

SUTTA QUOTES ON RACE & CLASS, (COLLECTED BY AJAHN AMARO)

These various extracts are not in any particular, fine-tuned order. They are roughly grouped according to their main themes and where they came from in the scriptures.

These first few are passages most often quoted when highlighting the Buddha's universality and his rejection of the caste system:—

On one occasion the Elder Ananda was travelling through the countryside near Savatthi. It was a hot day and the Elder had been walking for a long time so, as he reached the edge of a village, he enquired as to where he might find water. The people told him that the wells used by the high caste folk were on the other side of the village but that the ones used by the lower castes and the Untouchables were nearby, just around the corner. He thanked them and to their surprise - as to all eyes he had the bearing of one from the warrior noble class - he took the track that led to the closer wells.

When he reached the spot he found that a young woman was already there. He also saw that she had just hauled up a bucket of water; it looked clean and fresh so he asked her: "Sister, if it's not too much to ask, I would like a cup of the water you have drawn - I have been walking all day, my throat is dry, and I still have a few more miles to go before I reach the end of my journey."

"S-s-surely, Sir, you have come to the wrong place," she stammered, "for unless your eyes fail you, you must recognize that I am an Untouchable, and even though you are dressed in the robes of a homeless one, you certainly must be a brahmin or a warrior noble - any water you took from my hand would surely be a defilement for you and bring terrible karma to me also, is that not so?"

"Indeed it is not so, Sister. Just as the water does not discriminate by whom it is drunk or used, so too should the heart not discriminate between people of different backgrounds, races, customs or social stations - these are mere conventions of our own human creation, they are not the Dharma of the Natural Law. Please, let me have a little water."

As he said this he held out a small coconut-shell cup and, with trembling hand, the girl filled it with the sparkling water. Ananda then sat down on the stones by the well-head and slowly drank the cup dry; the girl looked on joyful, wide-eyed and with a racing heart, as if she were witnessing a miracle - for in a way she was. Never in her life before, when around any people other than her family, had she ever been able to feel that she was just another person; the presence of "Untouchable" hung in the air and cast a veil between her and the whole world. Now here was a holy man who, in these few moments, had brushed that veil so easily aside - she saw that he was right and her heart was free from fear of any wrongdoing. This day her life had changed forever.

The Elder then thanked her for the refreshing draught, picked up his small bundle of belongings, and continued on his way.

It was not surprising that the young woman found herself in love with this mysterious stranger. Her heart became infatuated with the memory of him, the one who had changed her world so much, so it was not long before she made her way to the Jetavana Monastery, in the hope of finding him and declaring her love.

When she arrived at the monastery she chanced to meet the Buddha. He asked her why she looked so radiant and happy - she explained that she had met this wonderful man, dressed just like him, and that she was going to give herself to him and they were going to be married. The Buddha gently drew the story of the encounter at the well out of her. He then asked what it was that she loved so much about Ananda and she replied that it was his peaceful radiance, his purity and his impartiality that had really won her heart.

Within a few words the Buddha was able to help her realize that it was not so much Ananda as a person that she was attracted to, it was more the qualities of Dharma that he embodied: purity, radiance and peacefulness. And, whereas the lives of people were fickle and fleeting, certain to be separated by distance or death at some point, taking Dharma as a Refuge was infinitely more rewarding and secure.

Her eyes were opened, yet again, and she there and then asked for the going forth as a nun. It was not long after that she realized arahantship.

(Divyavadana)

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In relation to these following verses, and throughout the teachings on this area, it should be understood that the brahmins claimed the highest position in the social order. They were thus the "white men" of their age, being the voice of the dominant culture, and tended to proudly claim intrinsic superiority over the rest of the human family.

"Neither matted hair, nor so-called high family,
Nor states of birth make one a brahmin,
By one's own actions in the practice of truth
Does one become a brahmin." v 11

"I do not call a person a brahmin merely by reason of birth,
Or if they were born of a noble mother.
Only if free of all attachments, from worldly grasping,
Then do I call them a brahmin." v 14

"Whoever is not afraid of breaking their chains,

Whoever has escaped from ties of attachment -
That person I call a brahmin.” v15

Dhammapada, Ch. 26 - *Brahmanavagga*, “The Chapter on the Brahmin”

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Then one of the brahmin caste - of the haughty, haw-hawing kind -
[*huhunka jatika*] went to the Buddha and exchanged greetings with him. He
then said “What is brahmin, Master Gotama? And what are the things that
make a brahmin?”

Knowing the meaning of this the Blessed One uttered this exclamation:

“The brahmin who is rid of evil things
Not haughty, undefiled and self-controlled
Perfect in knowledge and living the brahma-life,
Can rightly employ the word ‘brahmin,’
If he is proud of nothing in the world.”

MV 1.2, Ud 1.4

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AGGAÑÑA SUTTA

1. **THUS HAVE I HEARD.** Once the Buddha 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 Buddha 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 Buddha 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 Blessed One himself.’ ‘Yes, indeed’, said Bharadvaja, so they went up to the Buddha, saluted him, and fell into step with him.

3. Then the Lord said to Vasettha: ‘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, venerable sir, 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 caste 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 shaveling 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, 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 (warrior nobles), 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 a noble one and considered so, unwholesome with unwholesome 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 a noble one and considered so, bright with bright results and praised by the wise, are sometimes to be found among the khattiyas, and 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 monastic, 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 transcendent-knowledge - they are proclaimed supreme by virtue of Dhamma.

D 27.1-8

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Very shortly before the Buddha's enlightenment, during a single night, he had five great, portentous dreams; the fourth of them was one in which he dreamt that: –

"...four birds of different colours came from the four quarters and, as they alighted at his feet, they all became white. This was the fourth dream that appeared to him, and it foretold that members of the four castes - the warrior-nobles, brahmins, merchants & artisans - would all realize supreme deliverance when the Dharma had been taught by the Tathægata."

A 5.196

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Naturally enough, being a human group like any other, soon after the monastic order was first formed the question arose as to how, or whether, seniority should apply. Arguments began to occur so the Buddha interceded:—

The Buddha asked: “Who, bhikkhus, is worthy of the best seat, the best water, the best food?”

Some of the bhikkhus said, “Whoever went forth from a warrior noble family is worthy of the best seat, the best water, the best food.” Some of them said, “Whoever went forth from a brahmin family... from a householder family...whoever is an expert on the discourses... expert on the discipline...whoever is a Dhamma teacher...whoever has gained the first jhana... second...third... fourth jhana... whoever is a stream enterer... once-returned...non-returned... an arahant... a master of the Three Knowledges... a master of the six psychic powers is worthy of the best seat, the best water, the best food.”

Then the Blessed One said to the bhikkhus: “Once, bhikkhus there was a great banyan tree on the slopes of the Himalayas. Three friends lived dependent on it: a partridge, a monkey and an elephant. They were discourteous, disrespectful and impolite toward one another. Then the thought occurred to the three friends: ‘Let’s find out which among us is the most senior by birth. We would then pay homage and respect to them, revere them and honour them and abide by their advice.’

“Then the partridge and the monkey asked the elephant: ‘What ancient thing do you remember?’

“‘When I was young, friends, I used to walk over this banyan tree with it between my thighs, and the topmost buds brushed against my belly. This is an ancient thing that I remember.’

“Then the partridge and the elephant asked the monkey: ‘What ancient thing do you remember?’

“‘When I was young, friends, I used to sit on the ground and chew off the topmost buds from this banyan tree. This is an ancient thing that I remember.’

“Then the monkey and the elephant asked the partridge: ‘What ancient thing do you remember?’

“Over there in that spot there used to be a great banyan tree. Having eaten one of its fruits, I relieved myself in this spot. From that, this banyan tree was born. Thus, friends, I am the most senior among us by birth.’

“So the monkey and the elephant said to the partridge: ‘You, friend are the most senior among us by birth. We will pay homage and respect to you, revere you and honour you and abide by your advice.’

“Then the partridge had the monkey and the elephant undertake the Five Precepts, as he himself had done. They, having lived respectfully, courteous and polite toward one another, after death reappeared in a heavenly world - this came to be known as The Partridge’s Holy Life.

They - people skilled in the Dhamma,
Who revere their elders -
Are praised in the here and now,
And have a good destination hereafter.

“Now, if common animals can live respectfully, courteously and polite toward one another, shouldn’t it shine forth that you, having gone forth in such a well-taught Dhamma and Discipline, live respectfully, courteously and polite toward one another?”

CV 6.6.2-3 [Buddhist Monastic Code II p 96]

So, far from allowing any existing social mores to intrude (eg “brahmins & warrior nobles first”), the Buddha even refused to allow a value he respected, ie states of realization, to be a way of ranking anybody. He saw that these too were debatable, in their own way, since who’s to judge who is more accomplished than whom if there is not an unbiased, psychically accurate arahant nearby? The only thing that was completely neutral was the date and time of ordination - that ground was safe and it is what has been used ever since.

Having said this, it is true that the Buddha bowed to social pressure and had the nuns’ order arranged junior to the monks’ - but this should be viewed in the light that he was taking things as far as he could by creating a nuns’ order in the first place.

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Another couple of items from the monastic rule, the vinaya, might also be of interest:—

It is an offence for a monk or a nun to insult anyone. An insult is defined as a gesture or statement, written or spoken, made with the malicious intent of hurting another person’s feelings or of bringing them into disgrace.

The Vinaya lists ten ways a verbal insult (*akkosa-vatthu*) can be phrased - making remarks about the other person’s:—

- 1) race, class or nationality
- 2) name
- 3) family or lineage
- 4) occupation
- 5) craft
- 6) disease or disability
- 7) physical characteristics
- 8) defilements
- 9) offences or attainments
- 10) using an abusive form of address

Buddhist Monastic Code I p 263-4 [Pac. 2]

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On one occasion a group of monks who had originally been born into poor farming families went to the Buddha and complained that one of the Elders was treating them badly and speaking to them in a haughty, supercilious manner. The Buddha asked for the name of the monk in question, thinking to query him as to his behaviour, but when they told him who it was the Buddha reassured them: "It is understandable that you might feel offended by that monk's manner, but he is an arahant, a worthy one, and incapable of the arrogance that you ascribe to him. The reason why he has the habit of speaking in such a tone is that he was a pompous brahmin in 500 previous lives; the habits of speech linger because of such a strong degree of conditioning. Please be assured that his heart is perfectly pure and that he holds you in complete respect."

Vinaya

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Finally, here is an episode where the Buddha decides to teach a conceited young brahmin, (a star pupil and bright light of his own order), by reminding him of his own mixed ancestry and encouraging him to not be so biased against those of different coloured skin. This sutta is also interesting in that it is an instance where the Buddha directly speaks about Krishna, and notably in a very respectful way.

AMBATTHA SUTTA

1.9. Ambattha went up to the dwelling and on to the verandah, coughed, and knocked. The Buddha opened the door, and Ambattha went in. The young men entered, exchanged courtesies with the Buddha, and sat down to one side. But Ambattha walked up and down while the Buddha sat there, uttered some vague words of politeness, and then stood so speaking before the seated Buddha.

1.10. And the Buddha said to Ambattha: 'Well now, Ambattha, would you behave like this if you were talking to venerable and learned Brahmins, teachers of teachers, as you do with me, walking and standing while I am sitting, and uttering vague words of politeness?' 'No, Reverend Gotama. A Brahmin should walk with a walking Brahmin, stand with a standing Brahmin, sit with a sitting Brahmin, and lie down with a Brahmin who is lying down. But as for those shaven little ascetics, menials, black scourgings from Brahma's foot, with them it is fitting to speak just as I do with the Reverend Gotama.'

1.11. 'But, Ambattha, you came here seeking something. Whatever it was you came for, you should listen attentively to hear about it. Ambattha, you have not perfected your training. Your conceit of being trained is due to nothing but inexperience.'

1.12. But Ambattha was angry and displeased at being called untrained, and he turned on the Buddha with curses and insults. Thinking: 'The ascetic Gotama

bears me ill-will', he said: 'Reverend Gotama, the Sakyans are fierce, rough-spoken, touchy and violent. Being of menial origin, being menials, they do not honour, respect, esteem, revere or pay homage to Brahmins. With regard to this it is not proper ... that they do not pay homage to Brahmins.' This was the first time Ambattha accused the Sakyans of being menials.

1.13. 'But, Ambattha, what have the Sakyans done to you? 'Reverend Gotama, once I went to Kapilavatthu on some business for my teacher, the Brahmin Pokkharasati, and I came to the Sakyans' meeting-hall. And at that time a lot of Sakyans were sitting on high seats in their meeting-hall, poking each other with their fingers, laughing and playing about together, and it seemed to me that they were just making fun of me, and no one offered me a seat. With regard to this, it is not proper that they do not pay homage to the Brahmins.' This was the second time Ambattha accused the Sakyans of being menials.

1.14. 'But Ambattha, even the quail, that little bird, can talk as she likes on her own nest. Kapilavatthu is the Sakyans' home, Ambattha. They do not deserve censure for such a trifle.'

'Reverend Gotama, there are four castes: the Khattiyas, the Brahmins, the merchants and the artisans. And of these four castes three - the Khattiyas, the merchants and the artisans - are entirely subservient to the Brahmins. With regard to this, it is not proper that they should not pay homage to the Brahmins.' This was the third time Ambattha accused the Sakyans of being menials.

1.15. Then the Buddha thought: 'This young man goes too far in abusing the Sakyans. Suppose I were to ask after his clanname? So he said: 'Ambattha, what is your clan?' 'I am a Kanhayan, Reverend Gotama.'

'Ambattha, in former days, according to those who remember the ancestral lineage, the Sakyans were the masters, and you are descended from a slave-girl of the Sakyans. For the Sakyans regard King Okkaka as their ancestor. At one time King Okkaka, to whom his queen was dear and beloved, wishing to transfer the kingdom to her son, banished his elder brothers from the kingdom - Okkamukha, Karandu, Hatthiniya and Sinipura. And these, being banished, made their home on the flank of the Himalayas beside a lotus-pond where there was a big grove of teak-trees. And for fear of contaminating the stock they cohabited with their own sisters. Then King Okkaka asked his ministers and counsellors: "Where are the princes living now?" and they told him. At this King Okkaka exclaimed: "They are strong as teak (*saka*), these princes, they are real Sakyans!" And that is how the Sakyans got their well-known name. And the King was the ancestor of the Sakyans.

1.16. 'Now King Okkaka had a slave-girl called Disa, who gave birth to a black child. The black babe, when it was born, clamoured "Wash me, mother! Bath

me, mother! Deliver me from this birth-matter, and I will bring you profit!” Because, Ambattha, just as people today use the term hobgoblin (*pisaca*) as term of abuse, so in those days they said black (*kanha*) [NB this is *krishna* in Sanskrit]. And they said: “As soon as he was born, he spoke. He is born a Kanha, a hobgoblin!” That is how in former days ... the Sakyans were the masters, and you are descended from a slave-girl of the Sakyans.’

1.17. On hearing this, the young men said: ‘Reverend Gotama, do not humiliate Ambattha too much with talk of his being descended from a slave-girl: Ambattha is well-born, of good family, he is very learned, he is well-spoken, a scholar, well able to hold his own in this discussion with the Reverend Gotama!’

1.18. Then the Buddha said to the young men: ‘If you consider at Ambattha is ill-born, not of a good family, unlearned, ill-spoken, no scholar, unable to hold his own in this discussion with the ascetic Gotama, then let Ambattha be silent, and you conduct this discussion with me. But if you think he is... able to hold his own, then you be quiet, and let him discuss with me.’

1.19. ‘Ambattha is well-born, Reverend Gotama ... We will be silent, he shall continue.’

1.20. Then the Buddha said to Ambattha: ‘Ambattha, I have a fundamental question for you, which you will not like to answer. If you don’t answer, or evade the issue, if you keep silent or go away, your head will split into seven pieces. What do you think, Ambattha? Have you heard from old and venerable Brahmins, teachers of teachers, where the Kanhayans came from, or who was their ancestor?’ At this, Ambattha remained silent. The Buddha asked him a second time. Again Ambattha remained silent, and the Buddha said: ‘Answer me now, Ambattha, this is not a time for silence. Whoever, Ambattha, does not answer a fundamental question put to him by a Tathagata by the third asking has his head split into seven pieces.’

1.21. And at that moment Vajirapani the yakkha, holding a huge iron club, flaming, ablaze and glowing, up in the sky just above Ambattha, was thinking: ‘If this young man Ambattha does not answer a proper question put to him by the Blessed One by the third time of asking, I’ll split his head into seven pieces!’ The Buddha saw Vajirapani, and so did Ambattha. And at the sight, Ambattha was terrified and unnerved, his hairs stood on end, and he sought protection, shelter and safety from the Buddha. Crouching down close to the Buddha, he said: ‘What did the Reverend Gotama say? May the Reverend Gotama repeat what he said!’ ‘What do you think, Ambattha? Have you heard who was the ancestor of the Kanhayans?’ ‘Yes, I have heard it just as the Reverend Gotama said, that is where the Kanhayans came from, Kanha was their ancestor.’

1.22. Hearing this, the young men made a loud noise and clamour: 'So Ambattha is ill-born, not of a good family, born of a slave-girl of the Sakyans, and the Sakyans are Ambattha's masters! We disparaged the ascetic Gotama, thinking he was not speaking the truth!'

1.23. Then the Buddha thought: 'It is too much, the way these young men humiliate Ambattha for being the son of a slave-girl. I must get him out of this.' So he said to the young men: 'Don't disparage Ambattha too much for being the son of a slave-girl! That Kanha was a mighty sage. He went to the south country, learnt the mantras of the Brahmins there, and then went to King Okkaka and asked for his daughter Maddarupi. And King Okkaka, furiously angry, exclaimed: "So this fellow, the son of a slave-girl, wants my daughter!" and put an arrow to his bow. But he was unable either to shoot the arrow or to withdraw it. Then the ministers and counsellors came to the sage Kanha and said: "Spare the king, Reverend Sir, spare the king!"

"The king will be safe, but if he loses the arrow downwards, the earth will quake as far as his kingdom extends."

"Reverend Sir, spare the king, spare the land!"

"The king and the land will be safe, but if he loses the arrow upwards, as far as his realm extends the gods will not let it rain for seven years."

"Reverend Sir, spare the king and the land, and may the gods let it rain!"

"The king and the land will be safe, and the gods will let it rain, but if the king points the arrow at the crown prince, the prince will be completely safe."

'Then the ministers exclaimed: "Let King Okkaka point the arrow at the crown prince, the prince will be perfectly safe!" The king did so, loosed the arrow and yet the prince was unharmed. Then King Okkaka, terrified and fearful of divine punishment, gave away his daughter Maddarupi. So, young men, do not disparage Ambattha too much for being the son of a slave girl. That Kanha was a mighty sage.'

D 3.1.9-23

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