MN 93 — MN 93 With Assalāyana | Assalāyana Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

With Assalāyana

Assalāyana Sutta (MN 93)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s monastery. And on that occasion 500 brahmans from various provinces were staying at Sāvatthī on some business or other. The thought occurred to them, “This Gotama the contemplative prescribes purity for the four castes. Now who is capable of disputing with him on this statement. And on that occasion the brahman student Assalāyana was staying at Sāvatthī. Young, shaven-headed, sixteen years old, he was a master of the Three Vedas with their vocabularies, liturgy, phonology, etymology, & histories as a fifth; skilled in philology & grammar, he was fully versed in cosmology and in the marks of a Great Man. The thought occurred to the brahmans, “This brahman student

Assalāyana is staying in Sāvatthī… He is capable of disputing with Gotama the contemplative on this statement."

So the brahmans went to the brahman student Assalāyana and said to him, "Master Assalāyana, this Gotama the contemplative prescribes purity for the four castes. Come and dispute with him on this statement."

When this was said, the brahman student Assalāyana said to the brahmans, "Sirs, Gotama the contemplative is one who speaks Dhamma. And those who speak Dhamma are hard to dispute with. I can't dispute with him on this statement."

A second time…. A third time, the brahmans said to the brahman student Assalāyana, "Master Assalāyana, this Gotama the contemplative prescribes purity for the four castes. Come and dispute with him on this statement, for you have lived the life of a wanderer. Don't be defeated without being defeated in battle."

When this was said, the brahman student Assalāyana said to the brahmans, "Apparently, sirs, I don't get leave from you (to avoid the matter by saying), 'Gotama the contemplative is one who speaks Dhamma. And those who speak Dhamma are hard to dispute with. I can't dispute with him on this statement.' But at your bidding I will go."

Then the brahman student Assalāyana went with a large group of brahmans to the Blessed One and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there he said to the Blessed One: "Master Gotama, the brahmans say, 'Brahmans are the superior caste; any other caste is inferior. Only brahmans are the fair caste; any other caste is dark. Only brahmans are pure, not non-brahmans. Only brahmans are the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.' What does Master Gotama have to say with regard to that?"

"But, Assalāyana, the brahmans' brahman-women are plainly seen having their periods, becoming pregnant, giving birth, and nursing (their children). And yet the brahmans, being born through the birth canal, say, 'Brahmans are the superior caste; any other caste is inferior. Only brahmans are the fair caste; any other caste is dark. Only brahmans are pure, not non-brahmans. Only brahmans are the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.'"

"Even though Master Gotama says that, still the brahmans think, 'Brahmans are the superior caste… the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.'"

"What do you think, Assalāyana? Have you heard that in Yona & Kamboja and other outlying countries there are only two castes—masters & slaves—and that having been a master one (can) become a slave, and that having been a slave one (can) become a master?"

“Yes, Master Gotama….”

“So what strength is there, Assalāyana, what assurance, when the brahmans say, ‘Brahmans are the superior caste… the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā’?”

“Even though Master Gotama says that, still the brahmans think, ‘Brahmans are the superior caste… the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.’”

“What do you think, Assalāyana? Is it only a noble warrior who—taking life, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, telling lies, speaking divisively, speaking harshly, engaging in idle chatter, greedy, bearing thoughts of ill will, and holding wrong views—on the break-up of the body, after death, reappears in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell, and not a brahman? Is it only a merchant…? Is it only a worker who—taking life, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, telling lies, speaking divisively, speaking harshly, engaging in idle chatter, greedy, bearing thoughts of ill will, and holding wrong views—on the break-up of the body, after death, reappears in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell, and not a brahman?”

“No, Master Gotama. Even a noble warrior…. Even a brahman…. Even a merchant…. Even a worker…. (Members of) all four castes—if they take life, steal, engage in sexual misconduct, tell lies, speak divisively, speak harshly, engage in idle chatter, are greedy, bear thoughts of ill will, & hold wrong views—on the break-up of the body, after death, reappear in a plane of deprivation, a bad destination, a lower realm, hell.”

“So what strength is there, Assalāyana, what assurance, when the brahmans say, ‘Brahmans are the superior caste… the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā’?”

“Even though Master Gotama says that, still the brahmans think, ‘Brahmans are the superior caste… the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.’”

“What do you think, Assalāyana? Is it only a brahman who—refraining from taking life, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, from telling lies, from speaking divisive speech, from harsh speech, & from idle chatter, not greedy, bearing no thoughts of ill-will, & holding to right view—on the break-up of the body, after death, reappears in a good destination, a heavenly world, and not a noble warrior, not a merchant, not a worker?”

“No, Master Gotama. Even a noble warrior…. Even a brahman…. Even a merchant…. Even a worker…. (Members of) all four castes—if they refrain from taking life, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, from telling lies, from speaking divisive speech, from harsh speech, & from idle chatter, are not greedy, bear no thoughts of ill-will, & hold to right view—on the break-up of the body, after death, reappear in a good destination, a heavenly world.”

“So what strength is there, Assalāyana, what assurance, when the brahmans say, ‘Brahmans are the superior caste… the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā’?”

“Even though Master Gotama says that, still the brahmans think, ‘Brahmans are the superior caste… the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.’”

“What do you think, Assalāyana? Is it only a brahman who is capable of developing in any direction a heart of good will—free from animosity, free from ill will—and not a noble warrior, not a merchant, not a worker?”

“No, Master Gotama. Even a noble warrior…. Even a brahman…. Even a merchant…. Even a worker…. (Members of) all four castes are capable of developing in any direction a heart of good will—free from animosity, free from ill will.”

“So what strength is there, Assalāyana, what assurance, when the brahmans say, ‘Brahmans are the superior caste… the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā’?”

“Even though Master Gotama says that, still the brahmans think, ‘Brahmans are the superior caste… the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.’”

“What do you think, Assalāyana? Is it only a brahman who is capable of taking a loofah & bath powder, going to a river, and scrubbing off dust & dirt, and not a noble warrior, not a merchant, not a worker?”

“No, Master Gotama. Even a noble warrior…. Even a brahman…. Even a merchant…. Even a worker…. (Members of) all four castes are capable of taking a loofah & bath powder, going to a river, and scrubbing off dust & dirt.”

“So what strength is there, Assalāyana, what assurance, when the brahmans say, ‘Brahmans are the superior caste… Only brahmans are pure, not non-brahmans. Only brahmans are the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā’?”

“Even though Master Gotama says that, still the brahmans think, ‘Brahmans are the superior caste… Only brahmans are pure, not non-brahmans. Only brahmans are the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.’”

“What do you think, Assalāyana? There is the case where a consecrated noble warrior king might call together 100 men of different births (and say to them), ‘Come, masters. Those of you there born from a noble warrior clan, from a brahman clan, or from a royal clan: taking an upper fire-stick of Sal wood, salaḷa wood, sandalwood, or padumaka wood,

produce fire & make heat appear. And come, masters. Those of you there born from an outcast clan, a trapper clan, a wicker workers' clan, a cartwrights' clan, or a scavengers' clan: taking an upper fire-stick from a dog's drinking trough, from a pig's trough, from a dustbin, or of castor-oil wood, produce fire & make heat appear.' What do you think, Assalāyana? Would the fire made by those born from a noble warrior clan, a brahman clan, or a royal clan—who had produced fire & made heat appear by taking an upper fire-stick of Sal wood, salaḷa wood, sandalwood, or padumaka wood—be the only one with flame, color, & radiance, able to do whatever a fire might be needed to do? And would the fire made by those born from an outcast clan, a trapper clan, a wicker workers' clan, a cartwrights' clan, or a scavengers' clan—who had produced fire & made heat appear by taking an upper fire-stick from a dog's drinking trough, from a pig's trough, from a dustbin, or of castor-oil wood—be without flame, color, & radiance, unable to do what a fire might be needed to do?"

"No, Master Gotama. The fire made by those born from a noble warrior clan, a brahman clan, or a royal clan… would have flame, color, & radiance, able to do whatever a fire might be needed to do. And the fire made by those born from an outcast clan, a trapper clan, a wicker workers' clan, a cartwrights' clan, or a scavengers' clan… would have flame, color, & radiance, able to do whatever a fire might be needed to do. For all fire has flame, color, & radiance, and is able to do whatever a fire might be needed to do."

"So what strength is there, Assalāyana, what assurance, when the brahmans say, 'Brahmans are the superior caste… Only brahmans are pure, not non-brahmans. Only brahmans are the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā'?"

"Even though Master Gotama says that, still the brahmans think, 'Brahmans are the superior caste… Only brahmans are pure, not non-brahmans. Only brahmans are the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.'"

"What do you think, Assalāyana? There is the case where a noble warrior youth might cohabit with a brahman maiden, and from their cohabitation a son would be born. Would the son born from the noble warrior youth and brahman maiden be like the father and like the mother? Should it be called a noble warrior & a brahman?"

"Yes, Master Gotama…."

"What do you think, Assalāyana? There is the case where a brahman youth might cohabit with a noble warrior maiden, and from their cohabitation a son would be born. Would the son born from the brahman youth and noble warrior maiden be like the father and like the mother? Should it be called a noble warrior & a brahman?"

"Yes, Master Gotama…."

“What do you think, Assalāyana? There is the case where a mare might mate with a donkey, and from their mating a foal would be born. Would the foal born from the mare & the donkey be like the father and like the mother? Should it be called a horse & a donkey?”

“Master Gotama, from the mixed breeding it would be a mule. Here I see that it [the mixed breeding] makes a difference, but there [in the other two cases] I don’t see that it makes a difference.”

“What do you think, Assalāyana? There is the case where there might be two brahman-student brothers, born of the same mother: one learned & initiated, the other not learned & uninitiated. Which of the two would the brahmans serve first at a funeral feast, a milk-rice offering, a sacrifice, or a feast for guests?”

“The brahman student who was learned & initiated, Master Gotama…. For what great fruit would there be for what is given to one who is not learned & uninitiated?”

“What do you think, Assalāyana? There is the case where there might be two brahman-student brothers, born of the same mother: one learned & initiated (but) unvirtuous & of evil character, the other not learned & uninitiated, (but) virtuous & of fine character. Which of the two would the brahmans serve first at a funeral feast, a milk-rice offering, a sacrifice, or a feast for guests?”

“The brahman student who was not learned & uninitiated, (but) virtuous & of fine character, Master Gotama…. For what great fruit would there be for what is given to one who is unvirtuous & of evil character?”

“First, Assalāyana, you went by birth. Then, having gone by birth, you went by mantras. Then, having gone by mantras, putting them both aside, you have come around to the purity of the four castes that I prescribe.”

When this was said, the brahman student Assalāyana sat silent, abashed, his shoulders drooping, his head down, brooding, at a loss for words.

Then the Blessed One—seeing that the brahman student Assalāyana was sitting silent, abashed, his shoulders drooping, his head down, brooding, at a loss for words—said to him, “Once, Assalāyana, this evil viewpoint arose in the seven brahman seers as they were consulting together in leaf huts in the wilderness: ‘Brahmans are the superior caste; any other caste is inferior. Only brahmans are the fair caste; any other caste is dark. Only brahmans are pure, not non-brahmans. Only brahmans are the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.’ Then the seer Devala the Dark heard, ‘This evil viewpoint has arisen in the seven brahman seers as they are consulting together in leaf huts in the wilderness: ‘Brahmans are the superior caste; any other caste is inferior…. Only brahmans are the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.’ So, arranging his hair & beard, putting on crimson garments, wearing multi-layered sandals, and carrying a staff made of gold, he appeared in the courtyard of the seven brahman seers. Then he

walked back & forth in the courtyard of the seven brahman seers saying, "Well, now, where have these masters, the brahman seers, gone? Well, now, where have these masters, the brahman seers, gone?"

"Then the seven brahman seers said to the seer Devala the Dark, "Now who is this, walking back & forth in the courtyard of the seven brahman seers like a village lout, saying, "Well, now, where have these masters, the brahman seers, gone? Well, now, where have these masters, the brahman seers, gone?" Let's curse him!' So the seven brahman seers cursed the seer Devala the Dark: "Be ashes, dribble-spit!1 Be ashes, dribble-spit! Be ashes, dribble-spit!" But the more they cursed him, the more beautiful, good-looking, & inspiring he became. Then the thought occurred to the seven brahman seers, 'Our asceticism is in vain! Our holy-life is fruitless! For before, whenever we cursed anyone, "Be ashes, dribble-spit!" he would always become ashes. But the more we curse this one, the more beautiful, good-looking, & inspiring he becomes!'

"'Masters, your asceticism is not in vain, and your holy-life not fruitless. Please, masters, abandon your hatred toward me.'

"'We abandon our hatred toward you, master. Who are you?'

"'Have you heard of the seer Devala the Dark?'

"'Yes, master.'

"'I am he.'

"Then the seven brahman seers approached him to bow down to him, and he said to them, 'I have heard that this evil viewpoint has arisen in the seven brahman seers as they are consulting together in leaf huts in the wilderness: "Brahmans are the superior caste; any other caste is inferior.... Only brahmans are the sons & offspring of Brahmā: born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā."'

"That is so, master.'

"'But do you know, masters, if the mother who bore you went only with a brahman, and not with a non-brahman?'

"'No, master.'

"'And do you know if the mothers of the mother who bore you—back seven generations of mothers—went only with brahmans, and not with non-brahmans?'

"'No, master.'

"'And do you know if the father who sired you went only with a brahman woman, and not with a non-brahman woman?'

“‘No, master.’

“‘And do you know if the fathers of the father who bore you—back seven generations of fathers—went only with brahman women, and not with non-brahman women?’

“‘No, master.’

“‘Do you know how there is the descent of an embryo?’

“‘Yes, master, we know how there is the descent of an embryo. There is the case where the mother & father have come together, the mother is fertile, and a gandhabba [the being about to be reborn] is standing present. The coming together of these three is the descent of the embryo.’2

“‘But do you know for sure whether the gandhabba is a noble warrior, a brahman, a merchant, or a worker?’

“‘No, master.’

“‘That being the case, do you know who you are?’

“‘That being the case, master, we don’t know who we are.’

“Now, Assalāyana, when those seven brahman seers couldn’t defend their own birth-statement when interrogated, pressed, & rebuked by the seer Devala the Dark, how can you now defend your own birth-statement when interrogated, pressed, & rebuked by me—you, their lineage holder, but not (the equal of) Puṇṇa, their ladle holder?”

When this was said, the brahman student Assalāyana said to the Blessed One: “Magnificent, Master Gotama! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to show the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way has Master Gotama—through many lines of reasoning—made the Dhamma clear. I go to Master Gotama for refuge, to the Dhamma, and to the Saṅgha of monks. May Master Gotama remember me as a lay follower who has gone to him for refuge, from this day forward, for life.”

Notes

1. Reading capalī with the Thai edition of the Canon. The PTS edition has vasalī (“one having a vile person (as a mother?)”); the Sri Lankan edition, vasala, “vile person.”

2. This description of the conditions for birth is identical with one the Buddha himself gives in MN 38. Apparently in the Buddha’s time it was a common feature among those who taught rebirth.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: SN 3:24; AN 5:191; Sn 1:11