

## CHAPTER 12 – THE SKULLS

There was once a man named Vangisa who had a very unusual talent. He could tell in which world a dead person was reborn. He could tell this by tapping on the skull of the dead body.

He would tap on one skull and say, “This is the skull of a man who has been reborn in a hell-world.”

He would tap on another skull and say, “This man has been reborn as an animal.”

He would tap on a different skull and say, “This man has been reborn as a ghost.”

And he would tap on another skull and say, “This is the skull of a man who has been reborn in the human world.”

He would tap on yet another skull and say “This person has been reborn in a heaven-world.”

Many people asked him to come and tap on the skull of a family member, a friend, or an enemy who died, to tell the future existence of the person. People were very curious to know if the good or bad behavior of the person in their lifetime resulted in a lucky or unlucky rebirth—whether it led to a rewarding next life in heaven or a punishing next life in a hell-world or as a ghost or animal. And they wanted assurance that their loved ones had a good rebirth. So, many people were willing to pay Vangisa money for his special talent.

There was a group of brahmin men who lived in his town who thought to themselves, “We can use this man to take advantage of people all over the world!” They made a plan to take him all around India and persuade people everywhere to give them money for Vangisa to tell what happened to their relatives after death. The brahmins thought this would make them rich and famous!

They gave him red robes to wear, to look like an important, respected holy man. They brought him to towns and villages all over the country, traveling as a group, saying to everyone they met,

“This holy man Vangisa can tell by tapping on the skulls of dead men in which world they have been reborn. Ask him to tell you in which world your own family members have been reborn.”

People would give him ten pieces of money, or twenty, or a hundred, according to the amount of wealth they had, showed him a dead body and asked him about the rebirth of the person.

One day, Vangisa and his group reached the city of Savatti and camped near the Buddha’s famous monastery called Jetavana. After breakfast, they were surprised to see crowds of people going toward the monastery carrying perfumes, flower garlands, and fruits in their hands.

Men from Vangisa's group asked some of these people, "Where are you going?"

The townspeople replied, "To the monastery to hear the Dharma."

The brahmin men asked, "What will you gain by going there?"

Without waiting to hear an answer, they said, "There is nobody like our holy man, Vangisa. He can tell by tapping on the skulls of dead men in which world they have been reborn. Just ask him in which world your own relatives have been reborn."

The people of Savatti replied, "What does Vangisa know? There is no one like our teacher."

The friends retorted, "There is no one like Vangisa!"

Soon, the men of Vangisa's group and the townspeople were arguing with each other.

Finally, the townspeople—the devotees of the Buddha—said, "Come now, let's go find out which of the two knows more, your Vangisa or our teacher."

They led Vangisa and his group to the monastery.

The Buddha knew that they were on their way, and before they arrived, he requested an assistant to bring him certain human skulls. The assistant brought the five skulls and the Buddha arranged them in a row near his seat. The Buddha knew that the person to whom one of the skulls had belonged had been reborn in a hell world, the second skull's owner was reborn in the animal world, the third one's owner was reborn as a human, and the fourth one's owner had been reborn in a heaven world. The owner of the fifth skull had become an arahant.

When Vangisa and his friends arrived, the Buddha asked Vangisa, "Are you the man of whom it is said that by tapping on the skulls of dead men you can tell in which world they have been reborn?"

"Yes," said Vangisa.

The Buddha pointed to the first skull and asked, "Then whose is this skull?"

Vangisa tapped on the skull and said, "This is the skull of a man who has been reborn in hell."

The Buddha exclaimed, "Good, good!" and applauded him.

Then the Buddha asked about the next three skulls, and Vangisa answered without making a mistake. The Buddha applauded him for each answer he gave. Finally, the Buddha pointed to the fifth skull.



“Whose skull is this?” the Buddha asked.

Vangisa tapped on the fifth skull as he had done on the others. He was silent.

Then he said, “I don’t know into which world this man has been reborn.”

The Buddha said, “Vangisa, you don’t know?”

“No,” replied Vangisa, “I don’t know.”

The Buddha said, “I know.”

Then Vangisa asked him, “Teach me this charm.”

The Buddha replied, “I cannot teach it to one who has not been ordained as a monk.”

Vangisa thought to himself, “If I only knew this charm, I would be the most famous man in all of India.” He didn’t want to be embarrassed by not knowing where a dead person was born, or by guessing wrong—saying that an evil person went to a heaven-world or that a good person went to a hell world. Then people would lose respect for him. He thought he could just learn some kind of magic charm or technique from the Buddha for finding out where the person who owned the fifth skull was reborn.

Vangisa turned to his group and told them that he wanted to learn the technique for finding out where the person who owned the fifth skull was reborn. He said he would learn it as soon as possible from the Buddha.

He told them, “Remain here for a few days. I intend to be ordained as a monk.”

The group stayed at their camp near the monastery, and Vangisa became ordained by the Buddha as a monk and joined the other monks. He was then called Venerable Vangisa.

The monks instructed Venerable Vangisa to meditate on the 32 parts of the body, and to repeat the first words of the instructions. He followed their instructions very carefully and practiced meditation very diligently.

Over the next few days, whenever Venerable Vangisa saw the brahmins from his group, they asked him, “Have you learned the technique?”

Each time, he answered, “Just wait a little! I am learning it.”

After a few days, Venerable Vangisa became enlightened as an arahant.

The group of brahmins asked him again, “Have you learned the technique yet?”

This time, he replied, “Friends, I am now unable to learn it.”

Some monks heard this conversation and went to the Buddha, saying, “Lord, this monk says what is not true; he is guilty of dishonesty.”

The Buddha replied, “Monks, do not say so. Monks, my son now knows all about the passing away and rebirth of all beings.”

He continued by saying these stanzas:

“He who knows the death and birth of beings in every way, who is detached, disciplined and enlightened, that one I call a true brahmin.”

“Those whose future is unknown to humans, spirits or gods, pollutions destroyed, an arahant, that one I call a true brahmin.”

#### *Questions:*

1. What did the group of brahmin men want to do with Vangisa? (use him to persuade people all over India to give them money)
2. What did they hope would happen to them by taking Vangisa all around the country? (they would become rich and famous)
3. How did Vangisa and his groups end up visiting the Buddha? (the people of Savatti took them to the Buddha after they got into an argument with Vangisa’s group over whose teacher knew more, the Buddha or Vangisa)
4. What did Vangisa say when he tapped on the fifth skull? (he said that he didn’t know where the man was reborn)
5. Why did Vangisa become a monk? (so he could learn the technique to find out where the owner of the fifth skull was reborn; the Buddha said he had to become a monk to learn it)
6. Did Vangisa finally learn what happened to the owner of the fifth skull? (yes)

*What the Buddha said:*

“Cutim yō vēdi sattānaṃ, upapattim ca sabbasō, asattaṃ sugataṃ Buddhaṃ, tamahaṃ brūmi brāhmaṇaṃ.”

“Yassa gatiṃ na jānanti, deva gandhabbamānusa, khīṇāsavaṃ arahantaṃ, tamahaṃ brūmi brāhmaṇaṃ.”

“He who knows the death and birth of beings in every way, who is detached, disciplined and enlightened, that one I call a true brahmin.”

“Those whose future is unknown to humans, spirits or gods, pollutions destroyed, an arahant, that one I call a true brahmin.”

Dhammapada 419, 420 (26:37, 26:38)

*Dharma discussion – Power:*

The group of men wanted to use Vangisa as a way to make money and become famous. They wanted to use his power so they could become powerful, too—with money and fame. When they went to Savatti,, they wanted to persuade the people that Vangisa was more interesting and knowledgeable than the Buddha.

They weren't interested in the Dharma or learning anything from the Buddha; they just wanted to make money.

When he first met the Buddha, was Vangisa interested in the Dharma?

No, he was only interested in showing his power, and when it wasn't enough to determine the rebirth of the fifth skull, he wanted to enhance his power by learning a technique to make sure he could continue predicting the rebirth of every dead person.

So, he was willing to become a monk to increase his power, and he probably planned to leave the Buddha and go back to his group and travel with them again once he learned the technique.

Vangisa and his group were fascinated with his mystical or psychic power.

They thought that those kinds of powers were the most impressive and important.

They were so greedy for money, fame and power that they weren't interested in the Dharma, even when the Buddha was sitting directly in front of them!

But, what happened to Vangisa when he actually tried practicing the Dharma?

He became enlightened as an arahant.

Then, what happened to his plan to learn the technique for finding out the rebirth of owner of the fifth skull?

He probably dropped that plan because he found out what an arahant was—someone who is not reborn anymore, who has no more rebirths as a human, in a god-world, as an animal, or any lower world.

He told his friends he was unable to learn the technique that he had planned to learn.

Why would he say that?

Because no one can learn where an arahant is reborn when there is no rebirth for an arahant.

In today's world, many people are like the men in Vangisa's group.

They are so focused on making money and becoming more popular that they ignore the Dharma; they aren't interested in spirituality.

And many people who are interested in spirituality are fascinated by supernatural or psychic powers.

Like Vangisa at first, they just want to learn those powers—how to train their mind so they can get mystical or psychic powers and impress people, be admired and popular.

But then they are just feeding their ego, becoming more egoistic.

Most people think that money, popularity and power will make them happy.

But, the ego is never fully satisfied—it's always looking for more attention, more power; it never has enough.

How can we really feel satisfied—how can we feel more content?

We can feel more content when we learn and practice the Dharma.

That is when we start to unlock the true power of our mind.

What is the true power of our mind?

It's what the Buddha was seeking and what he found when he became enlightened—the way to the end of suffering, and unending peace and ultimate wisdom.

That seems like a long, long way off into the future for us.

But we can enjoy at least some of the peace and wisdom even now.

Meditation and mindfulness give our mind a break, let it relax from the stress of daily life.

And they give us a more positive perspective—a better way of looking at things.

Lovingkindness and compassion turn our minds away from stressful thoughts to positive ones.

And making merit by doing good deeds creates a better future for us.

When we can reduce our stress and dissatisfaction by these practices, then some of the biggest problems that people are facing, all around the world—too much stress and worry—we are conquering right now, when we are young.