

## Buddhism and Caste,

c. 500–100 B.C.E.

This story, part of the Buddhist canon that was written between one hundred and four hundred years after Buddha's death, tells of a confrontation between the Buddha and Brahmans, members of the Hindu priestly caste. Such an encounter would have been common as Brahmans and Buddhists confronted each other during the Maurya Empire (321–184 B.C.E.), which included the great Buddhist convert, King Ashoka (304–232 B.C.E.). (A Brahman reaction set in during the following Shunga dynasty, and Buddhism almost vanished from India.) How would you expect most Brahmans to react to the Buddha's opposition to caste? Would some Brahmans be persuaded by the Buddha's arguments? How and why might Buddhism have a wider appeal than Hinduism?

### THINKING HISTORICALLY

What signs do you see in the document that it was not written during the lifetime of the Buddha? Notice the mention of Greece and the dialogue style of this selection. If, as some scholars have suggested, there may be Greek influence here, which Greek writer would they be referring to (see Chapter 3)? How might this Greek influence help us find an approximate date for this writing?

Once when the Lord was staying at Sāvattihī there were five hundred brāhmins from various countries in the city . . . and they thought: "This ascetic Gautama preaches that all four classes are pure. Who can refute him?"

At that time there was a young brāhmin named Assalāyana in the city . . . a youth of sixteen, thoroughly versed in the Vedas . . . and in all brāhminic learning. "He can do it!" thought the brāhmins, and so they asked him to try; surrounded by a crowd of brāhmins, he went to the Lord, and, after greeting him, sat down and said:

"Brāhmins maintain that only they are the highest class, and the others are below them. They are white, the others black; only they are pure, and not the others. Only they are the true sons of Brahmā, born from his mouth, born of Brahmā, creations of Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā. Now what does the worthy Gautama say to that?"

"Do the brāhmins really maintain this, Assalāyana, when they're born of women just like anyone else, of brāhmin women who have their periods and conceive, give birth and nurse their children, just like any other women?"

Source: *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China and Japan*, ed. William Theodore de Bary (New York: Random House, 1969), 49–51.

"For all you say, this is what they think. . . ."

"Have you ever heard that in the lands of the Greeks and Kambojas and other peoples on the borders there are only two classes, masters and slaves, and a master can become a slave and vice versa?"

"Yes, I've heard so."

"And what strength or support does that fact give to the brāhman's claim?"

"Nevertheless, that is what they think."

"Again if a man is a murderer, a thief, or an adulterer, or commits other grave sins, when his body breaks up on death does he pass on to purgatory if he's a kshatriya,<sup>1</sup> vaishya,<sup>2</sup> or shūdra,<sup>3</sup> but not if he's a brāhman?"

"No, Gautama. In such a case the same fate is in store for all men, whatever their class."

"And if he avoids grave sin, will he go to heaven if he's a brāhman, but not if he's a man of the lower classes?"

"No, Gautama. In such a case the same reward awaits all men, whatever their class."

"And is a brāhman capable of developing a mind of love without hate or ill-will, but not a man of the other classes?"

"No, Gautama. All four classes are capable of doing so."

"Can only a brāhman go down to a river and wash away dust and dirt, and not men of the other classes?"

"No, Gautama, all four classes can."

"Now suppose a king were to gather together a hundred men of different classes and to order the brāhman and kshatriyas to take kindling wood of sāl, pine, lotus, or sandal, and light fires, while the lowclass folk did the same with common wood. What do you think would happen? Would the fires of the high-born men blaze up brightly . . . and those of the humble fail?"

"No, Gautama. It would be alike with high and lowly. . . . Every fire would blaze with the same bright flame." . . .

"Suppose there are two young brāhman brothers, one a scholar and the other uneducated. Which of them would be served first at memorial feasts, festivals, and sacrifices, or when entertained as guests?"

"The scholar, of course; for what great benefit would accrue from entertaining the uneducated one?"

"But suppose the scholar is ill-behaved and wicked, while the uneducated one is well-behaved and virtuous?"

"Then the uneducated one would be served first, for what great benefit would accrue from entertaining an ill-behaved and wicked man?"

<sup>1</sup>KSHAH tree uh Warrior. [Ed.]

<sup>2</sup>VYS yuh Free peasant, artisan, or producer. [Ed.]

<sup>3</sup>SHOO druh Serf. [Ed.]

"First, Assalāyana, you based your claim on birth, then you gave up birth for learning, and finally you have come round to my way of thinking, that all four classes are equally pure!"

At this Assalāyana sat silent . . . his shoulders hunched, his eyes cast down, thoughtful in mind, and with no answer at hand.

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