

# 2018-02-11 The Vasettha Sutta

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## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So, welcome to IMC. I would like this morning to introduce you to a sutta. A word that means discourse, discourse of the Buddha, there's many of them. And this one is called the Vasettha Sutta. And it's the probably the primary discourse of the Buddha that's used in conversations are used as a resource for issues of race and racism. People are looking for in Buddhism for some kind of reference, some kind of teaching that might be relevant for this will often choose this particular discourse. So I thought I'd introduce it to you. And so you would know a little bit about this. And this discourse, involves starts with two Brahmins. In ancient India, there were time of the Buddha. Usually people don't refer to caste where that ancient time India nowadays this kind of has caste systems that are stratified hierarchies of different caste of people. And sometimes in India it's gonna be quite painful some of the way that works and with most people when they think about ancient India call it class rather than caste. I don't know exactly what the difference is the at least in English and But anyway, there is a Brahmin class, and that they're the highest class, the state thought so. And, and they, some of them consider themselves to belong to that class, because they were born into it. And so it was hereditary. And so people are the people who were born into other classes and that's what's also considered hereditary, born into the class, that of your parents, and that's, where's your place in society more or less? And so there was these two Brahmins who were talking. And they were having a debate about what makes a person a Brahmin. And one of them said, well, when is only a Brahmin based on birth. And it's a pure birth. So if you go back seven generations, and all your ancestors have been Brahmin, then you're a pure Brahman, your Brahman as well. The other one said, No, no, no. You're a Brahmin by your actions. And by the virtue you live by, by the observances you live by. And it doesn't matter how you're born, it matters and what you've done what you do. So they have this disagreement. So they go to the Buddha and, and they asked him because, at least for the people, compose these texts, the Buddha was someone that you want to go to, and he was, you know, greatly wise and so he would have something to say. And, and what we have here then when they come is that one of the longest poems, in this canon, this collection of ancient scriptures, and it's the poem is repeated in two places in the early Buddhist canon, indicating it was probably fairly important. And the fact that it's a long poem probably suggests that it was performed. And if we say poem in English, because it's, you know, four line with looks like four line versus exactly what it was in ancient world. We don't quite know because it's possible it was more in that it was performed. Some scholars have called these ballots and, and so there were people who go around and perform these in a public setting. Maybe there are monastics and late lady would come and, and, and back then there was no TV and radio and you know, it was mostly entertainment or what happened orally. So, there was a very high developed oral culture. And so, this poet these poems represent that. So, I say this because this was probably a relatively important discourse in the ancient world. And so, the teaching in it probably, you know, represented something important for the early Buddhist community they wanted to emphasize. So, these two come to the Buddha and they say, a dispute has arisen between us concerning the question of birth and class.

My friend, it says, one is a Brahmin by birth, while I hold one is a Brahmin by action. This is our debate, since neither of us could convince the other or make sense make him see his point of view, we have come to ask you, sir, widely famed to be the Buddha. So what is it? What do you think about this? And what we'll see is the Buddha, in no uncertain terms is going to say who is a Brahmin is ramen by action, that birth is doesn't matter. It's how we behave and what we do. And, and so, you know, sometimes the Buddha is presented as someone maybe has no views or, you know, is above us beyond kind of kind of philosophy and us and, but he comes in no uncertain terms and says it's by action. And what he does here is something that the Buddha does frequently and then Buddhism tends to do it down through the ages, is rather than rejecting some of the terms some of the concepts of his time, he redefines them for a kind of his own purposes. So, you'll see as we go through this, he redefined What it means to be a Brahmin and, and so, he takes kind of the definition that existed in his time and kind of makes turns it into a Buddhist concept. So, he, he says there are many different kinds of living beings. First, you should know the grasses and the trees. Though they lack self awareness, their birth is their distinctive mark. Another translation of this is the various kinds of distinctive physical marks. The various kinds of beings life have distinctive marks at birth. So, the redwood trees are distinct from the dandelion flowers and they're you know, they're distinctive from birth somehow by physical characteristics. Next come the maths and the butterflies And so on through to ants and termites. their birth is their distinctive mark. They have distinctive physical characteristic that separates them out from other insects that from birth. So they're, you recognize, you know, moths and butterflies. And since you know, all these insects, they're distinct from each other nowadays we'd call different species.

Then know the kinds of quadruped heads of various sorts, both small and large. their birth is their distinctive mark. Next, know the birds that wait the birds that wing their way as they range in open skies, their birth, there's their distinctive mark. While in these births, the differences of birth make their distinctive mark with humans, no differences of birth. Make a distinctive mark. In other words, we don't he's not gonna differentiate human beings by their physical characteristics. There is no physical characteristics that allows us to make a clear distinction between one person and other in terms of here I think he's talking about class, but we can say in modern kind of language, in race. So, not in the hairs not in the head nor in the ears, not in the eyes, not in the mouth, not in the nose, not in the lips, and not in the brows. Not in the shoulders or the neck, not in the belly or the back, not in the buttocks or the breast, not in the genitals or ways of mating. Not in the hands, not in the feet, not in the fingers or the nails. Not in the knees in Not in the thighs, not in this color of their skin or invoice. Here, birth makes no distinctive mark as does for other beings, other living things, other species, in human bodies in themselves nothing distinctive can be found distinction among human beings is purely a verbal designation. So, you know, we of course, we can see distinctions between physical people and tall and short and all kinds of things. But none of those are used as a to distinguish people into different classes, different races different, that they're not from species different anything. We're all human species together. And then he makes it very interesting statement 2500 years ago that these distinctions among human beings, is purely verbal designations. So at least for the class system that he was talking about, In ancient India, he said these are just verbal distinctions. They're conventions that we live by. And the Buddha does this repeatedly in different ways, is to point out the role that verbal distinctions, conceptual categories, conceptual conventions that we kind of make up are overlaid on top of our reality. And that we have to be careful about these distinctions. Not to assume that the distinctions we make the designations that conventions the names we make, are necessarily represent something real in the world. And, and all too often we can, can make up a noun for something. And then we live in that noun as if this is how things are, this is the truth. And in our social world, there's a lot of social distinctions that are made of all kinds. I mean, there's, you know, probably an infinite number that we live in. And we often don't spend time to see that there are conventions that arose. Some of them

are roses, conventions were invented. Particular arrows of human life, if you know, certain concepts that you there's a history to them, and scholars will go back and see when those when that history began.

So like the concept of race has a particular history that does make most scholars point back the current version of this word race to Europe in the 17 1800s. And, and it was very much a project or part and parcel of colonialism. And, and it was partly used then to justify subjugating other people seeing that they were inferior and superior races, and that justified kind of the colonial rape and pillage that many European countries did around the world. And then when in the United States, this concept was also has a history and, and that the word word race and the concept of it that designation that that convention has a tremendously painful history. So much so that I think some of the most painful social divides in this country have to do around this concept of race between African Americans and whites and others, and Native Americans and whites and others. And just until just a few decades ago, this convention this the designation of race was used, explicitly explained exactly explicitly, but use very consciously to give preferential treatment to white people and to give give them rights to own property, to have access to some of the land grants to get up until the 1990s. The Department of Agriculture gave preferential loans to a white tobacco growers over the black African American Tobacco growers so designation that you know, it's continued until modern times who knows and You know, I, you know, and so what does it mean to live where there's a powerful designation powerful convention that's organized so much of how people live? And, and how do we relate to I think all of us in this country in some way or other consciously or unconsciously are relating to this idea, this convention, this designation, and how, what is our relationship to it? What is understanding of it? I've been reflecting a little bit lately about importantly, maybe prompted by what our dear president said recently about Norwegians.

And so I'm an immigrant from Norway. And so, but I came as a child at a time when United States had preferential immigration much more than they have now. So I came from a country that had preferential the doors were open much more openly than they were to other people back at that time. And so what does it mean to have received that and to come into a country where that, you know, coming from that kind of benefits that came with that, that other people don't have? And, and, you know, what, you know, what is what what is it that we don't see when, when we're handed or grow up with a designation with a distinction with a convention? And what is it we don't see about how we live in that world of that, you know, that. So I think it's quite To me, it's quite powerful. The Buddha highlighted that the caste system of his time was a designation, a convention. And I think in some way he has he had, from his meditation practice from his ability to drop deep down into meditation. I think it's one of the ways to watch how the mind works. And how the mind makes concepts and ideas that that you know that we can't see so much if we're just living our busy, active life and we don't actually track and watch what our mind is doing so much. And so one of the advantages I think of meditation has become is the highlight that heightened sensitivity to how this works. So then he goes on to describe somehow some of these conventions might work. He says, Whoever makes their living by agriculture is known as a farmer. Whoever makes their living by crafts is called a craftsman who makes their living by merchandise is called a merchant. And who makes their living by serving others is called the servant. Whoever makes their lives by stealing is called a robber. Whoever makes their living by archery is called a soldier. Whoever makes their living by priestly craft is called a chaplain. Whoever governs is called a ruler. So he's saying that people are defined, we're given a name designation, based on what they do. And so if you don't do it anymore, then you don't have that name anymore. So here he's beginning to make his argument. That designation is what you are is by what you do your actions, rather than something you're born into and who you are. So that and then he's going to talk about Brahmins. I do not call I call not I do not call the person to Brahman. Because of a birth or lineage. If If attachments lurk in them. He is one who is It's little bit hard to know how to translate this. But one translation says he's one who is

pompous, who kind of, I'm not quite sure how this means, but he's a little bit being critical of these Brahmins of his time. Who has no attachments and clings no more. That is the person I call the Brahman. So as long as someone has attachments clinging they have no matter if they're born into being a Brahmin or not, they're not a Brahmin. Someone who is free of their attachments, free clinic clinging, whether they're, you know, born into Brahmins or not, they he called a Brahmin. So someone who was born into lowest class of India, the Buddha is call them a Brahmin if they have no clinging and no attachment, and so this idea of clinging attachment is really a central idea for the Buddha. He puts tremendous value on it and in a sense what it is Going along with this custom of seeing Brahmins is kind of where the people are special people, and he's going to hold up a special. They're people who have no clinging whatsoever.

So here are some examples. They get cut because it goes on for a long time in this poem kind of to reinforce this in different ways. Who has cut off all attachments and is no more by anguish shaken? Who has overcome all ties, who is unattached? I call a Brahmin who endures without a trace of hate, abuse, violence and bondage. With strength of patience is the one I call a Brahmin who does not flare up with anger. But it's beautiful, virtuous and humble, tamed I call a Brahmin who is laid aside weapons against all beings frail or bold? Who does not kill or have them killed is one I call the Brahmin who is unopposed among opponents. Peaceful among those given to violence. Who does not cling among those who claim is the one I call a Brahmin who has dropped all lost and hate, dropped conceit and contempt. like mustard seed on the point of an owl, all the time, is I call a Brahmin who in this world will never take what is not given, long or short, smaller, big or fair or foul is the one I call the Brahman who has crossed The further shore and meditates within meditates in the concentration state so jhanas is unperturbed, an unimproved flexed, who has attained Nirvana through non clinging, I call a Brahmin. So I'm just choosing a sample of these. It goes on and on and on. And I think in the ancient oral tradition, maybe song performance, he just kind of going to kind of drumming this in kind of emphasizing this probably is a nice rhythm and poetry in the song of the time. And these are this is what Brahman is, this is what Brahman is. And what stands out, as I've read this, is that, as I study this, is most of the things that designate one as a Brahman are not exactly actions of things we do, but rather, what we've managed to free ourselves from And so freed ourselves from hate, from lust, from anger, from clinging from attachments. And so that we can live in the world without those. That is what the Buddha holds up as being kind of the highest status status state that a person can attain maybe a little bit dissatisfying to read this is so important, because sometimes we want to see that people do things as well. You know, it's not enough just to kind of live in enlightened retirement. And, you know, just you know, just leave the world alone, not care. But I think that this is the foundation from which positive action the world can come. And I'll save that more about that in a few minutes. Here he goes on and says, For name and clan are assigned as merit designations in the world, originating and conventions, they're assigned here and there. One is not a Brahmin by birth, nor by birth a non Brahmin, by action is one of Brahman by action is one a non Brahman action makes the world go round. I love this because of what I grew up with. The version that said love makes the world go round. And here the Buddhist says action makes the world go round action makes this generation turn. living beings are bound by action, like the chariot wheel by the linchpin.

So the Buddha is emphasizing a number of things here that I think are important one is that he puts emphasis on action. That the word here is karma, but it means here action And he puts out what we do how we live is important. And, and it's one of the reasons why what's called sila. Sometimes ethics is so important in Buddhism, it's considered the foundation, the beginning of Buddhist practices to be ethical. And that's supposed to be the end, in fact, and they differ. But that's not just the beginning of Buddhist practice, being ethical as the end of Buddhist practice. In fact, some of the most common ways that the Enlightenment is defined in the sutras is an ethical terms. And, and so it's kind of like becoming, you

know, someone's enlightened because they become ethical, enlightenment and ethics are kind of like the same thing, almost becoming ethical are so closely connected. And, you know, when I was a new Buddhist practitioner, I didn't understand that I thought, oh, ethics is what you do kind of like, you know, kindergarten Buddhism. And, you know, I didn't understand how central it is to this whole enterprise or Buddhism, I thought you kind of get your stuff together a little bit just enough so you can meditate and go on to the important things. And turns out one way to understand the important things, and the progress and growth of practice in Buddhism, is that an ethical growth to ethical maturity that goes on, and that at first, Buddhists will follow precepts and follow ethical guidelines. out of a sometimes out of a sense of duty sometimes because it's been handed down through your family, sometimes because your teachers tells you to or whatever, it's kind of like something that you take on. But as people practice, there tends to be a shifting relationship with sila with ethics with ethical guidelines with the precepts and they're no longer some point they no longer become some of the external that we take on or duty or requirement, but they started having a life inside of us. They become something that we're inspired to live by. Because they speak to something very important that we sense and feel inside of us. We feel that there's a, a, a clarity of purity, a cleanliness, cleanliness, a wholeness. I know that what the right language is for different people that is violated or hurt or destroyed or contracted when we live unethically. And so to move towards greater freedom to greater openness has a lot to do with not succumbing to unethical behavior, but staying ethical. And then eating ethical becomes more and more an internal guide. We get an internal guide for what that is. And we follow that internal guide to fill out or expand what it means to be ethical. And, and then at some point in that maturation process that Buddhism described ethics I see love being doing things like not killing and stealing and sexual misconduct and lying becomes not something that one is is it you know, something you read something inside of you that guide you that you're trying to live by, but rather it becomes who you are that the forces inside that would prompt unethical behavior. No longer is there. And so there's this sense of being non attached non clinging is very much having to do with those forces that would lead us to be unethical, lead us to hate, lead us to be greedy, lead us to do kind of unethical behavior. And so then they say that with a full maturation of enlightenment, a person is defined and described by being ethical. So we start with kind of a kind have a sense of duty or just like take it on as a something we've been told is a good to do. And then it comes our own becomes a guide. And then at some point it becomes who we are in a sense. So this process of maturation in Buddhism can be seen as ethical along the way. So here in this, in this text here, the Buddha is describing ethics, but mostly from the point of view of what we let go of the cove attachment clinging hate, anger and all these things.

And I think of this as partly a process of relaxation, if that doesn't be a little the hold a conversation, that that a lot of these forces of anger and hate and clinging and attachment lost represents forces of tension that are carried in the system here in mind and the heart and the body. And people who live with tremendous Tension all the time, whether it's stress from their environment or from whatever, tend to respond more from a certain aspect of our humanity that lends itself to more harmful behavior. People who hurt as the saying goes, are more likely to hurt others. People who are healed are more likely to be interested in healing others. People who are in a lot of pain, tend not to want to touch their pain or to feel it. And so they recoil from it and sometimes directed outwards in terms of hate and other things as well. And so, you know, we have this idea of fight and flight, when there's a lot of stress and a lot of danger that comes up. And I think that that that's a reaction from certain kinds of physiological mechanisms that tend to operate more strongly when we're under stress, there's a whole other side of us that other way of operating, that is considered and kind of the opposite of fight or flight, which is approaching sooth. And so you know, so a parent who has a young child who's hurt themselves, hopefully won't run away. They will approach the child and sued the child. And we have this whole system of empathy, different kinds of hormones in our system that kind of predisposed us or towards



this approach and Sue's kind of approach, which tends to work better when we're relaxed when there's no tension.

So as we let go of these kinds of things that the Buddha is talking about here and become more unattached, non clinging. It shifts Part of this humans responsivity that we have, from those kinds of responses that come from stress and tension to those that come from being relaxed and open. And then we have greater access to things like compassion, greater access to loving kindness, greater access to empathy that goes on. And in fact, sometimes the Buddha actually doesn't say this explicitly. But there are times where in the suttas where he described someone who's let go quite deeply. And then the next passage, he's just describing how now they have lots of loving kindness and compassion. And his descriptions of it are quite beautiful. How boundless those are. So almost like he doesn't have to explain how he got how they got there. From letting go to compassion, and I think it's because he just he just knows that happens kind of automatically once we shift where we go. So Here in this country, we cannot avoid, unfortunately, the concept of race and trying to get wise about how to navigate, navigate that to understand it, how to understand our own relationship to it and try to understand ourselves in different ways that maybe we haven't understood what it means to be white or African American or whatever the background we are. And to understand it deeper and deeper, I think it's a kind of responsibility for being in this country. And so how do we, you know, address it. And one way I think that maybe I hope as a help with this is to go from places of tension. And the forces that operate when we're tense to freeze forces that operate when we're open and not holding on so much. And I represent this in In the word, brace, we brace ourselves. There's all these, when we're tense and brace ourselves to life, then we're more likely to operate from positions of bias, or likely to live with barriers and boundaries between people who are more likely to experience or to put up boulders for people to find their way through life and to make their way. We bully people, these B's that go with brace, we bully people, the people who are in the know, those.

And we're dominant positions in this kind of race thing. But if we take away the B, we end up with race. But if we add g we get grace. And I think that's I don't know all the words that we want associated with, you know, the transformation to into this other half of who we are, but at the time Other things that we add with grace, our goodwill, we had generosity. We add, goodness, maybe we add gratitude that these are the, you know, these kinds of forces of goodwill, goodwill and goodness if we are the ethical side of us that contents to come out, and we don't cling and don't live under tension or appraised against life or some of the things that are needed in our society, and we need it towards ourselves and to others, so that you know, that we can somehow find a way to transform the fault lines of our society around race to something that everyone has equal opportunity everyone has a place to feel at home and comfortable in our in our society with each other. So this is our this discourse has been used. Often referred to and these kinds of conversations here in the West, and I don't know all the issues that come up for people in, in this kind of discourse and whether how useful it is for in the conversations going on here in the west around issues of race and other designations people have. So but for those of you who might be useful, some of these ideas, this is, you know, often use as a reference. So, you have any comments we have about five minutes in this we have the mic up here.

So, Gil theirselves ancient Indian saying, which says that is totally relevant to discuss the origins of two things, maybe four other things. That's okay. But it's River and the wise man wise person sh. So, in India there are two big rulers, the Ganga and Yamuna. They start off as puddles in humans. So, this theme is very recurrent in a lot of the Indian texts like in Gita. It says that all the books and texts are as much used to a wise man as a well when there's flood everywhere. And so that it makes me wonder when I was in grad school professors, they like to have their pictures taken in the library with a ton of

books. And it always makes me wonder so are people do they want to convey the information that they've read all these books are

It always makes me wonder.

Now I'm self conscious that I brought this big fat book

are you having?

So this technical question about? So this poem sounds a lot like the specific area in the Dhammapada, where he prefers about the Brahmins. That section is this where a lot of that was maybe constructed go?

Yeah, there's, there's a whole chapter of this anthology of ancient verses called the Dhammapada. And the last chapter of that is very similar to this. It's kind of redefines what it means to be a Brahmin. And I think some of these verses that are there, but I think also, there's other verses that are pulled from other places that are added to that.

So I have a question.

I'm interested in your comments. So we live in a much more complex world and much more mixed world than the Buddha did. Were from cultures all over the place, some very recent, some not so recent.

How does that play into this mix?

In the talk you've just given

what's the maybe maybe I should ask that a little differently as I'm thinking, what's the effect of, of so many different cultures mixed, mixing together as opposed to a more homogeneous society and in this particular country, certain places are not mixed at all. They're they're very homogeneous and others are.

How does that

play into all this? I probably don't know. It's a big question, but I hope it just makes us better and better people. And we learn from each other and support each other and celebrate each other, appreciate each other. And that's what I hope it means for what it actually means. It's a big topic, I don't have to feel reluctant to pick it up.

So I'm just experiencing that this was a very profound talk, and I appreciate that. That's it.

Thank you. Hope it's okay. I mean, it's a sensitive topic, I felt I had a lot of doubts whether it was appropriate or I wanted what I had to say was useful on this topic, and what kind of harm Am I caused by saying this talking about this topic, but I just there was kind of this is what was up for me and what I felt I had, you know, was in me to speak about, and sometimes when that kind of have to go without otherwise they'll turn who was just to, I don't know what, be silent. Sometimes that's better. But anyway, I hope that what I said today is certainly hasn't caused any harm and my attempt to try to cover this

topic, it's a very sensitive topic and one that I feel is very important but hard to understand. And, and it's hard to talk about it also in my my particular position in our society as a white man, white man, have, you know, I'm kind of I'm sitting on a high platform, so You know, white man of authority and variety of things. So it's something that, you know, that is a work in progress for many of us. So thank you all. And we have the tea today. You're all welcome to stay. And what would be really lovely to hear at IMC kind of what did we try it what I what we tried to have here is open doors, where this is available for the community in such a way that anybody who's here, it's your place. So if this is your first time here, you know, you're you know, you're very welcome here. But you're also kind of Welcome to put this hour you're here to make it your home or you know, your volunteer everyone. And when I say that, because just if you're this is your first time here, and if you've been here many times before, either way You don't mind turn to the person next to you or one or two people next to you and say hello and welcome them here.