

Rohini's Skin

There was a time that the Venerable Anuruddha, one of the Buddha's student monks, went with a group of five hundred monks to his home town of Kapilavastu (or, in Pali, Kapilavatthu). When Venerable Anuruddha's family heard that he had arrived, everyone in his family except his sister Rohini went to visit him at the monastery where he was staying.

Venerable Anuruddha asked his family, "Where is Rohini?"

One of the family members replied, "She's at home, reverend sir."

The monk asked, "Why didn't she come here?"

The family member answered, "Reverend sir, she is suffering from an eruption on her skin, so she was ashamed to come."

The monk said, "Call her to come immediately."

When the family requested her to come, Rohini arranged a cloth around her face to hide much of it and went to see the monk, her brother.

When he saw her, he asked, "Rohini, why didn't you come here before?"

She replied, "Reverend sir, I am suffering from an eruption of the skin, and because of this I was ashamed to come."

He responded, "But shouldn't you perform works of merit?"

She asked, "What can I do, reverend sir?"

He suggested, "Cause an assembly-hall to be built."

Wondering how she, as a young lady, could do this, she asked, "What funds do I have to use for this purpose?"

He suggested, "Don't you have a set of jewels?"

"Yes, reverend sir, I have," she answered.

"How much did it cost?" he asked.

She responded, "It must have cost ten thousand pieces of money."

"Well then, spend this in building an assembly-hall," he suggested.

“Who will build it for me, reverend sir?” she asked.

Venerable Anuruddha looked at their family members standing there and said to them, “This shall be your duty.”

Rohini, wondering if her brother might help direct the other family members in the work, asked him, “But, reverend sir, what will you do?”

He responded, addressing the rest of the family, “I shall stay right here; therefore, bring her the building materials.”

They agreed, “Very well, reverend sir,” and soon brought some building materials.

Venerable Anuruddha organized the arrangements for building the assembly-hall.

He said to Rohini, “Have them build an assembly-hall two stories tall, and as soon as the floor planks are put in place on the second floor, you stand below and sweep constantly, prepare seats, and keep the water containers filled with water.”

“Very well, reverend sir,” agreed Rohini.

She sold her set of jewels so that all the materials needed for building a two-story assembly-hall could be purchased. As soon as the floor planks were installed on the top story, she stood in the first floor of the building and swept and performed other duties. Monks came and sat there, and she provided water for them. As she swept the new assembly-hall, she noticed that her skin eruption started healing.

When the assembly-hall was completed, she invited the Buddha and his monks, and prepared seats and a meal for all of them. When they came and took their seats, she offered them all kinds of food.

When the Buddha finished his meal, he asked the gathering of people standing there, “Who made this offering?”

They answered, “Rohini, reverend sir.”

“But where is she?” he asked.

“In the house, reverend sir,” they responded.

“Call her to come here,” he said.

When she was called to come to the Buddha, she was unwilling to go. But in spite of her unwillingness, the Buddha caused her to leave the house and come to him.

She bowed to him and sat down, and the Buddha asked her, “Rohini, why didn’t you come before?”

She replied, “Reverend sir, I was suffering from an eruption of the skin and was ashamed to come.”

He said, “But do you know the reason why this eruption of the skin broke out on your body?”

“No, reverend sir, I don’t,” she answered.

He said, “It was because of your anger that this eruption of the skin broke out on your body.”

Rohini asked, “Why, reverend sir? What did I do?”

“Well then, listen,” he instructed her, and told the following story.

“In times long past, the chief queen of the King of Benares disliked one of the king’s dancing girls. She thought, ‘I will make her suffer.’ So, she got some ingredients that were severely irritating to the skin and made them into powder. Then she went to the girl’s bedroom and secretly sprinkled some of the powder in her bed, on her cloak, and on her goat’s-hair blanket. Then she called the girl to come to the bedroom, and then, as if in fun, she sprinkled some powder on the girl’s body. Immediately, the girl’s body became covered with pimples and boils that looked extremely red and irritated. The girl started scratching herself. When she lay down on her bed, the powder agitated her skin even more and she suffered even harsher pain. The chief queen at that time was Rohini.”

After the Buddha told that story of Rohini’s past life, he said, “Rohini, that was the evil deed which you committed at that time. Anger or jealousy, however slight, is always unbecoming.” Then he gave the following teaching:

One should give up anger and abandon pride,
And all the fetters one should overcome;
Suffering does not fall on one desiring nothing,
Clinging not to mind or body.

So, Rohini in the past life had been very vain, clinging to the appearance of her body, proud of her beauty, and thus jealous of the beauty of the dancer, which led to anger and ill-will. After the Buddha gave the teaching, many people who were listening attained a level of enlightenment—the first level, called stream-enterer or sotapanna (having a maximum of seven future lives in human or heaven worlds until reaching the level of an arahant), the second level, called once-returner or sakadagami (having only one more life as a human before reaching the

level of an arahant), or the third level, called non-returner or anagami (having rebirth only in heavenly realms before reaching the level of an arahant). Rohini attained the first level, and at that moment her body took on a golden hue.

Dharma Discussion - Attractiveness:

The Buddha teaches that our actions in past lives, our karmas, affect how we look in this life.

Karma is similar to Newton's Third Law: each action has an equal and opposite reaction.

One might ask, does a person appear unattractive due to their own fault—their past negative karma? If so, isn't it awfully harsh to blame them for their unattractiveness?

And do very attractive people have better karma, or less negative karma, than others?

We all have negative karmas from mistakes we made in countless past lives, and when they ripen, that is, when we experience their results, they can manifest in various ways.

Unattractiveness is just one of them; other ways they can manifest include poverty, loss, failure, disease, mental illness, unhappiness, or injury. Even the Buddha suffered from ripening of negative karma from a past life when his foot was severely injured by a boulder that was pushed off a cliff by his cousin Devadatta.

And, many very beautiful people suffer extreme tragedies or unhappiness in their lives.

So we don't blame or judge a person for their appearance; instead, we recognize that we all are suffering or will suffer results of our actions from past lives.

Rohini suffered the skin affliction as the result of the negative karma of her jealousy and harming the dancer in a past life. Her suffering from shame about her appearance—the skin problem—was so extreme that she wanted to give up the very rare and precious opportunity to see her brother and the Buddha.

Similarly in today's world, people are so anxious about their physical appearance that they neglect more valuable aspects of their lives and make misguided decisions.

All over the media are images of beautiful people, which set impossibly high standards of attractiveness that seem to equate with success and happiness.

And many people judge others only superficially, by their outer appearance, comparing it to conventional standards or ideals of attractiveness

We may have friends or acquaintances who are preoccupied with their looks.

So, we can become overly anxious about our appearance—focusing on what we perceive as flaws in our appearance—constantly comparing our appearance with others and looking in the mirror or at selfies, or even avoiding social situations or photos. Although this isn't unusual among young people, in some cases it can lead to difficulty coping in everyday life.

If people stare or frown at us, ignore or reject us, or bully, ridicule or talk badly about our appearance, we feel very self-conscious and this can give rise to feelings of unworthiness or depression. Poor self-image and lack of confidence might give us many other difficulties, such as finding and maintaining friendships.

Even if we don't have those difficulties, just having worries and negative thoughts about our appearance is stressful, like a black cloud over us, distracting us, sucking so much energy and time away from us.

How can we get some relief from this? Is there a way to distance ourselves from those influences that overemphasize physical attractiveness?

We can focus more on valuing inner beauty and seek out friends who value inner beauty. We can see inner beauty by looking beyond the superficial outer appearance to see subtle indications of a person's character. Notice carefully the facial expressions, eyes, voice, and mannerisms of a person in addition to what they say, and try to detect whether the person has characteristics of kindness, respect, tolerance, gratitude, and other virtues, or whether the person has characteristics of arrogance, cruelty, insincerity, pettiness or other non-virtues.

We also can reflect on the risks and downsides of being preoccupied with outer beauty. Outer beauty is so transient and largely out of our control; due to age, illness, genetics, habits, or accident, it comes and goes, and diminishes over time. On the other hand, our inner beauty always can be increased throughout our lifetime—it comes and grows—making us appear more attractive regardless of physical features.

Though people spend so much time and money to look better, they're almost never totally satisfied.

Some people even develop an eating disorder, or addiction to cosmetic procedures or extreme exercise.

Preoccupation with physical appearance leads to a lot of competitiveness and rivalry.

And that can lead to a lot of suffering for oneself. Remember Rohini's past life, seeing the beautiful dancer as a rival, she suffered feelings of jealousy, anger and ill-will, and then she harmed her and suffered the karmic results.

When a person's face reflects their jealousy, anger or ill-will, they look more unattractive; as the Buddha said, "Anger or jealousy, however slight, is always unbecoming."

In any event, preoccupation with outward appearance makes one constantly seek validation, attention and admiration. When admired, one feels pride and vanity, and when not admired, then disappointment and anger follow. The ego is either built up or beaten down; either way, the ego and desires become stronger and more binding, which leads to more suffering.

As the Buddha said:

One should give up anger and abandon pride,
And all the fetters one should overcome;
Suffering does not fall on one desiring nothing,
Clinging not to mind or body.

What are "fetters"? That which restrains, confines, or binds, like a shackle or chain around the feet, preventing freedom. What does it mean in Buddhism? That which binds us to suffering in samsara, that which keeps us in the cycle of rebirth, being born again and again into a world where we experience suffering, preventing us from attaining the freedom of nirvana. Fetters include anger, conceit, ill will, jealousy, greed, killing, stealing, lying, and slandering.

So, the Buddha taught that not clinging to the body, not being too attached to the body, relieves us from suffering.

We still can care about the way we look. We feel more confident and we have more self-esteem when we look their best.

We should care about our body and our appearance in a healthy, balanced way that avoids undue stress and suffering. How do we do that?

First, we can recognize that our body is not who we are; it's only a temporary vehicle for this lifetime. But it's such an important vehicle! A human body is the only body that can take us to enlightenment, the end of all suffering. Birth in the other realms, such as the animal realm and the heavens, doesn't give us the opportunities to develop merit and wisdom that enable enlightenment.

And, we can cultivate a positive attitude toward our body.

We can appreciate how healthy and strong our body is.

Even if it's not as healthy and strong as we would like, it's healthy and strong enough to enable us to learn and practice the Dharma, to make merit, and to lead us toward enlightenment.

So, it shouldn't be neglected. Instead, considering how hard it works, constantly, carrying us through all the situations we face every day, we should have compassion for it and take good care of it with nutritious food and exercise. Engaging in sports or other physical activities also helps us improve our self-esteem, feel better and appreciate our body for more than just the way it looks.

The Buddha advised his monks to meditate on the 32 parts of body, such as bones, muscles and blood, especially for monks who were too identified with their body, too attached to the body.

For those of us who have negative feelings about our body, we can think about how amazing and intricate all the body's systems are, as students learn in medical school, and how these systems are interdependent.

We can contemplate how our body is made of cells, molecules, atoms; how they are interdependent with the world around us; and where the atoms were before they were in our body, thousands of years ago, millions of years ago.

We also can reduce our stress by reducing the intensity of the desire to be physically attractive.

We can contemplate, what if I was extremely attractive and always admired? Would there would be any downsides, disadvantages? Some disadvantages are that we might have more distractions from our goals in life, and we might find it difficult to have a stable marriage or relationship, as is the experience of many Hollywood stars, unlike the many average or below-average looking people who find their marriage or relationship fully satisfying.

Similarly, many people would choose a practical car rather than a Lamborghini because of the downsides of such a special car--expensive maintenance and fuel, and worry about others being jealous, trying to compete with you in races, and damaging your car.

We can also contemplate the positive aspects of not being the most attractive.

Sometimes it's more pleasant not to attract too much attention, not to be constantly observed.

We don't have to compete with others or deal with the envy of others.
It's a good opportunity to practice detachment from the body and humility.
And we can better understand and uplift others who feel insecure about their appearance.

We can also contemplate, what if we chose or created this imperfect body as the most suitable vehicle for this life, to learn the best lessons, create the most merit, attain the most wisdom, and progress spiritually to our highest potential? In that way, our body is perfect for us!

What can we do to reduce our discomfort with the way we look?

Whenever we feel uncomfortable with our appearance, we can counteract that feeling by imagining the Buddha in front of us, looking at us happily with kind, loving eyes. He is so pleased with our inner beauty, and he doesn't value outer beauty. This exercise generates merit!

When we feel the pain of others judging us by our physical appearance, we can counteract it by trying to develop compassion toward them, understanding that they have a flaw of judging people superficially without seeing inner beauty. This exercise generates merit, too!

If we feel the sting of insecurity, jealousy or rivalry when seeing a very attractive person, we can think: "This person earned this attractiveness by their past good deeds."

Instead of identifying with our physical body and comparing it with the other person, we can try to admire their beauty like we would admire a beautiful flower or a beautiful car. This helps us overcome our jealousy. And it generates merit!

And if the person is very egotistical, selfish, hateful or harmful, that can remind us that we all are suffering with negative karmas from our past, regardless of how we look, and they are creating more negative karmas with their non-virtue, so we can try to be compassionate.

If you are with a romantic partner and see a potential rival, consider that a good opportunity to test your relationship rather than as a threat. It's better to observe your partner's behavior and see whether or not they step outside reasonable bounds of loyalty to you, than to try to isolate or turn your partner away from potential rivals, because ultimately that probably won't be successful.