

VAMMIKA SUTTA, the "discourse on the anthill", is the twenty-third discourse in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (*M. I*, 142-145). This discourse has four parallels preserved in Chinese translation (*T. I*, 918b-919a; *T. II*, 282a-c; *T. II*, 379c-380a; *T. II*, 733b-c).¹

The *Vammika Sutta* describes how a *deva* presented the monk Kumāra Kassapa with a riddle-like description of an anthill and various items that are to be unearthed from it, such as a bar, a toad, a fork etc. Once all these items are taken out of the anthill and discarded, a *nāga* will appear, which is to be worshipped. Kumāra Kassapa approached the Buddha with this riddle and received the explanation that these various items stand for different mental defilements that are to be eradicated, while the *nāga* represents the attainment of liberation.

The commentary reports that, after receiving this explanation and practising diligently in accordance with it, Kumāra Kassapa became an arahant (*MA. II*, 134; cf. also *J. I*, 148 and *T. II*, 733c26). This successful outcome of the explanation given by the Buddha is what makes the *Vammika Sutta* worthy of note, as it depicts a rather unique mode of instruction that enabled a monk to reach final liberation.

Kumāra Kassapa apparently had a personality that was prone to the use of imagery, as can be seen from the *Pāyāsi Sutta* (*D. II*, 319). This discourse reports that he delivered a whole series of imaginative similes in a discussion with a sceptic Brahmin, so much so that the Brahmin, even though already convinced, continued to oppose Kumāra Kassapa just in order to hear more similes and explanations (*D. II*, 352).

The *Vammika Sutta* indicates that the Buddha would have been aware of this propensity of Kumāra Kassapa and was able to skilfully employ the series of images related to the anthill in order to bring home to his disciple that he should meditatively unearth within himself all those states and conditions that obstruct the attainment of liberation.

Anālayo

Reference

¹ *T.* stands for the Taishō edition.

VĀSEṬṬHA SUTTA, the "discourse to Vāseṭṭha", is found twice in the Pāli canon, once as the ninety-eighth discourse in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, and again as the ninth discourse in the third chapter of the *Sutta Nipāta*. According to the introductory narration, the Brahmins Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja had approached the Buddha in order to get his opinion on whether one becomes a true Brahmin by dint of birth or rather through virtue. In reply, according to the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* the Buddha delivered a series of verses in which he set forth what, according to his understanding, is required in order to become a true Brahmin. The significance of the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* derives from these verses, which offer a vivid testimony to the early Buddhist conception of sainthood, and at the same time clarify its stance on matters of race and caste. The present article will briefly survey these verses and then examine the main points they make.

The first theme broached in these verses is that essential differences of the type that are seen between different animals cannot be found between human beings. To illustrate this point, a survey of the plant and animal world is undertaken - such as grass, trees, insects, quadrupeds, snakes, fish, and birds - concluding that the variety that can be observed here shows that there are indeed many kinds of birth, *aññamaññā hi jātiyo* (*Sn.* 601-606). In contrast to such variety, a survey of differences among human beings shows that, in as much as essential bodily components are concerned, no essential differences can be found (*Sn.* 607-611).¹

Thus "according to the Buddha, *jāti* or caste is primarily a biological term and it signifies 'species'. The social divisions among men cannot be treated as '*jāti*' or castes in this sense. These divisions are merely occupational and not congenital, as a *Brahmin* and a member of one of the other castes can mate together ... for the purpose of procreation, while a male of one species and a female of another species cannot procreate offspring as in the case of men".² This leads to the inevitable conclusion that distinctions among humans are merely based on conventions, *vokārañca manussesu samaññāya pavuccati* (*Sn.* 611).

Such conventions are then examined in the next verses, which indicate that human beings are to be reckoned in accordance with their respective occupations (*Sn.* 612-619). This examination culminates by announcing the principle underlying

the Buddhist conception of a true Brahmin, according to which one does not become a Brahmin by birthright or lineage, *na cāhaṃ brāhmaṇaṃ brūmi yonijaṃ mattisambhavaṃ* (Sn. 620). Instead, to become a true Brahmin requires purification of the mind.

The theme of the true Brahmin is then treated in the next set of verses from a series of related perspectives (Sn. 620-647). After this exposition of the early Buddhist conception of sainthood under the heading of being a true Brahmin, the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* reaffirms that distinctions among humans are merely conventions. What in truth accounts for differences among humans are their deeds (i.e. their karma), not their birth, *na jaccā brāhmaṇo hoti, na jaccā hoti abrahmaṇo, kammanā brāhmaṇo hoti, kammanā hoti abrahmaṇo* (Sn. 650). The final two verses take up again the Buddhist conception of sainthood, proclaiming that through self-restraint and celibacy, and by transcending rebirth, one becomes a true Brahmin (Sn. 655-656).

The first part of the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* shows unequivocally that early Buddhism does not leave any room for race prejudices. As highlighted by Malalasekera and Jayatilleke, "it is argued on biological grounds that ... mankind is one species". "The apparent divisions between men are not due to basic biological factors, but are 'conventional classifications'".³ A complementary perspective on the same theme is offered in the *Aggañña Sutta*, which traces the designation of the Brahmin and Warrior castes to conventions that arose out of specific situations during the evolution of mankind (D. III, 93).⁴

This discourse is spoken to the same two Brahmins, Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja, that are also the audience of the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta*. While with the conclusion of the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* they became lay followers, by the time of the *Aggañña Sutta* they are in the process of becoming Buddhist monks (D. III, 80). Similar to the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta*, the *Aggañña Sutta* also sets out on the topic of the nature of a true Brahmin, only that by now Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja are no longer inquiring about this topic themselves. In the case of the *Aggañña Sutta*, the reason for taking up this topic is rather that Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja are confronted with the negative reactions of other Brahmins to their presumed loss of caste status through going forth in the Buddhist order. It is this criticism by other Brahmins that forms the rationale for the Buddha's exposition of the *Aggañ*

ña Sutta, which thus can be seen to complement, by way of allegory, the exposition given in the first part of the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* on the origin of distinctions among men in worldly conventions.

The theme of the basic unity of mankind, broached in the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta*, stands in clear contrast to any caste or racial prejudice, which assumes that social position and spiritual ability are inherited at birth. The clear stance that early Buddhism took against caste prejudice finds its perhaps most explicit expression in the admission policy of the Buddhist order, as the Buddhist monastic institution was open to members of any caste. A passage in the *Vinaya* illustrates this policy with a simile that indicates how, just like the great rivers of India lose their name on reaching the sea, so too all caste distinctions are left behind on entering the Buddhist order (*Vin.* II, 239).

The discourses offer several analyses of caste prejudice, undertaken from a set of related angles (See also CASTE). The *Esukāri Sutta* counters the belief that one's occupation is destined by one's birth in a particular caste, revealing that this is simply a presumption of the Brahmins (*M.* II, 178). The *Madhura Sutta* takes up the same theme, pointing out that in actuality those who have wealth are able to avail themselves of the services of others, independent of caste affiliation (*M.* II, 84). These discourses draw out in more detail the presentation in the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta*, according to which the respective occupation accounts for the designation to be given to a human being.

The claim to be a Brahmin by birthright, rejected in the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta*, comes in for a rather humorous treatment in the *Assalāyana Sutta*. In a pun on a *Ṛgvedic* myth,⁵ the *Assalāyana Sutta* inquires how it is that Brahmins claim to originate from the mouth of Brahma when Brahmin women are seen to become pregnant and give birth (*M.* II, 148). The same discourse also takes up the contrast between deeds and birth that is the basic theme of the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta*. As the *Assalyana Sutta* points out, an evildoer will go to hell and one who performs wholesome deeds will be reborn in heaven, independent of whatever caste they may come from (*M.* II, 149). The *Madhurā Sutta* rounds off this argument by noting that an evildoer will not only go to hell, but also receive punishment here and now by the king, independent of whether the culprit is a Brahmin or a member of any other caste (*M.* II, 88).

The culmination of the exposition in the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* lies in its depiction of the true Brahmin. A considerable number of the verses in the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta* that throw into relief the true Brahmin as the emancipated sage can also be found in the chapter on Brahmins in the *Dhammapada* (*Dhp.* 396-423). The underlying theme of these verses is the early Buddhist re-interpretation of the term Brahmin as standing for one who has reached liberation and purification of the mind, instead of designating someone who is born from Brahmin parents.⁶ Purification of the mind is, according to early Buddhism, also required for the path to communion with Brahmā. The path to such communion with Brahmā is the theme of yet another discourse given to Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja, the *Tevijja Sutta* of the *Dīgha Nikāya*. In this discourse, the Buddha disclosed the path to communion with Brahmā to Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja, explaining that it requires the development of the *brahmavihāras* of loving kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity (*D.* I, 250).

Yet, to become a true Brahmin in its Buddhist sense requires taking purification of the mind even further, as indicated in the *Vāseṭṭha Sutta*, since a true Brahmin is one who has eradicated all mental defilements and reached final liberation.

*Yassa gatiṃ na jānanti
devā gandhabbamaṇusā,
khiṇṇāsavaṃ arahantaṃ,
tam ahaṃ brūmi brāhmaṇaṃ.*

Whose track is not known,
To gods, spirits and men,
An arahant with influxes destroyed,
Such a one I call a Brahmin indeed. (*Sn.* 644)

*Yassa pure ca pacchā ca
majjhe ca n' atthi kiñcanaṃ,
akiñcanaṃ anādānaṃ,
tam ahaṃ brūmi brāhmaṇaṃ.*

To whom before and behind,
And in between there is nothing,
Having nothing, holding nothing,
Such a one I call a Brahmin indeed. (*Sn.* 645)

Anālayo

References

- 1 Cf. also the *Divyāvadāna* ed. by Vaidya, Darbhanga 1999: 323,14.
- 2 Barua: "Early Buddhism and the Brahmanical Doctrines", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Pakistan*, 12.1, 1967: 53.
- 3 *Buddhism and the Race Question*, UNESCO, Paris 1958: 35 and 37.
- 4 For a detailed study of this discourse cf. Collins: "The discourse on what is primary (Aggañña-Sutta)", *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 1993, 21: 301-393.
- 5 Norman: "Theravāda Buddhism and Brahmanical Hinduism", *Collected Papers*, vol. 4, 1993: 272, notes that here "the Buddha satirises the Puruṣasūkta of the Ṛgveda".
- 6 Norman op. cit. p. 275 explains that whereas "in brahmanical Hinduism a brahman (<br̥ṃh - 'to be strong') was a brahman by birth", "the Buddha ... by adopting a different etymology (<br̥ṃh - 'to destroy') ... was able to justify his view that a brahman was one who had destroyed evil".

VASSĀVĀSA. The term *vassāvāsa* (Bdst.Skt. *varṣāvāsa*) literally means 'residence during rains', but with reference to Buddhist monks and nuns and also to various other sects of religious recluses and ascetics who have renounced home life, it has the special meaning of 'rains-retreat' observed according to the rules and regulations of discipline of each such sect. Apparently there were two main reasons that could have led to this practice among home renouncing religious groups in ancient India. One was the physical impossibility of staying in the open air and travel about in the torrential rains experienced in North India during the rainy season. Muddy paths and lanes, sometimes covered with water, were extremely difficult to travel along. The many streams and rivers in spate often restricted the movements of the wandering ascetics and recluses during the rains. Secondly, the extreme concepts of *ahiṃsā* held by most of these ascetics and recluses, especially the Jains and Ājīvakas, led them to severely curtail their movements out of doors during the rains. As revealed by the views expressed by the protesting public against the Buddhist monks who continued their touring through the country even during the rainy season, these religious recluses believed that they

ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF BUDDHISM

Founder Editor-in Chief

G. P. MALALASEKERA, M. A., Ph. D., D. Litt., Professor Emeritus

Editor-in Chief

W. G. WEERARATNE, M. A., Ph. D.

VOLUME VIII

FASCICLE 3 : Vācā – Z hong a-han



2009