

AGGANNA SUTTA: On Knowledge of Beginnings

This is a text taken from a larger collection called the Long Discourses (*Digha Nikaya*); the teachings attributed to the Buddha were organized by his later disciples in terms of their length. This text is considered by Buddhists to be an actual teaching of the Buddha made in the sixth or fifth century before Christ, and preserved by his disciples in its present form. Texts such as this one are difficult to date. We know that they were put down into writing during the first few centuries of the common era, but there is evidence which strongly suggests that these texts were preserved and transmitted orally for several centuries.

This text, quite self-consciously, gives an alternate view of the creation of the universe, and is directly opposed to the sorts of myths exemplified by the Rig Veda's *Hymn of Purusa*, which sought to base, and thus justify, the social hierarchy in a creation myth. This myth counters that one, and has a very different idea about how society developed. It thus constitutes a very interesting look at the Buddhist view of ancient Indian society, and the hotly contested issues of that social context.

Source: The Long Discourses of the Buddha, a Translation of the Digha Nikaya. Trans. Maurice Walshe. Wisdom Publications (Boston)

[80] 1. THUS HAVE I HEARD. Once the Lord was staying at Savatthi, at the mansion of Migara's mother in the East Park. And at that time Vasettha and Bharadvaja were living among the monks, hoping to become monks themselves. And in the evening, the Lord rose from his secluded meditation and came out of the mansion, and started walking up and down in its shade.

2. Vasettha noticed this, and he said to Bharadvaja: 'Friend Bharadvaja, the Lord has come out and is walking up and down. Let us approach him. We might be fortunate enough to hear a talk on Dhamma from the Lord himself.' 'Yes, indeed', said Bharadvaja, so they went up to the Lord, saluted him, and fell into step with him.

3. Then the Lord said to Vasettha: [81] 'VaSettha, you two are Brahmins born and bred, and you have gone forth from the household life into homelessness from Brahmin families. Do not the Brahmins revile and abuse you?' 'Indeed, Lord, the Brahmins do revile and abuse us. They don't hold back with their usual flood of reproaches.' 'Well, Vasettha, what kind of reproaches do they fling at you?' 'Lord, what the Brahmins say is this: "The Brahmin caste⁸¹⁴ is the highest caste, other castes are base; the Brahmin caste is fair, other castes are dark; Brahmins are purified, non-Brahmins are not, the Brahmins are the true children of Brahma, born from his mouth, born of Brahma, created by Brahma, heirs of Brahma. And you, you have deserted the highest class and gone over to the base class of shoveling petty ascetics, servants, dark fellows born of Brahma's foot! It's not right, it's not proper for you to mix with such people!" That is the way the Brahmins abuse us, Lord.'

4. 'Then, Vasettha, the Brahmins have forgotten their ancient tradition when they say that. Because we can see Brahmin women, the wives of Brahmins, who menstruate and become pregnant, [82] have babies and give suck. And yet these womb-born Brahmins talk about being born from Brahma's mouth. These Brahmins misrepresent Brahma, tell lies and earn much demerit.

5. 'There are, Vasettha, these four castes: the Khattiyas, the Brahmins, the merchants and the artisans. And sometimes a Khattiya takes life, takes what is not given, commits sexual misconduct, tells lies, indulges in slander, harsh speech or idle chatter, is grasping, malicious, or of wrong views. Thus such things as are immoral and considered so, blameworthy and considered so, to be avoided and considered so, ways unbecoming an Ariyan and considered so, black with black result and blamed by the wise, are sometimes to be found among the Khattiyas, and the same applies to Brahmins, merchants and artisans.

6. 'Sometimes, too, a Khattiya refrains from taking life, . . . is not grasping, malicious, or of wrong views. Thus such things as are moral and considered so, blameless and considered so, to be followed and considered so, ways befitting an Ariyan and considered so, bright with bright results and praised by the wise, are sometimes to be found among the Khattiyas, and [83] likewise among Brahmins, merchants and artisans.

7. 'Now since both dark and bright qualities, which are blamed and praised by the wise, are scattered indiscriminately among the four castes, the wise do not recognise the claim about the Brahmin caste being the highest. Why is that? Because, Vasettha, anyone from the four castes who becomes a monk, an Arahant who has destroyed the corruptions, who has lived the life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached the highest goal, destroyed the fetter of becoming, and become emancipated through super-knowledge --he is proclaimed supreme by virtue of Dhamma and not of non-Dhamma.

Dhamma's the best thing for people
In this life and the next as well.

8. 'This illustration will make clear to you how Dhamma is best in this world and in the next. King Pasenadi of Kosala knows: "The ascetic Gotama has gone forth from the neighbouring clan of the Sakyans." Now the Sakyans are vassals of the King of Kosala. They offer him humble service and salute him, rise and do him homage and pay him fitting service. And, just as the Sakyans offer the King humble service. . . , [84] so likewise does the King offer humble service to the Tathagata, thinking: "If the ascetic Gotama is well-born, I am ill-born; if the ascetic Gotama is strong, I am weak; if the ascetic Gotama is pleasant to look at, I am ill-favoured; if the ascetic Gotama is influential, I am of little influence." Now it is because of honouring the Dhamma, making much of the Dhamma, esteeming the Dhamma, doing reverent homage to the Dhamma that King Pasenadi does humble service to the Tathagata and pays him fitting service:

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9. 'Vasettha, all of you, though of different birth, name, clan and family, who have gone forth from the household life into homelessness, if you are asked who you are, should reply: "We are ascetics, followers of the Sakyan." He whose faith in the Tathagata is seffled, rooted, established, solid, unshakeable by any ascetic or Brahmin, any deva or mare or Brahma or anyone in the world, can truly say: "I am a true son of Blessed Lord, born of his mouth, born of Dhamma, created by Dhamma, an heir of Dhamma." Why is that? Because, Vasettha, this designates the Tathagata: "The Body of Dhamma", that is, "The Body of Brahma", or "Become Dhamma", that is, "Become Brahma".

10. 'There comes a time, Vasettha, when, sooner or later after a long period, this world contracts. At a time of contraction, beings are mostly born in the Abhassara Brahma world. And there they dwell, mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous, moving through the air, glorious — and they stay like that for a very long time. But sooner or later, after a very long period, this world begins to expand again. At a time of expansion, the beings from the Abhassara Brahma world, [85] having passed away from there, are mostly reborn in this world. Here they dwell, mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous, moving through the air, glorious--and they stay like that for a very long time.

11. 'At that period, Vasettha, there was just one mass of water, and all was darkness, blinding darkness. Neither moon nor sun appeared, no constellations or stars appeared, night and day were not distinguished, nor months and fortnights, no years or seasons, and no male and female, beings being reckoned just as beings. And sooner or later, after a very long period of time, savoury earth spread itself over the waters where those beings were. It looked just like the skin that forms itself over hot milk as it cools. It was endowed with colour, smell and taste. It was the colour of fine ghee or butter, and it was very sweet, like pure wild honey.

12. 'Then some being of a greedy nature said: "I say, what can this be?" and tasted the savoury earth on its finger. In so doing, it became taken with the flavour, and craving arose in it. Then other beings, taking their cue from that one, also tasted the stuff with their fingers. They too were taken with the flavour, and craving arose in them. So they set to with their hands, breaking off pieces of the stuff in order to eat it. And [86] the result of this was that their self-luminance disappeared. And as a result of the disappearance of their self-luminance, the moon and the sun appeared, night and day were distinguished, months and fortnights appeared, and the year and its seasons. To that extent the world re-evolved.

13. 'And those beings continued for a very long time feasting on this savoury earth, feeding on it and being nourished by it. And as they did so, their bodies became coarser, and a difference in looks developed among them. Some beings became good-looking, others ugly. And the good-looking ones despised the others, saying: "We are better-looking, than they are." And because they became arrogant and conceited about their looks, the savoury earth disappeared. At this they came together and lamented, crying: "Oh that flavour! Oh that flavour!" And so nowadays when people say: "Oh that

flavour!" when they get something nice, they are repeating an ancient saying without realising it.

14. 'And then, when the savoury earth had disappeared, [87] a fungus cropped up, in the manner of a mushroom. It was of a good colour, smell, and taste. It was the colour of fine ghee or butter, and it was very sweet, like pure wild honey. And those beings set to and ate the fungus. And this lasted for a very long time. And as they continued to feed on the fungus, so their bodies became coarser still, and the difference in their looks increased still more. And the good-looking ones despised the others. . . And because they became arrogant and conceited about their looks, the sweet fungus disappeared. Next, creepers appeared, shooting up like bamboo. . . , and they too were very sweet, like pure wild honey.

15. 'And those beings set to and fed on those creepers. And as they did so, their bodies became even coarser, and the difference in their looks increased still more. . . [88] And they became still more arrogant, and so the creepers disappeared too. At this they came together and lamented, crying: "Alas, our creeper's gone! What have we lost!" And so now today when people, on being asked why they are upset, say: "Oh, what have we lost!" they are repeating an ancient saying without realising it.

16. 'And then, after the creepers had disappeared, rice appeared in open spaces, free from powder and from husks, fragrant and clean-grained. And what they had taken in the evening for supper had grown again and was ripe in the morning, and what they had taken in the morning for breakfast was ripe again by evening, with no sign of reaping. And these beings set to and fed on this rice, and this lasted for a very long time. And as they did so, their bodies became coarser still, and the difference in their looks became even greater. And the females developed female sex-organs, and the males developed male organs. And the women became excessively preoccupied with men, and the men with women. Owing to this excessive preoccupation with each other, passion was aroused, and their bodies burnt with lust. And later, because of this burning, they indulged in sexual activity. But those who saw them indulging threw dust, ashes or [89] cow-dung at them, crying: "Die, you filthy beast! How can one being do such things to another!" Just as today, in some districts, when a daughter-in-law is led out, some people throw dirt at her, some ashes, and some cow-dung, without realising that they are repeating an ancient observance. What was considered bad form in those days is now considered good form.

17. 'And those beings who in those days indulged in sex were not allowed into a village or town for one or two months. Accordingly those who indulged for an excessively long period in such immoral practices began to build themselves dwellings so as to indulge under cover. 'Now it occurred to one of those beings who was inclined to laziness: "Well now, why should I be bothered to gather rice in the evening for supper and in the morning for breakfast? Why shouldn't I gather it all at once for both meals?" And he did so. Then another one came to him and said: "Come on, let's go rice-gathering." "No need, my friend, I've gathered enough for both meals." Then the other, following his example, gathered enough rice for two days at a time, saying: "That should be about

enough." Then another being came and said [go] to that second one: "Come on, let's go rice-gathering." "No need, my friend, I've gathered enough for two days." (*The same for 4, then 8, days*). However, when those beings made a store of rice and lived on that, husk-powder and husk began to envelop the grain, and where it was reaped it did not grow again, and the cut place showed, and the rice grew in separate dusters.

18. 'And then those beings came together lamenting: "Wicked ways have become rife among us: at first we were mind-made, feeding on delight. *Call events repeated down to the latest development, each fresh change being said to be due to 'wicked and unwholesome ways'*). . . [91] [92] and the rice grows in separate dusters. So now let us divide up the rice into fields with boundaries." So they did so.

19. 'Then, Vasettha, one greedy-natured being, while watching over his own plot, took another plot that was not given to him, and enjoyed the fruits of it. So they seized hold of him and said: "You've done a wicked thing, taking another's plot like that! Don't ever do such a thing again!" "I won't", he said, but he did the same thing a second and a third time. Again he was seized and rebuked, and some hit him with their fists, some with stones, and some with sticks. And in this way, Vasettha, taking what was not given, and censuring, and lying, and punishment, took their origin.

20. 'Then those beings came together and lamented the arising of these evil things among them: taking what was not given, censuring, lying and punishment. And they thought: "Suppose we were to appoint a certain being who would show anger where anger was due, censure those who deserved it, and banish those who deserved banishment! And in return, we would grant him a share of the rice." [93] So they went to the one among them who was the handsomest, the best-looking, the most pleasant and capable, and asked him to do this for them in return for a share of the rice, and he agreed.

21. "'The People's Choice" is the meaning of Maha-Sammata, which is the first regular title to be introduced. "Lord Of The Fields" is the meaning of Khattiya, the second such title. And "He Gladdens Others With Dhamma" is the meaning of Raja, the third title to be introduced. This, then, Vasettha, is the origin of the class of Khattiyas, in accordance with the ancient titles that were introduced for them. They originated among these very same beings, like ourselves, no different, and in accordance with Dhamma, not otherwise.

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22. 'Then some of these beings thought: "Evil things have appeared among beings, such as taking what is not given, censuring, lying, punishment and banishment. We ought to put aside evil and unwholesome things." And they did [94] so. "They Put Aside Evil And Unwholesome Things" is the meaning of Brahmin, which is the first regular title to be introduced for such people. They made leaf-huts in forest places and meditated in them. With the smoking fire gone out, with pestle cast aside, gathering alms for their

evening and morning meals, they went away to a village, town or royal city to seek their food, and then they returned to their leaf-huts to meditate. People saw this and noted how they meditated. "They Meditate" is the meaning of Jhayaka, which is the second regular title to be introduced.

23. 'However, some of those beings, not being able to meditate in in leaf-huts, settled around towns and villages and compiled books. People saw them doing this and not meditating. "Now These Do Not Meditate" is the meaning of Ajjhayaka, which is the third regular title to be introduced. At that time it was regarded as a low designation, but now it is the higher. This, then, Vasettha, is the origin of the class of Brahmins in accordance with the ancient titles that were introduced for them. [95] Their origin was from among these very same beings, like themselves, no different, and in accordance with Dhamma, not otherwise.

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24. 'And then, Vasettha, some of those beings, having paired off, adopted various trades, and this "Various" is the meaning of Vessa, which came to be the regular title for such people. This, then, is the origin of the class of Vessas, in accordance with the ancient titles that were introduced for them. Their origin was from among these very same beings. ..

25. 'And then, Vasettha, those beings that remained went in for hunting. "They Are Base Who Live By The Chase", and that is the meaning of Sudda, which came to be the regular title for such people. This, then, is the origin of the class of Suddas in accordance with the ancient titles that were introduced for them. Their origin was from among these very same beings. . .

26. 'And then, Vasettha, it came about that some Khattiya, dissatisfied with his own Dhamma, went forth from the household life into homelessness, thinking: "I will become an ascetic." And a Brahmin did likewise, a Vessa did [96] likewise, and so did a Sudda. And from these four classes the class of ascetics came into existence. Their origin was from among these very same beings, like themselves, no different, and in accordance with Dhamma, not otherwise.

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27. 'And, Vasettha, a Khattiya who has led a bad life in body, speech and thought, and who has wrong view will, in consequence of such wrong views and deeds, at the breaking-up of the body after death, be reborn in a state of loss, an ill fate, the downfall, the hell-state. So too will a Brahmin, a Vessa or a Sudda.

28. 'Likewise, a Khattiya who has led a good life in body, speech and thought, and who has right view will, in consequence of such right view and deeds, at the breaking-up of

the body after death, be reborn in a good destiny, in a heaven-state. So too will a Brahmin, a Vessa or a Sudda.

29. 'And a Khattiya who has performed deeds of both kinds in body, speech and thought, and whose view is mixed will, in consequence of such mixed views and deeds, at the breaking-up of the body after death, experience both pleasure and pain. So too will a Brahmin, [97] a Vessa or a Sudda.

30. 'And a Khattiya who is restrained in body, speech and thought, and who has developed the seven requisites of enlightenment, will attain to Parinibbana in this very life. So too will a Brahmin, a Vessa or a Sudda.

31. 'And, Vasettha, whoever of these four castes, as a monk, becomes an Arahant who has destroyed the corruptions, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, attained to the highest goal, completely destroyed the fetter of becoming, and become liberated by the highest insight, he is declared to be chief among them in accordance with Dhamma, and not otherwise.

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32. 'Vasettha, it was Brahma Sanankamara who spoke this verse:

"The Khattiya's best among those who value clan;
He with knowledge and conduct is best of gods and men."

This verse was rightly sung, not wrongly, rightly spoken, not wrongly, connected with profit, not unconnected. I too say, Vasettha:

[98] "The Khattiya's best among those who value clan;
He with knowledge and conduct is best of gods and men."

Thus the Lord spoke, and Vasettha and Bharadvaja were delighted and rejoiced at his words.