

# Buddhism And the Caste System

Edited and presented by

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The Mid-twentieth century produced two great Sri Lankan scholars and gentlemen whose contributions to Buddhist studies made an indelible impact on western minds within the Theravada community. They were H. N. Jayatilleke, Professor of Philosophy, University of Ceylon and G. P. Malalasekera, Dean of the Faculty of Oriental Studies and Professor of Pali and Buddhist Civilization, University of Ceylon.

In their monumental work, *Buddhism and Racism*, UNESCO, 1958 (also condensed in *Buddhism and the Race Question*, Kandy, BPS Wheel 200/201) they presented the classic refutation of the racism and the caste question, which, although it is known only to an erudite few, deserves to be cited for the illumination of many in the present generation today. Excerpts from their argument citing references to textual evidence from the Pali Canon and elsewhere will be quoted and explicated below:

In their essay, they begin by addressing the myth of racism by pointing out where the Theravada texts speak of the origin of man within the context of a larger concourse of sentient beings, considered as populating a vast universe.

“It is said that, even if one moves with the swiftness of an arrow in any direction and travels for a whole lifetime, one can never hope to reach the limits of space.<sup>1</sup> In this vastness of cosmic space are located an innumerable number of worlds. As far as these suns and moons revolve, shedding their light in space, so far extends the thousandfold world-system. In it are far suns, a thousand moons, thousands of earths thousands of heavenly worlds. This is said to be the thousandfold minor world-system. A thousand times such a thousandfold minor world-system is the twice-a-thousand middling world-system. A thousand times such a twice-a-thousand middling world-system is the twice-a-thousand

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<sup>1</sup> A.IV.428.

major world-system.<sup>2</sup> These galactic systems (if we may use a modern term which seems to approximate very closely to this conception of the world systems) are however never static or lasting; they are in the process of being evolved (*saívāḥḥamána*), or of being dissolved (*vivāḥḥamána*). These processes take immensely long periods of time measured in aeons (*kappa*),<sup>3</sup> until eventually cosmic catastrophes put an end to them.<sup>4</sup> But time, we are told, is not the same everywhere, for fifty earth years are equivalent to one day and night in one of the heavenly worlds, while in another a day and night is equivalent to no less than 1,600 earth years.<sup>5</sup>

Several attempts are made to classify this vast array of beings. One such classification speaks of human beings, as well as some of the higher and lower beings, as falling into the class of beings who are different and distinguishable from each other in mind and body. There are other classes where the beings are different in body, but one in mind: Yet others are alike in body but different in mind, while there are some who are alike both in body and in mind. A further set of four classes of beings is mentioned who are formless. All these are described as the several stations which the human consciousness can attain (*viññāóāḥḥiti*),<sup>6</sup> and find renewed existence after death. Another such classification puts beings, in to the several classes of the no-footed, the two-footed the four-footed, the many-footed, those having or lacking material form, the conscious, the unconscious and the super-conscious.<sup>7</sup> The human worlds are always represented as, standing midway in the hierarchy of worlds. Life in these human worlds is a mixture of the pleasant and the unpleasant, the good and the evil, while the pleasant and good traits are intensified in the higher worlds and the unpleasant and evil in the lower.

If we contemplate the vastness of cosmic space and the seemingly endless number of worlds of which the human worlds form a very small part, the problems of race would appear in a different light and seem very trifling indeed. One is reminded of a comparison the Buddha made when he rebuked a section of his monks who felt superior to the rest in

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<sup>2</sup> 227. 228: IV. 59 60.

<sup>3</sup> S. II. 181.

<sup>4</sup> A.IV.100-3.

<sup>5</sup> A. Iv. 429.

<sup>6</sup> 6 A. IV. 39, 40.

<sup>7</sup> A: III. 35.

that they had more fame and gain than the others. He likens them to worms who, born in dung, bred in dung; and living on dung, feel superior to other worms who are not so privileged in this respect. Whatever the picture we may get from a cosmic perspective of humanity crawling over the surface of the earth and trying to eke out an existence on it, humility is one of the lessons we have to learn from it. Kingship on earth is a beggarly existence, in comparison with the joys of the heavenly worlds.<sup>8</sup> The span of life of mortal men is insignificantly small in comparison with cosmic time and may be compared in its duration to a line drawn on the earth.<sup>9</sup>

But although human life appears insignificant from a cosmic standpoint, yet it is constantly pointed out in the Buddhist texts as being of tremendous worth, as man has within him the capacity of gaining the highest knowledge, or of attaining a moral pre-eminence which can make him worthy of becoming a 'ruler of a world system.'

... In the course of our samsaric evolution we have been born, as it is said, hundreds of times as animals,<sup>10</sup> and it is rarely that we emerge into a human existence; 'birth as a human being is a rare event' (*dullabham manussattam*). It is therefore the duty of humans to make the most of the precious human life that they have acquired. Man has within him the potentiality of discovering the deepest truths about the cosmos for himself. A person who has realized such potentialities is the Buddha who is not only the best among humans but the highest among all sentient beings. When the Buddha was asked whether he was man or god, he answered that he was neither since he was the Buddha.<sup>11</sup> The intellectual, moral and spiritual heights that man can attain are so great that those who have attained them are as different from ordinary men as men are from animals. Yet such men are not mere freaks nor have they been specially favoured by any divine agency. They have attained such heights by dint of effort directed towards developing their intellectual, moral and- spiritual nature extending over many lives. And what has been achieved by one or a few is, within the capacity of all to achieve. As the Mahayana texts put it, it is not only men but all sentient beings down to the very lowest who are potential Buddhas, in that a Buddha nature (Buddha-bhava) is present within them. If only for this reason, no one has a right to despise

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<sup>8</sup> A. IV. 254

<sup>9</sup> A. IV. 138

<sup>10</sup> S. II. 188.

<sup>11</sup> A. II. 38.

a fellow creature, since all are subject to the same laws of existence and have ultimately the same nature and the same potentialities though they are in varying Stages of growth or development and their rates of growth may differ from time to time."

The following passage occurs in a polemic against the pretensions of the Brahmanic caste theory and incidentally shows by implication how the Brahmins were claiming superiority for themselves on genetical grounds:

'We have a controversy regarding (the distinctions of) birth, O Gotama ! Bharadvaja says, one is a Brahmin by birth, and I say by deeds; know this, O thou clearly-seeing!

`We are both unable to convince each other, (therefore) we have come to ask thee (who art) celebrated as perfectly enlightened.'

'I will explain to you—O Vasettha', so said Bhagavat, - `in due order the exact distinction of living beings according to species, for their species are manifold: `Know ye the grass and the trees, although they do not exhibit (it), the marks that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold.

`Then know ye the worms, and the moths, and the different sorts of ants, the marks, that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold.

`Know ye also the four-footed (animals), small and great, the marks that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold

'Know ye also the serpents, the long-backed snakes, the marks that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold.

`Then know ye also the fish which range in the water, the marks that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold.

`Then know ye also the birds that are borne along on wings and move through the air, the marks that constitute species are for them, and (their) species are manifold.

`As in these species the marks that constitute species are abundant, so in men the marks that constitute species are not abundant..

`Not as regards their hair, head, ears, eyes, mouth, nose, lips, or brows.

`Nor as regards their neck, shoulders, belly, back, hip, breast, female organ, sexual intercourse,

`Nor as regards their hands, feet, palms, nails, calves, thighs, colour or voice are there marks that constitute species as in other species.

`Difference there is in beings endowed with bodies, but amongst men this is not the case, the difference amongst men is nominal (only).

`For whoever amongst men lives by cow-keeping—know this, O Vasettha—he is a husbandman, not a Brahmin. ``And whoever amongst men lives by archery—know this, O Vasettha—he is a soldier, not a Brahmin.

`And I do not call one a Brahmin on account of his birth or of his origin from a (particular) mother ... "<sup>12</sup>

What is apparent from the above is that, according to the Buddha, there are no distinguishing characteristics of genus and species among men, unlike in the case of grasses, trees, worms, moths, fishes, beasts, birds, etc. As Chalmers says: `Herein, Gotama was in accord with the conclusion of modern biologists that "the Anthropidae are represented by the single genus and species, Man"—a conclusion which was the more remarkable inasmuch as the accident of colour did not mislead Gotama.<sup>13</sup> The Buddha goes' on to show that the apparent divisions between men are not due to basic biological factors but are 'conventional classifications' (*samanna*). The distinctions made in respect of the differences in skin colour (*vanna*), hair form (*kesa*), the shape of the head (*sisa*) or the shape of the nose (*nāsa*), etc., are not absolute categories. One is almost reminded of the statement of the scientists that `the concept of race is unanimously regarded by anthropologists as a classificatory device ...."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> 'Sutta Nipata' (trans. Fausboll), Sacred Books of the Past, Vol. Xpp 111-13.

<sup>13</sup> Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, 1894, A. 346.

<sup>14</sup> *The Race Concept* (Unesco), p. 38.

So when Buddhism asks us to treat all men, irrespective of race or caste, as our fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters or as one family, there seems to be a deeper truth in this statement than that of a mere ethical recommendation.

... It was claimed by the Brahmins to be one of the hereditary characteristics of a Brahmin that he, was handsome (*obhirupo* ), fair (*dassaniyo* ), endowed with an excellent complexion (*paramaya vanna-pokkharataya samannagato*), and of the fairest colour (*brahma-vanni*)<sup>15</sup> by virtue of which he claimed superiority over those of a dark complexion.

The terms 'Aryan' (*ariya* ) and 'non-Aryan' (*anariya*), are frequently found in the Buddhist texts, but never in a racial sense. The racial sense of superiority associated with the word 'Aryan' is completely eclipsed by the moral and spiritual sense of superiority, which the word in a Buddhist context connotes, devoid of any associations of race or birth. ... The use of the word 'Aryan' in the sense of 'noble' and 'spiritual' and 'non-Aryan' in the sense of 'ignoble' and 'immoral' is an eloquent testimony of how" Buddhism ignored racial claims and distinctions ... Thus 'Aryan quest' (*ariya pariyesana*) means 'spiritual quest,' which is defined as 'the quest of one who being subject to birth, decay and death realizes the evil consequences thereof and seeks the immortal and secure haven of Nirvana'.<sup>16</sup> The 'Aryan haven' (*ariya uccasayarea-maha-sayanam*) means the 'spiritual haven,' which is 'the state of being free from lust, hatred and delusion.'<sup>17</sup>

There is, however, a philosophical theory of 'racism' held by some of the religious teachers in the Buddha's time which is mentioned and criticised in the Buddhist texts. It is associated with two teachers both of whom denied free will to man. One was Purana Kassapa, who denied man's capacity for moral action in virtue of the fact that he had no free will. The other was Makkhali Gosala, who denied both free will and causation and argued that beings were miraculously saved (*ahetu appaccaya satta visujjhanti*) or doomed. They argued that human beings belonged to one or another of six species (*abhi jati*)<sup>18</sup> or specific types; in virtue of which they had certain genetic constitutions, physical traits and habits and psychological natures which they were incapable of altering by their own will or

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<sup>15</sup> D. I. 114.

<sup>16</sup> M. I. 162-3.

<sup>17</sup> A. I. 182.

<sup>18</sup> A. III. 383-4

effort. The six types were designated by six colours. They were the black species (*kanhabhi jati*), the blue species, the red species, the yellow species, the white species and the pure white species. Whether these colours denoted differences in their physical complexions is not clear,<sup>19</sup> but that they were genetically different physical and psychological types is what is implied by the classification. To the black species belonged the butchers, fowlers, hunters, fishermen, dacoits, and executioners and all those who adopt a cruel mode of living. They were, incidentally, among the lowest castes and their complexion was on the whole the darkest. The other five specific types differed in virtue of their degree of wickedness or saintliness, which was not in their power to alter. The pure white species were reckoned to be the perfect saints, though their saintliness was considered to be natural to them as much as their physical constitutions, and was in no way achieved by any effort of will on their part. In the opinion of these typologists, human beings who suffered pain in this life were so born to suffer as a result of their inheriting certain physical constitutions and psychological natures.<sup>20</sup>

... Arguing from the reality of free will and the capacity that man has within himself of becoming either moral or immoral or even happy or unhappy by transforming himself or degenerating morally as the case may be, the Buddha denies that there are such fixed human types genetically determined.

... The six types of human beings that the Buddha would recognize do not have fixed natures genetically determined but are the six classes of beings, namely the evil who remain evil, the evil who become good, the evil who transcend good and evil (and enter Nirvana), the good who become evil, the good who remain good and the good who transcend both good and evil (and enter Nirvana)—all of them no doubt by the exercise of their free will. The emphasis is not on what a man is born with but what he does with himself since man, irrespective of his physical constitution and psychological nature at birth, can—given the opportunity and effort—change for better or worse. The racist tenor of the former theory is thus denounced in the Buddha's classification, where the merits of people are to be judged not in terms of what they are born with but what they do with themselves.

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<sup>19</sup> of. Mahabharata, Santiparvan, where it is said that 'the colour of the Brahmin was white, that of the Ksatriyas red, that of the Vaisyas yellow and that of the Sudras black.' The commentator, however, explains these colours as psychological characteristics in terms of Samkhya philosophy.

<sup>20</sup> M. II. 222.

**The course that Buddhism adopted in combating caste prejudice and discrimination was to ignore it in practice and denounce its theory by means of rational persuasion.**

The thesis that we do not find differences of species among human beings as we do among plants and animals and that mankind is one species forms the crux of the biological argument. Found in the earliest texts (as quoted above), this argument is expanded in subsequent polemics against caste written by Buddhists. Thus Asvaghosa in his *Vajrasuci* (circa first century A.D.) says:

‘Caste names were merely conventional designations signifying occupational differences and, since men were free to change their occupations, these differences had no hereditary or genetical basis. As Asvaghosa says, ‘The distinctions between Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras are founded merely on the observance of diverse rites and the practice of different professions.<sup>21</sup> One who engages in trade comes to be known as a merchant, one who indulges in military pursuits is known as a soldier, and one who administers the country a king. It was not by birth that one becomes merchant, soldier or king but by the actions that one performs or the job one does.

Man is biologically one species. There are no separate castes (or races) radically different from each other and created from the beginning. The concept of pure castes (analogous to that of pure races) is dismissed on the grounds that most of us cannot, in the least, be sure whether caste purity, or intermarriage strictly within the caste alone, was observed by our parents and grandparents even up to seven generations.<sup>22</sup> Devala the Dark, who is quoted as one of the Brahmin seers opposed to the caste theory formulated by some of the Rigvedic Brahmins, questions the latter in the course of a discussion about caste as to whether they remember whether their parents and grandparents were of the same caste even up to seven generations; to which it is replied that they do not. It is then concluded that in such circumstances ‘We do not know who we are’ (*na mayam janama keci mayam homa*)<sup>23</sup> and therefore we have no right to maintain the reality or purity of castes. We also find the Buddha arguing with Brahmins who claimed caste purity,

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 303-4.

<sup>22</sup> D I: 92-9.

<sup>23</sup> M. II. 136.



showing them that some of their ancestors did not marry within the caste<sup>24</sup> and that the claim to purity was therefore a myth and not a fact.

The Buddha ... argued against claims to caste purity in view of the fact that intermarriage between castes was both a possibility and a 'historical fact, and held that the products of such caste mixture would resemble both parents and in such situations. Thus, we cannot say from observing the physical or genetical constitutions to which caste the child belongs.

The Ambattha Sutta<sup>25</sup> (i.e., the Discourse on Ambattha) exposes the myth of the purity of caste of which the Brahmins were so conscious. Ambattha was a Brahmin youth who was so conscious of his high Brahmin lineage that he did not observe the usual courtesies in talking to the Buddha, whom he despised on the score that he was not a Brahmin. In the course of the conversation with him, which turns round caste, the Buddha points out that the so-called purity of his ancestry was a myth: 'If one were 'so-called follow up your ancient name and lineage' says the Buddha, 'on the father's and mother's side it would appear that one of your ancestors was the offspring of one of the slave girls of the Sakyas:<sup>26</sup> Later Buddhist polemics against caste continue such arguments. Asvaghosa says: 'Do you say that he who is sprung from Brahmin parents is a Brahmin? Still I object that, since you must mean pure and true Brahmins, in such case the breed of Brahmins " must be at an end, since the fathers of the parent race of Brahmins are not, any of them, free from the suspicion of having wives who notoriously commit adultery with Sudras. Now, if the real father be a Sudra, the son cannot be a Brahmin, notwithstanding the Brahminhood of his mother.'<sup>27</sup>

Another way of combating caste theory revolves round the investigation of the nature and origins of human society and of caste divisions.

The Hindu conception of society was static and was dominated by the idea of caste. The traditional fourfold order of priests, soldiers and administrators, merchants and agriculturists and menial workers was considered not only to be absolute, fundamental and

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<sup>24</sup> Ambattha Sutta Digha Nikaya.

<sup>25</sup> D. I.

<sup>26</sup> D. I. 92.

<sup>27</sup> H. H. Wilson, Indian Caste, (London, 1887. Opp. 302-3

necessary to society but was also given a divine sanction by being considered a creation of God (Brahma). Against this was the dynamic evolutionary conception of society as pictured in Early Buddhism in which the four-fold order is here not considered absolute since, as the Buddha says, in certain societies there are only two classes (*dve'va vanna*)—the lords and the serfs or the masters and the slaves, and that not too rigid a division since `the masters sometimes become slaves and the slaves masters

In place of this conception of a divinely ordained four-fold order, Buddhism conceived of caste divisions as being occupational divisions which arose owing to historical circumstances and considered the perpetuation of caste prejudice and discrimination as being due largely to the sanctions given it by the early Brahmin priesthood.

This is well brought out in the story of Devala the Dark, a well-known priest himself, who was scorned because of his colour by the other priestly seers who are said, in the words of the Buddha, to have got together and formulated the following false and evil view (*papaka ditthigatam*), namely that `the Brahmins were the highest caste while the others were low caste, the Brahmins were "whites" while the others were "blacks," the Brahmins alone were saved while the others were not, and the Brahmins alone were the only chosen legitimate children of God<sup>28</sup>. If this legend contains a germ of historical truth, then in the words of Ghurye<sup>29</sup> 'caste in India must be regarded as a Brahmanic child of the Indo-Aryan culture, cradled in the land of the Ganges and thence transferred to the other parts of India by the Brahmin-prospectors.

To quote from Professor Rhys Davids' brief summary of the myth of caste: `Then successively fine moss, and sweet creepers, and delicate rice appeared, and each time the beings ate thereof with a similar result. Then differences of sex appeared; and households were formed; and the lazy stored up the rice, instead of gathering it each evening and morning; and the rights of property arose, and were infringed. And when lusts were felt and thefts committed the beings, now become men, met together, and chose men differing from the others in no wise except in virtue (*dhamma*), to restrain the evildoers by blame or fines or banishment. These were the first Kshatriyas. And others they chose to restrain the evil dispositions which led to the evil-doing. And these the first Brahmins, differing from the

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<sup>28</sup> M. II. 156.

<sup>29</sup> op. cit., p. 143.

others in no wise, except only in virtue (*dhamma*). Then certain others, to keep their households going, and maintain their wives, started occupations of various kinds. And these were the first Vessas. And some abandoned their homes and became the first recluses (*samanas*). But all were alike in origin, and the only distinction between them was in virtue'.<sup>30</sup> As Professor Rhys Davids comments, 'We may not accept the historical accuracy of this legend. Indeed a continual note of good-humoured irony runs through the whole story ... But it reveals a sound and healthy insight and is much nearer to the actual facts than the Brahmin legend it was intended to replace.'<sup>31</sup>

Caste names were in origin, even in the time of the Buddha, designations denoting differences of occupation. In actual fact the professions of Brahmins were multifarious and there were among them not only tradesmen and military advisers but even butchers and carriers of corpses, professions which were being confined to the Sudras in the laws drawn up by the Brahmin priests.<sup>32</sup>

Against this background, Buddhists tried to uphold the cause of the social equality of man, ... by pointing out that the ability to command the services and labour of others depended not on one's caste or high birth, which, *ipso facto*, made the Brahmins or the Kshatriyas the masters, but on the wealth that one had. A Sudra who could command enough wealth could easily have a Brahmin or Kshatriya servant to attend to him and be a menial in his household.<sup>33</sup> There was no intrinsic reason why a Sudra should be born to serve others, since in society it was economic power that counted and not caste superiority in requisitioning the services of others. It was shown that all were in fact, and should be, equal before the law. Even the Laws of Manu,<sup>34</sup> speak of 'Brahmins who are thieves and outcasts' and who on this account lose their right to be Brahmins. This shows that, even where Brahminism held sway, to some extent at least it was their deeds and not birth that mattered.

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<sup>30</sup> 'Dialogues of the Buddha, ' Part I, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, Vol. H, p. 106.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> 'Laws of Manu,' Sacred Books of the East, Vol. XXV, III. 150-68.

<sup>33</sup> M. II. 85.

<sup>34</sup> III: 150

In contrast to the Brahmins, who were trying to make a monopoly of religion, the Buddhists idealize a society in which all men irrespective of their social standing or birth were free to join religious orders and receive equal recognition as men of religion.

... It is said, for instance, not without some sarcasm that people of all castes whether 'high' or 'low' are capable of kindling a fire and that a fire that men of the so-called 'low' castes would kindle would be no less bright than the fires kindled by the so-called 'higher' castes.<sup>35</sup> The choice of 'kindling a fire' as the example is probably an ironical reference to the Brahmins, who specialized in the

... In the empiricist stand of Buddhism, the only sense of cleanliness or pollution, barring the spiritual sense was the physical sense and it is said with biting irony that people of all 'castes' even, the Sudras can soap themselves and bathe in the river and be equally clean,<sup>36</sup> so that Sudras are not at a disadvantage in their ability to be clean.

Thus, according to Buddhism all men, irrespective of their caste or race, had equal rights and deserved equal opportunities for development as members of a single social order which embraced a common humanity.

All men likewise, irrespective of race or caste, should be equal before the law. The aptitudes of people do not depend on their birth in a particular caste or race. The moral worth of a person should receive social recognition regardless of the caste to which he belonged and all men should receive equal opportunity for moral and spiritual development since all men were capable of it.

It was in these terms that Buddhism proclaimed the equality of man as a member of human society. The constant refrain that we find in these discussions, which are intended to counter the Brahmin claims to superiority by virtue of their birth, is that considering the capabilities of men of all castes 'people of all castes are on an equal footing' (*evam sante ime cottaro vanna samasama honti*), and that 'there is no distinction whatsoever among them in these respects' (*na'sam ettha kinci nanakaranam samanupassami*).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> M. It. 151, 152.

<sup>36</sup> M. II. 151.

<sup>37</sup> M. I. 85-9.

We find it stated in the words of the Brahmin opponents to Buddhism that the `recluse Gotama proclaims the possibility of salvation to all men of all four castes' (*Samano Gotama catuvannim suddhim pannapeti*).<sup>38</sup> All men irrespective of caste were capable of spiritual development, and a man whether born in a `high' caste or `low' `can develop within him loving thoughts towards all beings.'<sup>39</sup>

Similarly the claim to a divine origin for caste was condemned as mere propaganda on the part of the Brahmin priests and as having no basis in view of the gradual evolutionary origins of society.

All men are likewise equal before the moral law: Men are judged ... by the good and evil they do, and not by the stations of life in which they were placed by virtue of their birth. The reward and punishment are strictly in proportion to the good and evil done, and caste whether `high' or `low' does not matter in the least. A Sudra (outcast) ' who does good in this humble station enjoys later the pleasant fruits of his actions, while a Brahmin who does evil suffers. The magical concept of cleanliness and pollution associated with caste is given an ethical twist; what matters is not even external cleanliness but purity of heart or the absence of pollution within.<sup>40</sup>

Man's quest for security and lasting happiness never ceases, but it is never satisfied by pandering to his desires as a result of which he is continually in a state of unrest. What brought men together was the realization of their common lot and their common humanity. All men of whatever race were subject to disease, decay and death. All men were likewise impelled by the desires within them—the desire for sense-gratification, the desire for life or personal immortality, and the desire for domination over death. But deep within this fathom-long body, says the Buddha, is the final goal we all seek and it is only by discovering this eternal peace and happiness within us that we realize the highest that we are capable of.

All people, whatever their caste or racial origins may be, are in need of and capable of this self-same salvation. The King of Cosala once questioned, the Buddha on this subject : `There are these four castes, Sir—Kshatriyas; Brahmins, Vaisyas and Sudras. Let us

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<sup>38</sup> M. II. 147.

<sup>39</sup> M. II. 151.

<sup>40</sup> Sn. 43.

suppose them to be imbued with the five forms of strenuous exertion to attain salvation. In this case would there be any distinction, Sir, any difference between them [in regard to the quality of their salvation]?'

Here, too, Sire,' replies the Buddha, 'I do not admit any difference whatsoever in regard to the nature of their salvation. Just as if, Sire, a man were to kindle a fire with dry herbs, and another man were to kindle a fire with dry sal-wood, and a third were to kindle a fire with dry mango-wood,, and a fourth with dry fig-wood—what think you, Sire' would these diverse fires kindled with diverse woods show any difference whatsoever in respect of their flame, hue or brightness?'

'No difference at all, Sir.'

'Even so, Sire, is the inward illumination which is kindled by effort and nursed by strenuous exertion. I say that there is no difference whatsoever herein in regard to their salvation.'<sup>41</sup>

'Man', says the, Buddha, "is subject to both bodily and mental disease. Bodily disease afflicts him only from time to time, but except for those who have attained salvation the others cannot claim to have perfect mental health even for a second.<sup>42</sup> But such perfect control and poise of mind, which awakens in us a peace that passeth understanding can only be found by those who practise love and charity to all beings and engage in the development of their minds by following the process of self-analysis as recommended in Buddhism. And being obsessed by one's 'superior' birth in respect of the race or caste to which one belongs is one of the first obstacles that has to be put away in the interests of our own mental health as well as of the world. The outcast as described in Buddhism is not one who is born in a particular caste but 'one who hardens his heart by virtue of his birth in a particular race (*jati-tthaddho*), or by virtue of his wealth (*dhana-tthaddho*) or caste (*gotta-tthaddho*), and despises his neighbor (*sam natim atimanneti*).'<sup>43</sup>

So when we consider differences among human beings it is not the shape of their limbs, the colour of their skins, their parentage or social status that matters, but the question

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<sup>41</sup> M. 11. 129,130.

<sup>42</sup> A. II. 143.

<sup>43</sup> Sn.104.

how far each human being is from his goal, which is also the goal of all mankind, and which gives him real happiness and perfect mental health. Are we progressing, towards this goal or away from it?

It is solely in virtue of the degree of moral And spiritual attainment of people, irrespective of race or caste, that Buddhism classified human beings as superior or inferior—although this classification too is not rigid inasmuch as each person is constantly changing and has within himself the power to change for better or for worse. The superior ones are those who have attained the goal or are near it or are progressing towards it, while the inferior ones are those who are far from the goal or are going away from it. And significantly enough it is said that those who are 'bound by racial prejudices' (*jati-vada-vinibaddha*) or 'bound by caste prejudices' (*gotta-vada-vinibaddha*) have strayed 'far from the way of salvation' (*araka anuttaraya vijja-carana-sampadaya*):<sup>44</sup>

It is also a characteristic of the superior ones that they do not assert or make personal claims of their moral and spiritual superiority over others.<sup>45</sup> This does not however mean that they are conscious of their superiority but merely do not show it, for it is said that those who have attained salvation cease to think of themselves in terms of 'being superior' (*seyyo*), 'being inferior' (*niceyyo*) or 'being equal' (*sarikkho*).<sup>46</sup> ... The degree of moral and spiritual progress is therefore the only criterion by which men should be classified as being superior or inferior—though such classifications are not absolute since men are changing and can change.

Thus we have no right to despise another. Even a hardened criminal like Angulimala, the outcast robber, who was converted by the Buddha, had, deep within his nature, strong potentialities for undergoing a relatively quick spiritual transformation.

There are several such classifications of mankind on the basis of their varying moral and spiritual attainments in the Buddhist texts. We may refer to one which classifies individuals into seven grades:

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<sup>44</sup> D. I. 99.

<sup>45</sup> Sn. 782, 918.

<sup>46</sup> Sn. 918.

`There are these seven persons to be compared with those immersed in water, viz., one who is once drowned is drowned, one who is drowned after emergence, etc....

`(1) How is a person who is once drowned just drowned? Here a certain person is possessed of absolutely black immoral qualities. Such a person being once drowned is drowned.

`(2) How is a person drowned after emergence? Here a certain person emerges with faith; with modesty, with conscientiousness, with energy, with insight, as regards good (moral) qualities, but his faith, his modesty, conscientiousness, energy or insight neither persists nor grows, but decreases. Such a person is drowned after emergence.

`(3) How does a person persist after emergence? Here a certain person emerges with faith, with modesty, with conscientiousness, with energy, with insight; as regards good qualities and his faith, his modesty, conscientiousness, energy, or insight neither decreases nor grows, but persists., Such a person persists after emergence.

`(4) How does a person look about and around after emergence ? Here a certain person emerges with faith; , with modesty, with conscientiousness, with energy, or with insight as regards good qualities. By complete destruction of three fetters he becomes a stream-attainer, no more liable to fall into a woeful state, but sure to win enlightenment as his final end and aim. Such a person looks about and around after emergence.

`(5) How does a person swim on after emergence? Here a certain. person emerges with faith, with modesty, with conscientiousness, with energy, or with insight, as regards good qualities. By complete destruction of three fetters and by the destruction of passion, hatred, and delusion he becomes a once-returner, who coming back but once to this world makes an end of suffering. Such a person swims on after emergence.

`(6) How does a person reach a fixed footing after emergence? Here a certain person emerges with faith, with modesty, with conscientiousness, with energy or with insight, as regards good qualities. By complete destruction of five fetters causing rebirth in the lower worlds, he becomes a being of apparitional rebirth attaining the final release in that state, and is not liable to return from that world. Such a person reaches a fixed footing after emergence.



`(7) What sort of person' is he who as a true Brahmin after emergence crosses to the other shore and establishes himself in fruition? Here a certain person emerges with faith, with modesty, with conscientiousness, with energy or with insight, as regards good qualities. By destruction of 'sinful tendencies, he lives in possession of emancipation' of will, of emancipation of insight, free from those sinful tendencies and having come to know and realize them by his own efforts in this very existence. Such a person is a true Brahmin crossing after emergence and going to the other shore and establishing himself in fruition.<sup>47</sup>

As Professor Rhys Davids says, the Buddha `ignores completely and absolutely all advantages or disadvantages arising from birth, occupation or social status and sweeps away all barriers and disabilities arising from the arbitrary rules of mere ceremonial or social impurity'.<sup>48</sup> People of all castes were freely admitted to the order and in doing so people had to change even their names and designations because of their associations with their rank or birth. There were possibly a few who while being members of the Order of Monks were still conscious of their `high' birth or lineage and tried to claim special privileges on these grounds but such attempts were always checked and sternly denounced. It is said that a section of monks who were conscious of their 'high' rank as civilians tried to monopolize lodgings, thereby leaving out the senior elders of the Order. The Buddha inquiring into the matter asked them, `Tell me, who deserves the best lodging, the best water, and the best rice, brethren?' Whereupon some answered `He who was a noble—man before he became a brother', and others said, `He who was originally a Brahmin, or a man of means.' The Buddha's reply was: `In the religion which I teach, the standard by which precedence in the matter of lodging and the like is to be settled, is not noble birth, or having been a Brahmin, or having been wealthy before entry into the Order ...'<sup>49</sup>

Some of the most distinguished members of the Order were from the so-called `low' castes. Upáli, who was the chief authority on the rules of the Order after Buddha himself, had formerly been a barber, one of the despised occupations of the `lower' castes: Punna and Punnika, who joined the Order of Nuns had been slave girls. The members of the Order, whether male or female, do not seem however to have been drawn exclusively from the `lower' castes. An analysis of the social position of the nuns mentioned in the Psalms of

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<sup>47</sup> Human Types (trans. by B. C. Law, Pali Text Society, 1924), pp. 99. 100.

<sup>48</sup> 'Dialogues of the Buddha,' Part I, Sacred Books of the Buddhists, Vol. I, p. 100.

<sup>49</sup> The Jataka (trans.), Vol. I, pp. 92, 93.

the Sisters show that 81 per cent of the whole number were 'base-born.'<sup>2</sup> Professor Rhys Davids says: 'It is most likely that this is just about the proportion which persons in similar social rank bore to the rest of the population.'<sup>50</sup> Perhaps it would be nearer the truth to say that if eighty-one per cent of the contributed poems were composed by and express the religious joy that the members of the despised castes felt on joining the Order and realizing the fruits of the training that it gave, then the actual percentage of the women of 'low' birth in the Order would have been very much larger, since the social class from which they were drawn was mostly illiterate. As Mrs. Rhys Davids says in the introduction to the sister work, the Psalms of the Brethren: 'That a large proportion of these men of "letters" should belong to the class who were the custodians of religious lore and sacred hymns was inevitable. The really interesting feature is that the residuum, consisting of noblemen trained in war, governance, and sports, of merchants, craftsmen, and the like, occupied with business, commerce and constructive work, and of the illiterate poor, should be as numerous as it is. Or, indeed, that there should have been any of the last-named group at all as composers of verses deserving inclusion in the Canon. In fact, it would not be entirely unreasonable to conclude that if four per cent of the canonical poets were drawn from the poor and despised of the earth, from whom no such products as verses could be expected, then the proportion of monks, in general, coming from that class may have been considerable.'<sup>51</sup>

... Sunita, for example, was a scavenger and the following is a brief account of his life and successful quest told in verse in his own words:

Humble the clan wherein I took my birth  
 And poor was I and scanty was my lot;  
 Mean task was mine, a scavenger of flowers,  
 One for whom no man cared, despised, abused,  
 My mind I humbled and I bent the head  
 In deference to a goodly tale of folk:  
 And then I saw the All-Enlightened come,  
 Begirt and followed by his bhikkhu-train,  
 Great Champion entering Magadha's chief town.

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<sup>50</sup> op. cit. p. 102.

<sup>51</sup> Psalms of the Brethren (Pali Text Society), p, xxix.

I laid aside my baskets and my yoke,  
And came where I might due obeisance make,  
And of his loving kindness just for me,  
The Chief of men halted upon his way:  
Low at his feet I bent, then standing by,  
I begged the Master's leave to join the Rule  
And follow him, of every creature Chief.  
Then he whose tender mercy watch the all  
The world, the Master pitiful and kind,  
Gave me my answer: `Come, Bhikkhu!' he said  
Thereby to me was ordination given.

Lo ! I alone in forest depths abode,  
With zeal unfaltering wrought the Master's word,  
Even the counsels of the Conqueror.  
While passed the first watch of the night there rose  
Long memories of the bygone line of lives.  
While passed the middle watch, the heav'nly eye,  
Purview celestial, was clarified.

While passed the last watch of the night, I burst  
Asunder all the gloom of ignorance.  
Then as night wore down at dawn  
And rose the sun, came Indra and Brahma,  
Yielding me homage with their clasped hands:  
Hail unto thee, thou nobly born of men!  
Hail unto thee, thou highest among men!  
Perished for thee are all the intoxicants;  
And thou art worthy, noble air, of gifts.  
The Master, seeing me by troop of gods  
Begirt and followed, thereupon a smile  
Revealing by his utterance made response;  
`By discipline of holy life, restraint

And mastery of self : hereby a man  
Is holy; this is holiness supreme !<sup>52</sup>

It was the same with the women. To quote a few extracts from the utterances of Punna, who was once a slave girl:

Drawer of water, I down to the stream,  
Even in winter went in fear of blows, '  
Harassed by fear of blame from mistress.

Lo ! to the Buddha I for refuge go,  
And to the Norm and Order. I will learn  
Of them to take upon my self and keep  
The Precepts; so shall I indeed find good

Once a son of Brahmins born was I,  
Today I stand Brahmin in every deed.  
The nobler Threefold Wisdom<sup>53</sup> have I won,  
Won the true Veda-lore, and graduate  
Am I, from better Sacrament returned,  
Cleansed by the inward spiritual bath,<sup>54</sup>

In the Order, race or caste consciousness had no place: moreover, such prejudices actually hindered the awakening of spiritual insight and the cultivation of the moral life: 'Those who are obsessed with the prejudices of race or caste are far from the moral life and the attainment of supreme spiritual insight.' Such obsessions, which are the accumulated products of acquired erroneous beliefs, are among the intoxicants (*avi jjasava*) of the mind and have to be got, rid of by a process of self-analysis and conscious elimination. 'Intoxicants are to be eliminated by seeing and recognizing them as they affect our mind and not by being blind to them.'<sup>55</sup> This requires watchfulness (*sati*) on our part, the acquiring of right views

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<sup>52</sup>     *ibid.*, p. 273.

<sup>53</sup>     i.e. (i) the faculty of seeing one's past births, (ii) clairvoyance and (iii) the knowledge of one's inner mental processes.

<sup>54</sup>     Psalms of the Sisters (Pali Text Society), pp. 147-19.

<sup>55</sup>     M       .I. 7.

(*dassana*) to replace the erroneous ones, constant vigilance over our thoughts (*samvara*) and the cultivation of our mind (*bhavana*). The practice of metta or compassion towards all beings, and of upekkha or equanimity or impartiality towards all, would be considered impossible on the part of those who have not freed their minds of the initial prejudices associated with race or caste.

... If we consider these arguments we see that ... men of all castes are on an equal footing (*samasama*) with regard to their capabilities. ... The attempt at influencing public opinion by rational persuasion and example was not backed up merely by the exemplary organization of the Buddhist Order of monks and nuns, who did away with all distinctions or claims based on birth. The monks and nuns visited the homes of people of all castes, 'high' or 'low,' for purposes of preaching and having their meals, sometimes at the cost of personal discomfort. The Buddha was sometimes railed at by Brahmins for visiting their homes to beg for meals, and his invariable answer as to what was his race or caste was 'Ask me not for my birth' (*ma jatim puccha*).<sup>56</sup> Sometimes he visited Brahmin villages without getting a morsel of food. The disciples did the same, and ignored caste distinctions and practices in their relations with their fellow human beings. The following incident is recorded of Ananda, one of the immediate disciples of the Buddha, who rehearsed the dharma at the first Council: 'Now the elder Ananda dressed early and taking his bowl and robe entered the great city Sravasti for alms. After his round and having finished his meal he approached a certain well. At that time a Matanga (outcast) girl named Prakrti was at the well drawing water. So the elder Ananda said to the Matanga girl, 'Give me water, sister, I wish to drink.' At this she replied 'I am a Matanga girl, reverend Ananda.' 'I do not ask you, sister, about your family or caste but if you have any water left over, give it me, I wish to drink.' Then she gave Ananda the water....<sup>57</sup>

It is not only the monks and nuns who have to practise compassion but the lay disciples as well. The following are among the sentiments expressed in stanzas recited frequently by lay Buddhists even today:

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<sup>56</sup> Sn. 462.

<sup>57</sup> Divyavadana, p. 611., ff., quoted in E.J.Thomas, The Life of Buddha, p. 242.

'Whatever living beings there are, either feeble or strong, all either long or great,. middle-sized, short, small or largo. `Either seen or which are not seen, and which live far [or] near, either born or seeking birth, may: all creatures be happy-minded.

`Let no one deceive another let him not despise [another] in any place, let him not out of anger or resentment wish harm to another.

`As a mother at the risk of her life watches over her own child, her only child, so also let everyone cultivate a boundless [friendly] mind towards all beings.<sup>58</sup>

... In a sermon which distinguishes between the characteristics of the man who progresses and the man who degenerates, this is reckoned among one of the many causes for the downfall of man: `The man who, proud of his birth, wealth or family, despises his neighbor is degenerate,<sup>59</sup> and this conceit would be the cause of his downfall.

It is also not surprising that among the trades forbidden to Buddhists is the slave trade or 'trafficking in human beings' (*satta-vantjja*)<sup>60</sup> as this would not be in keeping with the right mode of livelihood' (*samma-a jiwa*) which every Buddhist must follow.

The treatment of the servants in one's household too should be such that their human dignity is recognized. `They should not be overburdened with work, they should be well provided with their meals and wages, they should be looked after when they are ill, the food and delicacies should be shared with them and they should be given enough leave and leisure.<sup>61</sup>

... It was in keeping with these Buddhist ideals and principles that in the third century B.C. the great Buddhist emperor Asoka modeled his policy towards the lower strata of society in his kingdom, the subject races, the forest tribes and the border peoples. Quoting the Buddhist saying that the gift of the Dhamma excels all other gifts' we find his Rock Edict XII calling attention before all else to the just treatment of servants and slaves. `There is no gift that can equal in merit the gift of Dhamma.' From it follow the right

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<sup>58</sup> Sacred Books of the East, Vol. X, p. 25.

<sup>59</sup> Sn. 104.

<sup>60</sup> A. 111: 308.

<sup>61</sup> D. III 191.

treatment of slaves and servants, service to mother and father ...<sup>62</sup> And, what he preached he seemed to have practised himself to judge by the record of his inscriptions.

Believing in the equality of man as an adherent of the Dhamma he seems to have treated his subjects, irrespective of race or social status, equally before the law, notwithstanding what was prescribed in Hindu legal codes: 'It is most desirable' he says in Pillar Edict IV? 'that there should be absolute equality for, all in all legal proceedings and in the punishments awarded ...'<sup>63</sup>

He extends this equality of treatment even to the border tribes, in Kalinga Edict. It making the following declaration: 'All people, are my children. 'Just as I desire on behalf of my own children, that they should be fully provided with all kinds of comfort and enjoyment in this world as well as in the other world, similarly I desire the same on behalf of all people. Those who live on the borders of my dominions, and have not been conquered by me, may wonder what exactly is my disposition towards them. My disposition towards them is this: they should be told that the King desires thus: "Let them not be afraid of me. Let them be made to feel confident that they need expect only happiness from me and not misery." They should again be told thus: "The King will forgive their faults that can be forgiven. May they be induced to practise Dhamma for my sake and thereby attain happiness in this world and in the next"... Your action should be shaped accordingly and the borderers should be comforted and consoled and inspired with confidence and with this idea: "The King is like our father. He cares for our welfare as much as he cares for himself. We are to him, like his own children."<sup>64</sup>

In the Ninth Rock Edict (*Girnar*) Asoka recommends the practice of the law of piety and discourages vain ritual and ceremonies, which possibly included the practice of caste-rites: 'Men are practising various ceremonies during illness or at the marriage of a son or daughter, or at the birth of a son, or when setting out on a journey; on those and other occasions men are practising various ceremonies. And women are practising many and various vulgar and useless ceremonies.

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<sup>62</sup> Edicts of Asoka (Adyar Library Series), p. 33.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 62, 63, 65.

Now, ceremonies should certainly be practised. But ceremonies like these bear little fruit indeed. But the following practice bears much fruit, namely, the practice of morality. Herein the following [are comprised]: proper courtesy to slaves and, servants, reverence to elders, gentleness to animals....<sup>65</sup> He proclaims that those of the humblest origins, even among the border tribes, are capable of experiencing the highest spiritual joy and in the Brahmagiri and Rupnath Edicts he enjoins his people to exert themselves in this direction: Men in Jambudipa, who were till now unmingled, have now been mingled with the gods. This is certainly—the fruit of my exertion.

... Nor is it correct to hold that is can be achieved only by the great ones, for even the smallest person can achieve the ideal of heavenly bliss by force of exertion. It is for this purpose that this proclamation has been proclaimed thus: "Let the humble and the great exert themselves to achieve this ideal. May my border people understand this. May this spirit of exertion endure everlastingly."<sup>66</sup>

... In the Rock Edict XIII he says: Devanampriya considers that even he who wrongs him is fit to be forgiven of wrongs that can be forgiven. And even the forest inhabitants included in the dominions of Devanampriya, who submit, he pacifies and converts [by kindly methods], duly informing them of his power to punish them, in spite of his compassion. And what for? In order that they may feel ashamed of their past conduct, and not be killed. Because Davanampriya desires that all beings should be left unhurt, should have self-control, have equal [impartial] treatment and should lead happy lives.<sup>67</sup>

Buddhism was from the first a missionary religion which sought to bring the message of truth and love to all mankind: Go ye forth; said the Buddha to his disciples, I am delivered from all fetters, human and divine. Ye are also delivered from all fetters human and divine. Go ye now and wander for the gain of the many, for the welfare of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, for the gain and for the welfare of gods and men. Let not two of you go the same way.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Hultzach, *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*, Vol. I, pp.112,113,

<sup>66</sup> op, oh. 70. 71.

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, PP. 44, 45.

<sup>68</sup> *Vinaya Texts*, (Oxford 1881), Part I, pp. 112-13.



They were to go to all manners of peoples and tribes, regardless of the hazards of such journeys and the dangers of trying to understand and convert strange peoples. Yet the only weapons they were allowed to take and have with them were the weapons of truth and love. Their training in the practice of compassion was such that, in the words of the Buddha, 'they would not have done his bidding if they were to manifest the slightest irritation or anger even if wily robbers were to get hold of them and cut them limb by limb with a double-edged saw.'<sup>69</sup>

The Buddha's interrogation of Punna, who was setting out on a dangerous mission, was as follows:

'With this concise teaching from me, Punna, in what country will you take up your abode?'

'In Sunaparanta, sir.'

'They are a fierce and violent race, Punna; it, Sunapa-ranta. If they were to abuse you and revile you there, what would you think?'

'I should think, Lord, that the good folk of Sunapa-ranta were really nice people, very nice people minded, in that they forbore to strike me.'

'But if they strike you?'

'I should think, Lord, that the good folk of Sunaparanta were really nice people... if they forbore to pelt me with clods.'

'But if they pelt you with clods?'

'I should think, Lord, . . . forbore to cudgel me,'

'But if they cudgel you?'

'I should think, Lord, . . . forbore to knife me.' 'But if they knife you?'

'I should think, Lord, ... forbore to take my life.' 'But if they take your life?'

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<sup>69</sup> M. L. 129

'If they did, Lord, I should think that there are disciples of the Lord, who in their tribulation and despair, are on the look-out for someone, with a knife, and that I have found him without having to hunt about. This is what I should think, Lord; that would be my thought, Blessed One.'

'Good indeed, Punna. With such a command of yourself, you will be able to live with the folk of Sunaparanta.'<sup>70</sup>

Punna would neither fear nor look down on anybody, even those who might be intending to kill him. Instead, he would win them over with the kind of loving-kindness the Buddha explained in the simile of the saw.

How far Buddhism succeeded by such methods of gentle persuasion and example in stemming the tide of caste in India may be seen in the account of a great Chinese saint and traveller of the fifth century who says: 'The people are numerous and happy; they have not to register their households or attend to any magistrates or their rules; only those 'who have to cultivate the royal land have to pay [a portion of] the gain from it. If they want to go; they go; if they want to stay, they stay. The king governs with no decapitation or [other] corporal punishments. Criminals are 'simply fined, lightly or ' heavily, according to the circumstances [of each case] ... The King's bodyguards and attendants all have salaries ...'<sup>71</sup>

Over time, leading into the present century, Buddhism came to stand for the oneness of the human species, the equality of man, and the spiritual unity of mankind.

Indeed, the differences among the so-called races as far as their physical characteristics go are negligible. The differences in cultural attainment are due to historical circumstances and not to any innate aptitudes with which some of the 'cultured' races, whether of the East or West, are favoured by nature or God. All men likewise, irrespective of their race, caste or class, have the capacity to reach the heights of moral and spiritual attainment."

The reader who finds sharing these concise Theravada citations, from Professors Jayatilleke and Malalakesekera, satisfying and illuminating may benefit by further

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<sup>70</sup> Further Dialogues of the Buddha; Part II. p. 308.

<sup>71</sup> Legge. A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms, pp. 42 43.

consulting the original works, the first of which was published in Paris, in 1958, as an Unesco report, entitled *Buddhism and Racism*, and the second of which was published in Kandy as BPS Wheel 200/201 *Buddhism and the Race Question*, which, while replicating only the main passages of the original document, contains a lot more evidence and discussion than is compacted into the present article. At the time of writing, the BPS document is being prepared for free download from [www.bps.lk](http://www.bps.lk).

## Abbreviations

In all references to Pali text editions of the Pali Text Society of London, the standard abbreviations are used:

D — Digha Nikaya

M — Majjhima Nikaya .

S — Samyutta Nikaya

A — Anguttara-Nikaya

J — Jataka

Sn — Sutta Nipata