudices and reasons to behave a certain way. It is because of the skandha process that we delude ourselves into thinking that we have a permanent identity or fixed self. The ordinary trance is none other than the skandha process of becoming.

The confusing thing about the skandhas is that there are many different interpretations of them within the Buddhist texts. What is clear, however, is that the Buddha is saying to get rid of them. There are many teachings in the recorded words of the Buddha found in the Nikaya and the Agamas which teach that the correct way to approach the skandhas is to regard them as, “...not me, this I am not, this is not my self.” It makes more sense to understand the skandhas as a psychological process.

In ancient times the term *Rupa* was connected to the idea of a sacred form. In Buddhism it is often used to refer to the statue on a shrine, hence the term Buddha rupa. It has a power over us and can help us to remember to regard feelings and thoughts as ‘This is not me, this is not myself, this I am not.’

If there is no need to reinforce a self then what we will see instead of a rupa is the dharma. Dharmas are real objects that exist in their own right and have nothing to do with us. By getting rid of our skandhas we are enabled to co-exist with those unlike ourselves with no end of skandhas in a shared space. We can listen to their experience of the world.

Dharmakara vows to create a place where no one is treated unfairly because of their sex, colour, race, age or any other identifier. Discrimination of a harmless kind still occurs though. The people who go there do not all of a sudden become identical, uniform and one and the same. Amida is saying that we can be different and unique. Dharmas come in all sorts of shapes, sizes, colours and desires.