

## Buddha's Criticism of Caste Divisions

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Hello, everyone, and welcome to this time for a Dhamma. Today I want to bring forth teachings of the Buddha, which is timeless teaching for our society. In our society, in our world, maybe in many countries around the world and down through the ages, there have been people who consider themselves superior to other people. Lots of conflict arises from that, and lots of iniquities arise from that. People who are superior will have greater access to wealth and power and status and all kinds of things. It was the same way in the time of the Buddha.

In the time of the Buddha, there was a particular, we might call class of people—some people considered, I use the word caste in relationship to them—that were known as the Brahmins. The Brahmins, at least some of the Brahmins at the time of the Buddha, thought of themselves as superior to others, to be the only ones who were somehow, in the way that the universe was created or the world was created, the only ones who were really pure, really came from the divine, in the divine source of life, in a way that was superior to every other form of life. They should be treated that way, and should be treated with respect and with power, since they were purer than everybody. What we find is the Buddha, who was often called a peaceful sage, was very definitive in undermining or not standing for this kind of teaching. He was very strong and direct to oppose this kind of idea. It wasn't that he was accepting of everything or just sat in the background, letting these things go along without addressing it; he addressed it very forcefully, especially when people came to him and asked him about it, especially when the Brahmins came to ask him about it.

I wanted to read first a passage where the Brahmin is being quoted for claiming that they are, you know, the best. Someone comes to the Buddha, for example a Brahmin, and said, Master Gotama, the Brahmins say thus: Brahmins are the highest caste. Those of any other caste are

inferior. Brahmins are the fairest caste. Those of any other caste are dark. Only Brahmins are purified, not non-Brahmins. Brahmins alone are the sons of Brahmā, the offspring of Brahmā, the great Brahmā, who somehow at the beginning of life were born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs to Brahmā. So that's the claim. It's a pretty confident, bold thing to say.

People would come to the Buddha and make this claim. In this case, they said to the Buddha afterwards, What do you think of this? In the Sutta—Majjhima Nikāya Sutta number ninety-three, where I quoted from—he goes through a whole series of arguments undermining that statement, and the person who is asking him, making this, asking this question, just doesn't accept any of the Buddha's arguments. The Buddha keeps going and going, opposing or undermining the argument. It's that it's by their birth that they are born Brahmins, it's by their purity, it's by all kinds of things. He just comes, step by step, goes through it all.

But there's one sutta, which I think is a beautiful sutta—it's mostly poetry—called the Vāseṭṭha Sutta. It's number ninety-eight in this middle length discourse. This issue of caste superiority of some people is a big theme in the nineties, in a number of these suttas in the nineties in the middle length discourses. This one is ninety-eight. Here, the two Brahmin students who are extremely learned in the Brahmanical lore and know all the Brahmanical texts and histories and everything, one of them says that. They ask themselves a question: How is one a Brahmin?

One student says, When one is well born on both maternal and paternal sides of pure descent, as far back as the seventh generation of ancestors, unassailable and impeccable with respect to birth, then one is a Brahmin. So it's really a matter of birth. How you are born makes you a Brahmin. If you have this pure descent from seven generations, and maybe before that from Brahmā, the god Brahmā himself, then you get to claim the superiority, then one is a Brahmin. Now, the other student, his name is Vāseṭṭha—and that's the name of the sutta, Vāseṭṭha Sutta—he has a different point of view. He says, When one is of good behaviour and proficient in the observances, then one is a Brahmin.

So what makes a Brahmin is their behavior. When their behaviour is ethical, and to be a Brahmin may be to know their Brahmanical observances and be able to do those rituals and things like that. They have an argument, and one can't convince the other. So they decide to go see the Buddha and ask him. The Buddha, they think, is well respected, he's wise, and certainly he'll have some good things to say about this. They ask him that question, they say, a dispute has arisen between us over the doctrine of birth. One of us says, One is a Brahmin by birth, but I say, One is a Brahmin by action, by what one does. Since neither of us is able

to convince the other, we have come to ask you, sir, widely famed to be enlightened.

The Buddha says, I will clearly explain this to you. I will explain it to you both in proper sequence as they are. The generic divisions of living beings, for their kinds, differ from one another. He is going to describe how each of the different species of beings are unique and special to themselves, and they differentiate by species. Some people actually translate what follows with the word species to distinguish them. He begins by talking about the grasses and trees.

I know the grasses and trees as well. Though they do not even make any claims for themselves, they can't speak for themselves. Their distinctive mark is produced by birth, and that's what makes them distinctive; their characteristic comes along with being born as particular kinds of trees, particular kinds of plants, and their kinds, their different varieties, their types differ from one another. So they have lots of different species. Next come the moth and the butterflies, even through the various kinds of ants; their distinctive mark is produced by their birth, for their kinds differ from one another. Then know the four-footed beings, both small and large; their distinctive mark is produced by birth. Their kinds differ from one another.

Know that those whose bellies are their feet, that is, the serpents—those long-backed creatures—their distinctive mark is produced by birth, for their kinds differ from one another. Now to the fish that dwell in water. Next, the birds who fly with their wings in the sky. So he goes through all these beings and says, Their distinctive mark is made by birth. Because of the repetition of it, the contrast of what he's going to say probably stands out in this oral culture in which he was teaching before. It's almost like a song as being spoken awhile among the many kinds of beings; their distinctive marks are determined by birth.

Among humans, there are no distinctive marks produced by their particular birth. Or to say it maybe in plain English—it's a little hard to know exactly how to translate this into English, the Pāli—but there is no species differentiation. There's no significant differences produced by a human being that distinguishes one person as being superior to someone else, one person a Brahmin over someone else, based on how they're born—not by the hairs or the head, not by the ears or the eyes, not by the mouth or the nose, not by the lips or the brow, not by the neck or the shoulders, not by the belly or the back, not by the buttocks or the breast, not by the anus or the genitals, not by the hands or the feet, nor by the fingers or nails, not by the knees or the thighs, nor by their color or voice. Birth does not make a distinctive mark, as it does with other kinds of beings. So there's no characteristic that we're born with that separates us out from other human beings as being better or superior from others and makes us a Brahmin

separately. Among human beings, nothing distinctive is found in their bodies.

Of course, we know lots of differences in people's bodies, but there's no inherent distinction that is the source or the reason to classify people as being superior or inferior. Then he makes an interesting statement: classification among human beings is spoken of by designation. So it's by convention, by designation, by the constructs of the mind, that we classify people in particular ways. As soon as you call it a designation, then it becomes a product of the mind and culture, and not anything inherent. Classification of people has some usefulness, but it's always going to be somewhat fragile. Since it is a designation, it's just a concept that's overlain on top of human beings. It's provisional. It's contextual. It's something which doesn't really fit, you know, a hundred percent all the time. So how to be wise about the conventions, the designations, the concept by which we understand each other?

The Buddha addressed this, but more about his orientation around this kind of idea. The humans who live by husbandry, you should know as farmers. Those who earn their living through crafts, you should know as a craftsperson. Those who live by trade, know them as a merchant. Those who live serving others should know as a servant. Those who live by stealing, you should know as a thief. Those among human beings who earn their living by archery, know them as a warrior. Those who live by priestly service, know them as a priest. Those who rule over village and realm, know them as a king. None of these, he says, are a Brahmin.

Here he is saying that the Buddha's orientation is to classify people as a designation for people by their roles, by what they do. Remember, one of the arguments of the two Brahmins was, People are Brahmin by their action. Here, the Buddha says, By their action is what we call people. That means that it only really applies when they're doing that action. That's when it really makes sense, and people change what they do and since change their roles. A significant moment with my first Encino teacher: I was talking about my relating to my father, and he said to me that, Oh, your father. Your father was a human being before he was your father, before you were born. The way he said it was like, Oh, you don't only see this person who's your father through the lens of being a father. This person has a whole new way of being in the world that's kind of free of being a father, just being a person in a different kind of way. That kind of gave me a different perspective, and I realized how much I had taken.

Certainly my father acted like a father, like you're supposed to your father, I suppose, and so it makes sense to call him a father. But someone is a father when they're fathering. Someone is a worker when they're working. Someone is a barber when they're barbering. Someone is a, you know, a cook when they're cooking. People can shift these roles, shift these activities,

and in a sense take on different designations, different names for them. That's a little bit about how the Buddha sees it. But all of that, all of that does not make a person a Brahmin.

Now the Buddha is going to say this is what makes a Brahmin. Rather than jettisoning or throwing away this concept, they had an ancient idea of the Brahmin as somehow being worthy of respect, or I know of superiors—not what the Buddha would say—but worthy of respect, or having some kind of value, special value. Rather than throwing the notion away, he redefined it in his own way for his own purposes. This is how he said it:

I do not call someone a Brahmin based on genealogy or maternal birth. A one who, without hatred, endures insults, attacks, and bondage, whose power is patience: That is the one I call a Brahmin. One who is without anger, observant of good behavior, a tame: That is the one I call a Brahmin. One who understands right here the destruction of suffering for oneself, that is the one I call a Brahmin. One who, having put down weapons towards all beings, frail and firm, is the one I call a Brahmin. Not hostile among the hostile, peaceful among those who have taken up weapons, not taking among those who take, not killing or making others kill: That is the one I call a Brahmin. One from whom lust and hatred, conceit, have dropped away: That is the one I call a Brahmin. One who utters no rough speech, whose speech is articulate and truthful, by which he does not hurt anyone: That is the one I call a Brahmin. One here who does not take anything in the world not given: That is the one I call a Brahmin. One here who has abandoned craving, who wanders without a home, with craving and existence destroyed: That is the one I call a Brahmin.

So many of these factors that the Buddha calls make someone a Brahmin have to do with their ethical behaviour, their action. In fact, these passages appear in a number of places in the suttas, both the Dhammapada and the Sutta Nipāta, so they must have been popular in the ancient world. It's people's ethical behaviour that the Buddha is emphasizing. This is over and over again what the Buddha is emphasizing. Some of the arguments he makes for why shouldn't he take those who are born into the Brahmin caste class as being real Brahmins has to do with their ethics: some of them kill and steal and lie and do all kinds of things, and some of them don't. Some of the people in different classes of society at that time lived very ethically, and whoever lived ethically, that was the Brahmin. Even if society put them in the lowest class, the Buddha wasn't going to see it that way. He saw them as being worthy and valuable human beings.

So much so, that when the Buddha created a monastic community, in the community there was no differentiation between those who came into the monastic community from the Brah-

min class, from the ruling class, from the merchant class, from the worker class. Any class of life people came from, they were folded in, and they had equal role, status, importance, position there. It must have been quite remarkable in the ancient world to come from a place where these social divisions existed and come together into community where those divisions had evaporated and people lived together without seeing those distinctions. I'll read a little bit more from here:

For whom name and clan ascribed to one are a designation in the world, having originated by convention, they are ascribed here and there.

Here again, this insight into there's nothing in the natural world in terms of status and positions and places of people that is inherent. These are designations, and we know that these horrible ways of racism exist in all kinds of ways. The designation was an invention that then got kind of such a solidified so strongly, especially in the United States, that it's hundreds, hundreds of years of racism, and difficult to shake off the strength of these concepts, these designations. Even people who we know now who consciously don't live by these designations, there's a concept inherited from a culture, all kinds of unconscious and subliminal ways in which we still kind of live in these bifurcated societies where people are put in different positions and prejudices and biases is a regular experience for them.

One is not a Brahmin by birth, nor by birth a non-Brahmin. By action one becomes a Brahmin. By action one becomes a non-Brahmin. That is how the wise see action as it really is: seers of dependent origination, skilled in action and its result. Skilled in dependent origination means that they are really skilled in seeing how things occur and exist in dependence on conditions that come together, that there is nothing really inherent in anything that is, that doesn't change, doesn't disappear, doesn't come and go, and because of that they become skilled in action. The Buddha was sometimes referred to as a teacher of action because for the Buddha, it was so important that action was the way to liberation—in a kind of more refined kind of action, more peaceful kind of action, way of living that led to freedom. But action, how we live, is what defines, in a sense, for the Buddha, the worth of a human being. The most worthy human beings are those who live most ethically, and those are the ones he calls a Brahmin.

He goes on to say, By action, the world goes around. By action, this generation of people spin around; sentient beings are fastened, tied up by their actions, which is like the linchpin of a moving chariot. By the spiritual life, by self-control and inner taming, by this one becomes a Brahmin. This is supreme brahminhood. I don't know how this sounds to some of you. To

me, it's a little bit jarring to claim that any individual is a Brahmin, is kind of more worthy than anybody else. It's certainly a very powerful critique the Buddha had on the racism or the classism that existed at his time, and a very powerful teaching that still resonates in India to this day among many people as a way—a kind of stepping away from the caste system.

In the nineteen fifties, there was a doctor named Ambedkar, one of a few people who, in my studies when I was younger, I thought had the moral stature or moral integrity or something to be critical of Mahātmā Gandhi as one of my heroes. It's a big thing to say that Ambedkar was one of the few people that if he has a critique, I'll listen. He belonged to the—so back then, the Untouchable class, the lowest caste in India. In nineteen fifty-four, I think, after a big search for a religion that wouldn't promote this caste system that Hinduism seems to have promoted in India, he landed on Buddhism. He did these mass conversions of the untouchables into Buddhism, because Buddhism was so clearly—Buddha was so clearly breaking down these caste divisions, and he was emphasizing ethics.

As I said, I feel a little uncomfortable by this idea of the Brahmin, but I love the idea that, you know, to break down these divisions and to emphasize our ethical life, or good ethics—a life of harmlessness and dedication to not stealing and killing and lying—as being a common ground in which these divisions can break down and soften. Rather than thinking of ourselves as higher or better than anybody else because of that, maybe it frees us from thinking in any kind of higher, lesser language at all, but rather to have a kind of simplicity and openness, and to respect anyone, or to be able to look on everyone as a friend, supporting everyone, to kind of maybe discover that in our hearts, in our core, deep inside, is an ethical nature, a life that wants—a heart that wants—to live harmlessly. All the ways that we humans cause harm really come from a more superficial surface area of life that falls away when we settle deep down into ourselves. That's part of the role for meditation: to shed the superficial and settle into what's deep, the place, the origin for a life of ethics, goodness that dissolves, where we can maybe contribute to dissolving these painful divisions in our society of some people being better than, superior, or more equal than others. It's needed in these times just as much as it was needed in the times of the Buddha. Thank you.