



## **The Discourse concerning Vāseṭṭha**

**MN 98 translated by  
Ānandajoti Bhikkhu**

## Preface

The Vāseṭṭhasutta is an important discourse of the Buddha which is found in two places in the Pāli canon, the first as part of the Chapter concerning Brahmins in the Majjhimanikāya (MN 98), and again as part of the Suttanipāta (Sn 3.9), which suggests to me that it may be part of the earlier strata of Buddhist texts that were brought together in that collection.

It deals ostensibly with the claims of the brahmins to be a people apart from all others, but in the course of the explanation, we are given what is basically a manifesto of human equality, which was indeed one of the main messages of the early teaching.

The discourse is also of interest for its use of scientific reasoning, albeit ancient, to prove its claims, which still has value and holds its appeal today, as the Buddha presents clearly defined arguments as to why we cannot deal with one lineage of people differently from any other.

In the classification of species we can see that they have distinguishing features by which we identify them as different kinds of plants, trees, insects, quadrupeds, reptiles, birds, fish, etc. But when we come to human beings they are not divided in this way.<sup>1</sup>

We can see that brahmins are born from their mother's womb just like any other humans, and not in any other way; they are also not distinguished in any feature of their bodies, and it is only through human designation that they are set off from others, just as is the case with their names.

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<sup>1</sup> In fact there have been species of hominids, such as the Neanderthal and others. This information was not available at the time, and in fact does not affect the argument, as brahmins are no different from any other *homo sapiens*.

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The Buddha then shows that people are distinguished, not by birth, but by occupation: someone who protects his cattle is a farmer, another is a craftsman, a trader, etc. A brahmin, according to the Buddha, is therefore someone who has earned the distinction by cutting off the fetters, and attaining liberation.

There is a long section of twenty-eight verses which then deals with the qualities of the true brahmin, and it is worth noticing that this section is repeated verbatim at the end of the Dhammapada (vv. 396-423), in the Chapter about Brahmins (*Brāhmaṇavagga*).

After this section we get a summary of the teaching when the Buddha declares that:

One is not a brahmin by birth,  
nor by birth is one not a brahmin,  
by deeds one is a brahmin,  
by deeds one is not a brahmin.

We see here that in redefining what a brahmin is, the Buddha has traced the word back to its origins as the word etymologically derives from Pāḷi root *brah*, and means, not a particular caste of people, but someone who has become great, superior. This was a ploy the Buddha used on many occasions to avoid the reified meanings of words, and to reinvigorate them by pointing out their true significance.

The interlocutors are the students Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja, two brahmin students who feature in a couple of other discourses in the canon. They appear in the Tevijjāsutta (DN 13), where they discuss right and wrong paths, and also in the Aggaññasutta (DN 27), where they are awaiting ordination, and where their

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questions lead the Buddha to give an alternative history of the world to that taught by the brahmins.<sup>2</sup>

Apart from the introduction and the conclusion, the main body of the discourse, which consists of the student Vāsetṭha's questions and the Buddha's answers, is in verse, and it reminds one of other and similar exchanges with brahmins, such as the Way to the Beyond (*Pārāyaṇavagga*) which involves a discussion with sixteen brahmin meditation masters.

The discourse actually has two commentaries on it, the first is the commentary to the Majjhimanikāya, and the second to the discourse in Suttanipāta. As they differ from each other, I think this must call into question whether they were both written by Bhadanta Buddhaghosa, as is claimed by the tradition.

In any case I have translated the commentary as it is found in the Majjhima commentary, as it helps explain and clear up many matters which may otherwise have been doubtful in the text itself, and adds substantially to our understanding of the work. I believe this is the first English translation of the commentary.

I should add here that there is a very fine exposition of this discourse offered by the human rights activist Nalin Swaris in his book *Buddhism, Human Rights and Social Renewal*, which I have also published here: <http://www.buddhasasana.net/nalin-swaris/buddhism-human-rights/buddhism-human-rights.htm>.

I have divided the translation into two versions; the main one is the text and translation of both the discourse and its commentary, which is found in the texts and translation section of the website; in the English Only section is a translation of the discourse alone, but with a reading of the text to accompany it.

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<sup>2</sup> This appears to be the first of the discussions they had with the Buddha; the Tevijjā records the second; and at the end of the third, according to the commentary, they are both given higher ordination.

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The translation of the commentary in particular posed many problems, and I once again record my great appreciation to Dr. Junko Matsumura who made many corrections and some very good suggestions for improvement which has greatly improved the translation. Any mistakes that remain, of course, are my own.

Ānandajoti Bhikkhu  
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## The Discourse concerning Vāseṭṭha (Vāseṭṭhasuttam MN 98)

### The Setting

Thus I heard:

at one time the Fortunate One was dwelling near Icchānaṅgala,<sup>3</sup> in the Icchānaṅgala jungle thicket.

Then at that time many well-known wealthy brahmins were living in Icchānaṅgala, such as: the brahmin Caṅkī, the brahmin Tārukkha, the brahmin Pokkharasāti, the brahmin Jānussoni, the brahmin Todeyya,<sup>4</sup> and other well-known brahmins.

Then to the students Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja, while wandering and strolling around on a walk, this discussion arose: “How, dear friend, is one a brahmin?”

The student Bhāradvāja said this: “When, dear friend, one is well-born on both the mother’s and father’s side, of pure descent as far as the seventh generation, not despised and blameless with regard to the matter of one’s birth, to that extent one is a brahmin.”

The student Vāseṭṭha said this: “When, dear friend, one is virtuous and endowed with good conduct, to that extent one is a brahmin.”

But neither was the student Bhāradvāja able to convince the student Vāseṭṭha, and nor was the student Vāseṭṭha able to convince the student Bhāradvāja.

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<sup>3</sup> This brahmin village was in Kosala, and it appears the Buddha stayed there on many occasions, see DN 3, SN 54.11, AN 5.30, An 6.42, AN 8.86, etc.

<sup>4</sup> This list of five brahmins is mentioned in other places in the canon, e.g. at the beginning of Tevijjasuttam (DN 13).

## The Discourse concerning Vāseṭṭha – 6

Then the student Vāseṭṭha addressed the student Bhāradvāja, (saying): “This ascetic Gotama, Bhāradvāja, a son of the Sakyas, having gone forth from the Sakyan clan, is dwelling near Icchānaṅgala in the Icchānaṅgala jungle thicket, and about this dear Gotama this beautiful report has gone round:

*‘Such is he, the Fortunate One, the Worthy One, the Perfect Sambuddha, the one endowed with understanding and good conduct, the Happy One, the one who understands the worlds, the unsurpassed guide for those people who need taming, the Teacher of gods and men, the Buddha, the Fortunate One.’*

Come, dear Bhāradvāja, let us approach the ascetic Gotama, and having approached the ascetic Gotama let us ask him about this matter, and in whatever way this ascetic Gotama will explain it so we will bear it in mind.”

“Just so, dear friend,” the student Bhāradvāja replied to the student Vāseṭṭha. Then the students Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja approached the Fortunate One, and after approaching they exchanged greetings with the Fortunate One, and after exchanging polite and courteous greetings, sat down on one side.

### The Question

While sitting on one side the student Vāseṭṭha addressed the Fortunate One with a verse:

“We are both of us acknowledged,  
sanctioned as knowing three Vedas,  
I am Pokkharasāti’s and  
this one is Tārukkha’s student.

## The Discourse concerning Vāsetṭha – 7

What is declared in three Vedas,  
in that we are surely complete,  
the words, the grammar, and in the  
chanting we are like our teachers.

Concerning the matter of birth  
there is a dispute between us,  
Gotama, Bhāradvāja says  
one is a brahmin just by birth,  
I say it is according to  
good deeds, understand it in  
this way, O Visionary one.

We are unable to convince  
one another concerning this,  
we came to ask the Fortunate One,  
famed as being Fully Awake.

Just as when the moon is full, the  
people approach with their hands raised,  
so, worshipping, they come to pay  
homage right here to Gotama.

The Eye has arisen right here,  
and therefore we ask Gotama,  
is one a brahmin through birth, or  
is it through deeds, tell us, who are  
ones who do not know, so that we  
may know who is the true brahmin.”

### The Classification of Species

“I will explain this to you,” said  
the Fortunate One to Vāsetṭha,  
“in order, as it really is,  
a classification of species,  
for the species are different.



## The Discourse concerning Vāsetṭha – 8

Understand plants and trees, although  
they do not acknowledge the fact,  
their sign is of their own species,  
for the species are different.

Then arthropods and grasshoppers,<sup>5</sup>  
up to ants and other insects,  
their sign is of their own species,  
for the species are different.

Understand also quadrupeds,  
the small and then also the large,  
their sign is of their own species,  
for the species are different.

Understand reptiles, snakes, pythons,  
their sign is of their own species,  
for the species are different.

Then understand the fish also,  
aquatics and amphibians,  
their sign is of their own species,  
for the species are different.

Then understand birds, flying  
creatures, those who go through the sky,  
their sign is of their own species,  
for the species are different.

Just as in these species the sign  
of the species is different,  
so in humans there is no sign  
that the species is various,

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<sup>5</sup> Many of the words for species in this section are hard to identify as they are very obscure, and seem sometimes to be generics.

## The Discourse concerning Vāseṭṭha – 9

not with the hair, not with the head,  
not with the ears, not with the eyes,  
not with the mouth, not with the nose,  
not with the lips, not with the brows,  
not with the neck, not with shoulders,  
not with belly, not with the back,  
not with the waist, not with the chest,  
the vagina, the testicles,<sup>6</sup>  
not with the hands, not with the feet,  
not with fingers, not with the nails,  
not with the calves, not with the thighs,  
not with the skin, not with the voice,  
there is no sign of a species  
as there is in other species.

There is divergence in bodies,  
but in humans this is not found,  
the difference in humans is  
through designation it is said.

### The Classification of Humans

Whoever amongst humans makes  
his living protecting cattle,  
know it thus, Vāseṭṭha: he is  
a farmer and not a brahmin.

Whoever amongst humans lives  
by a craft of a certain kind,  
know it thus, Vāseṭṭha: he is  
a craftsman and not a brahmin.

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<sup>6</sup> This meaning is inferred from *methuna* meaning *a pair*; it is not recorded in the dictionaries, and the *īkā* is no help.

## The Discourse concerning Vāseṭṭha – 10

Whoever amongst humans makes  
his livelihood through business,  
know it thus, Vāseṭṭha: he is  
a trader and not a brahmin.

Whoever amongst humans lives  
by way of service to others,  
know it thus, Vāseṭṭha: he is  
a servant and not a brahmin.

Whoever amongst humans makes  
his livelihood through thievery,  
know it thus, Vāseṭṭha: he is  
a robber and not a brahmin.

Whoever amongst humans makes  
his livelihood as an archer,  
know it thus, Vāseṭṭha: he is  
a soldier and not a brahmin.

Whoever amongst humans makes  
his livelihood by advising,  
know it thus, Vāseṭṭha: he is  
a cleric and not a brahmin.

Whoever amongst humans lives  
off a village or a kingdom,  
know it thus, Vāseṭṭha: he is  
a monarch and not a brahmin.

## The True Brahmin

I do not call one a brahmin  
because of being born from a  
certain womb, that one is just one  
who says ‘bho’<sup>7</sup> if he is attached,  
having nothing and unattached,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Whoever has cut off all the  
fetters surely does not tremble,  
surmounting attachments, detached,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Whoever has cut off the thong,  
the strap, the rope, together with  
the bridle, who has thrown off the  
obstacle and is awakened,  
that one I say is a brahmin.<sup>8</sup>

Whoever, being pure, forbears  
with punishment, bondage, abuse,  
having the strength of endurance,  
having the strength of armaments,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Whoever is controlled of mind,  
dutiful, virtuous, taint-free,  
well-trained and in his last body,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Like water on the lotus leaf,

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<sup>7</sup> It was a way for brahmins to address others, implying their inferiority.

<sup>8</sup> The commentary to the Dhammapada interprets the meaning as follows: *Whoever has cut off* hatred, craving, the sixty-two views *together with* the latent tendencies, *and thrown off* ignorance, *that one I say is a brahmin.*

## The Discourse concerning Vāseṭṭha – 12

like a mustard seed on needle,  
not smeared by sensual desires,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Whoever knows here and now the  
destruction of his suffering,  
putting down the burden, detached,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

The deeply wise sagacious one,  
skilled in what is path and not path,  
who has reached the ultimate good,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Whoever doesn't mix with the  
householders or with the houseless,  
wand'ring homeless, with few desires,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Whoever has laid down the stick  
used against fearful and fearless  
beings, who neither hurts nor kills,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Being friendly with the hostile,  
calm amongst those holding weapons,  
not attached amongst those attached,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

For whoever has thrown aside  
passion, hatred, conceit, anger,  
like mustard seed on a needle,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

## The Discourse concerning Vāsetṭha – 13

Whoever speaks a word of truth  
that is informed and is not coarse,  
through which no one will be angry,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Whoever here does not take what  
is not given, long, short, small, large,  
attractive or unattractive,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

For the one who has no longings  
in this world or in the next world,  
being without longings, detached,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

For the one who has no desires,  
who, through knowledge, is without doubt,  
who is immersed in the deathless,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Whoever here has overcome  
clinging to merit, demerit,  
who is griefless, dustless and pure,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Whoever just like the moon is  
stainless, pure, clear, undisturbed, and  
has destroyed joy in existence,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

## The Discourse concerning Vāseṭṭha – 14

Whoever has crossed the hard path  
through births and deaths and delusion,<sup>9</sup>  
the meditator, crossed over,  
the one who is lust-free, doubt-free,  
who is unattached and cooled down,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Whoever would wander homeless,  
giving up sensual desires,  
ending desires and existence,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Whoever would wander homeless,  
giving up all of his craving,  
ending craving and existence,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Abandoning the human yoke,  
overcoming the divine yoke,  
being unattached to all yokes,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Abandoning delight and hate,  
cooled off and free from all cleaving,  
a hero who vanquished the world,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Whoever knows in ev'ry way  
the passing, rebirth of beings,  
unattached, fortunate, awake,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

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<sup>9</sup> The commentary to the Dhammapada says: *Whoever has overcome the difficult path* of passions and so forth, *the inaccessible* defilements, the round of *samsāra*, the *delusion* of not having penetrated the four noble truths.

## The Discourse concerning Vāsetṭha – 15

For the one whose destiny is  
unknown to gods, gandhabbas, men –  
pollutant-free, an Arahāt,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

For whom there is nothing in the  
past, the future or the present,  
having nothing and unattached,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

A leader, noble, heroic,  
a great seer, victorious,  
lust-free and cleansed and awakened,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

Whoever knows their former lives,  
sees heaven and the underworld,  
and has attained birth's destruction,  
that one I say is a brahmin.

### Summary of the Teaching

These designations in the world  
have been made about name and clan,  
arisen through common consent  
they have been made both here and there.

Lying latent for a long time,  
this false view of the ignorant,  
indeed only the ignorant  
say one is a brahmin by birth.

One is not a brahmin by birth,  
nor by birth is one not a brahmin,  
by deeds one is a brahmin here,  
by deeds one is not a brahmin.



## The Discourse concerning Vāseṭṭha – 16

It's by deeds one is a farmer,  
and by deeds one is a craftsman,  
and by deeds one is a trader,  
and by deeds one is a servant,

and by deeds one is a robber,  
and by deeds one is a soldier,  
and by deeds one is a cleric,  
and by deeds one is a monarch.

Thus the wise, seeing this  
deed as it really is,  
seeing conditional  
origination, are  
skilled in deeds and results.

By deeds the world goes round, by deeds  
this generation goes round here,  
beings are bound fast by deeds, as  
chariots roll on their linchpin.

Through austerity, through celibacy,  
restraint and control, through these one is a  
brahmin, this here is the brahmin supreme.

Endowed with the three knowledges,  
peaceful and with rebirth destroyed,  
know thus, Vāseṭṭha, that one is  
Brahmā, Sakka, to those who know.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I.e. that one is the highest of beings.

## The Conclusion

When this was said, the students Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja said this to the Fortunate One:

“Excellent, dear Gotama! *Excellent, dear Gotama! Just as, dear Gotama, one might set upright what has been overturned, or open up what has been closed, or show a path to one who is lost, or carry an oil lamp into the darkness, (thinking): ‘those with vision will see forms’, just so has the Dhamma been explained by the dear Gotama in countless ways. We go to the dear Gotama for refuge, and to the Dhamma, and to the Community of monks. Please bear it in mind, dear Gotama, that we are lay followers who have gone for refuge from today forward for as long as we have the breath of life.*”

*The Discourse concerning Vāseṭṭha is Finished*