J. W. DE JONG

BUDDHISM AND THE EQUALITY OF THE FOUR CASTES

In his History of the Dharmaśāstra P. V. Kane devotes a long chapter to the caste system. He explains that the system of the four varṇas had taken deep root in the period when the Brāhmaṇa works were composed. According to Kane, “by the time of the Brāhmaṇa Literature, brāhmaṇas (men supposed to be devoted to learning and priesthood), kṣatriyas (kings, noblemen and some warriors) and vaiśyas (the artisans and common people) had become separated into groups more or less dependent on birth and ... the brāhmaṇa had come to be regarded as superior to the kṣatriya by the fact of birth.” As to the fourth varṇa, the śuddras, Kane remarks that a clear line of demarcation was kept between the āryas (the first three varṇas) and the śuddras in the period of the Brāhmaṇa works.

The four varṇas are often mentioned in early Buddhist texts. In his introduction to the Ambaṭṭha suttanta (the third of the 34 suttantas of the Dīghanikāya), T. W. Rhys Davids states that the four varṇas were not castes because there was neither connubium nor commensality between all the members of one varṇa, nor was there a governing council for each. The fourth was distinguished from the others by race. The remaining three were distinguished from each other by social position. According to Rhys Davids, in the Buddha’s time caste was in the making. The great mass of the people were distinguished quite roughly into four classes — social strata — the boundary lines of which were vague and uncertain. If one restricts the meaning caste to the word jāti, then, of course, it is not possible to define the varṇas as castes, but Rhys Davids is certainly wrong in stating that the varṇas were nothing more than social classes. Already in the time of the Brāhmaṇa works the brahmans considered themselves superior by birth to the other varṇas. Undoubtedly, the idea of an exclusive class of people entitled to special rights was already in existence long before the time of the Buddha. The later caste system developed in the course of

centuries, and gradually the word jāti acquired the meaning of ‘caste’ as it is used nowadays. In many Dharmaśāstras the words varṇa and jāti are still confounded. The canonical Pāli texts use both the words kula and vaṇṇa to indicate the four varṇas. According to Richard Fick, the word jāti is used more often than vaṇṇa to indicate the four varṇas. However, his work is based mainly upon the jātakas, which date from a much later period than the canonical suttas. A detailed study of the use and meaning of the word jāti in Pāli texts is yet to be undertaken.

The claims of the brahmans to superiority are put forward in a passage which is found repeatedly in the Pāli canon and which Miss Horner translated as follows: “Only brahmans form the best caste, all other castes are low; only brahmans form the fair caste, all other castes are dark; only brahmans are pure, not non-brahmans; brahmans are own sons of Brahmā, born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, formed by Brahmā, heirs to Brahmā.” In another often quoted passage, a brahan claims to be “well-born on both the mother’s and father’s side, ... of pure descent for seven generations, uncriticised and irreproachable with reference to birth.”

In the Dhammapada and the Suttanipāta, texts which comprise some of the oldest parts of the Pāli canon, many verses deal with the claims of the brahmans. In the Vāseṭṭhasutta the Buddha explains that the distinguishing mark (liṅga) of grasses, trees, beetles, moths, quadrupeds, etc. arises from their species (jāti) and manifold indeed are their species, but that among men there is no distinguishing mark: “Not by hair, nor head, nor ears, nor eyes, nor mouth, etc., is there a distinguishing mark arising from their species, as in other species. This (difference) is not found individually among men in respect of their own bodies, but among men difference is spoken of as a matter of designation.

10 The following quotations are all taken from Norman’s translation, 104-108.
(samañña)”. The Buddha explains that differences among men are due to their occupations: “Whoever among men makes his living by keeping cows, thus know, Vāsetṭha, he is a farmer, not a brahman. Whoever among men lives by means of various crafts, thus know, Vāsetṭha, he is a craftsman, not a brahman”. In the following twenty-seven verses the Buddha explains that a man is a brahman on the strength of his qualities and spiritual achievements: “Him I call a brahman if he has nothing and is without grasping ... Whoever in this very world understands the end of his own misery, with burden laid aside, unfettered, him I call a brahman ... In whom no attachments are found, who is without doubt because of knowledge, him, arrived at the plunge into the undying, I call a brahman”. Name and clan (gotta) are mere names (samañña): “For what has been designated name and clan in this world is indeed a (mere) name ... Not by birth does one become a brahman; not by birth does one become a non-brahman. By action one becomes a brahman; by action one becomes a non-brahman. By action one becomes a farmer; by action one becomes a craftsman, etc. By austerity, by the holy life, by self-restraint, and self-taming, by this one becomes a brahman. This is the supreme state of being a brahman”.

T.W. Rhys Davids remarks that “it is sufficiently evident from the comparative frequency of the discussions on the matter of Brahman pretensions that this was a burning question at the time when the Dialogues [i.e. DN and MN] were composed”\textsuperscript{11}. This is also proven by the fact that the canonical Jain texts contain verses very similar to the ones found in the Suttanipāta. For instance, Lecture XXV of the Uttarajjhāyā explains in a series of verses the nature of the true brahman: “He who is exempt from love, hatred, and fear, (and who shines forth) like burnished gold, purified in fire, him we call a brahman ... He who is not defiled by pleasures as a lotus growing in the water is not wetted by it, him we call a brahman”\textsuperscript{12}. P.V. Kane quotes similar passages even from the Mahābhārata. He writes: “Though in the Mahābhārata it is often said that a brāhmaṇa is so by birth alone and that he deserves respect from all, still we meet several times with passages wherein there is a revolt against the caste system dependent on birth alone and where it is severely condemned and great emphasis is laid on the moral worth of a man. In the Vaṇaparva (181,42-43) we are told: ‘Truthfulness, restraint, tapas, generosity, non-injury to sentient

\textsuperscript{11} Dialogue of the Buddha, Part I, 96.

\textsuperscript{12} Jaina Sutras, Part II. Translated by Hermann Jacobi, Oxford 1895, 138-139.
being, constant adherence to dharma - these always lead men to the fruition (of their goal) and not caste nor family’”\textsuperscript{13}. Even a südra can become a brahman: “Vanaparva (216,14-15) ‘that südra who is always struggling for self-restraint, truthfulness and dharma is a brāhmaṇa in my opinion, for a brāhmaṇa is so by his character’” (\textit{ibid.}).

It is, however, without doubt in the canonical Pāli texts that the theory of the four varṇas is discussed most frequently. It is said repeatedly that the four varṇas are only designations (samaññā) and that, for instance, if a noble acts like a thief, he is reckoned simply as ‘thief’\textsuperscript{14}. The constant refrain is that the four varṇas are exactly the same (ime cattāro vanṇā samasamā honti)\textsuperscript{15}. Most of the Pāli texts dealing with the four varṇas have been quoted in several articles in which other references are to be found\textsuperscript{16}. A detailed study of the attitude towards the four varṇas in the \textit{Upaṇiṣads} and in early Buddhism has been made by Hajime Nakamura\textsuperscript{17}.

It is interesting to see that in later times only a few Buddhist texts pay attention to the problem of caste. One of the most famous ones is the \textit{Vajrasūci}, which B.H. Hodgson published in translation in 1829, and with text and translation in 1839\textsuperscript{18}. The text begins with a verse in which Aśvaghosa is mentioned as the author of the work, but Burnouf had already questioned the authorship: “Aśvaghōcha est-il le célèbre Religieux dont le nom est traduit en chinois par \textit{Ma ming} (voie de cheval), et qui, suivant la liste de l’Encyclopédie japonaise, fut le douzième patriarche bouddhiste depuis la mort de Çākyamuni?” In 1908 Sylvain Lévi pointed out that the Chinese translation is ascribed to Dharmakīrti, and suggested that perhaps Dharmakīrti had composed a

\textsuperscript{13} \textit{Op. cit.}, 100-101.
\textsuperscript{14} \textit{The Middle Length Sayings}, vol. II, 276.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}
\textsuperscript{17} Genshi bukkyō no seikatsu rinri, Tōkyō 1972, Chapter VII: Ningen no hyōdō [The equality of man], 408-447.
\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Histoire du budhism indien} I, Paris 1844, 215.
new revised edition of the work originally written by Aśvaghoṣa\textsuperscript{20}. This hypothesis is defended to this day by Japanese scholars\textsuperscript{21}. Most scholars, however, believe that the *Vajrasūcī* was not written by Aśvaghoṣa. By 1918 Sylvain Lévi was less inclined to attribute the *Vajrasūcī* to him\textsuperscript{22}. In the introduction to his translation of the *Buddhacarita*, Johnston excluded the *Vajrasūcī* from the corpus of Aśvaghoṣa’s works but saw no reason for doubting the correctness of the ascription of a work to Dharmakīrti\textsuperscript{23}. However, just as in India Aśvaghoṣa’s name was so famous that many texts were attributed to him, in the same way in a much later period the name Dharmakīrti became famous in China, and not only the *Vajrasūcī* but also the *Śikṣāsamuccaya* were attributed to him. Biswanath Bhattacharya is quite right in stating that “it is therefore nothing beyond a mere idle conjecture to say that the Vajra-sūcī was originally composed by Aśvaghoṣa and its later redaction was made by Dharmakīrti”\textsuperscript{24}. Much has been written on this opuscule in which the author proves by means of quotations from Hindu texts that the claims of the brahmans are spurious\textsuperscript{25}. He refers several times to the *Mānavadharma*, but only two verses are identical with verses from the extant *Manusmṛti*: X,92 and III,19\textsuperscript{26}. The *Vajrasūcī* must have enjoyed a great degree of popularity in Buddhist circles because many of its verses have been quoted in the tenth story of the *Kalpadrumāvadānamālā*, i.e. verses 18, 19, 4, 5, 21-26, 29, 17, 14-16, 20, 10, 11, 30-51\textsuperscript{27}. This does not seem to have been noticed by Sujitkumar Mukhopadhyaya\textsuperscript{28}. However, the fact that the *Kalpadrumāvadānamālā* is later than the *Vajrasūcī* does not help us much in fixing a terminus ante quem for the *Vajrasūcī*. The *Kalpadrumāvadānamālā* is certainly a late text and cannot have been composed in the third century A.D. as

\textsuperscript{20} “Aśvaghoṣa, le Sūtrālaṃkāra et ses sources”, in: *JA* 1908, II, 70-71 note 1.
\textsuperscript{22} “Pour l’histoire du Rāmāyaṇa”, in: *JA* 1918, I, 11: “la Vajrasūcī, attribuée plus ou moins légitimement à Aśvaghoṣa”.
\textsuperscript{23} *The Buddhacarita*, Part II, Calcutta 1936, xxii.
\textsuperscript{24} *Aśvaghoṣa: a critical study*, Santiniketan 1976, 132, note 1.
\textsuperscript{27} Cf. J. S. Speyer, ed., *Avadānaçataka*, St.-Petersbourg 1902-1909, Preface, XLIX-LXVII.
\textsuperscript{28} I have not been able to examine the second revised edition of his edition of the *Vajrasūcī* published in Santiniketan in 1960.
has been assumed by Yutaka Iwamoto. The Vajrasūci was translated into Chinese in 986-987 A.D. Quotations from Vedic texts, the Mahābhārata and the Harivamśa are the only indications for a terminus a quo.

Also difficult to date is another text in which the claims of the brahmans are attacked, namely the Śārdūlaśakāvaḍāña, the thirty-third story of the Divyāvadāna, which was first studied by Burnouf. Cowell and Neil published a part of this avadāna: the full text was published only in 1954, by Sujitkumar Mukhopadhyaya. It is interesting to see that one finds almost the same arguments used in this text as in the Vaseṭṭhasutta of the Suttanipāta: cf. Suttanipāta 608-610:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{na kesehi na sīsena na kaṇhehi na akkhīhi} \\
\text{na mukhena na nāsāya na oṭthehi bhamaḥi vā 608} \\
\text{na gīvāya na aṃshehi na udarena na piṭṭhiyā} \\
\text{na soniyā na urasā na sambādhe na methune 609} \\
\text{na hatthehi na pādehi na aṅgulī hi nakhehi vā} \\
\text{na jāṃghāhi na úrūhi na vaṇṇena sarena vā} \\
\text{liṅgaṃ jātimayām n'eva, yathā aṅṅāsu jātisu. 610}
\end{align*}
\]

Divyāvadāna p. 626.18-23:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{na keseṇa na kaṇābhīyām na śīrṣena na cakṣusā} & / \\
\text{na mukhena na nāsayā na grīvāyā na bāhunā} & / \\
\text{norasā 'py atha pārśvābhīyām na prṛṣṭhenodarena vā} & / \\
\text{norubhyām atha jaṅghābhīyām pāṅipādanakhena ca} & / \\
\text{na svarena na vaṛṇena na sarvāṁśair na maithunaih} & / \\
\text{nāṇaviśeṣaḥ sarveṣu manusyeṣu на vidyate} & /
\end{align*}
\]

The Chinese Tripiṭaka contains two translations (T, nos 1300, 1301) which correspond rather closely with the Sanskrit text. In his study on the Chinese translations of the Śārdūlaśakāvaḍāña, W. Zinkgräf tried to show that they cannot have been translated before the sixth century. However, a detailed study of the terminology of these two Chinese

\[33\] W. Zinkgräf, Vom Divyāvadāna zur Avadāna-Kalpalata, Heidelberg 1940. Important is F. Weller’s review, OLZ 45, 1942, Sp. 67-79. According to Tomojiro Hayashiya, T. no. 1301 was translated by Chu Fa-hu who translated texts in the period 265-313, and T. no. 1300 was translated after the Sung and Ch’i dynasties (420-502) by an unknown translator, cf. iyaku kyōrui no kenkyū, Tōkyō 1945, 524-541.
translations will be necessary in order to determine their dates, and, in
the absence of such a study, it is not possible to venture an opinion
about the probable date of the Sanskrit original.

Easier to date is another text in which the brahmanical institutions are
condemned. Sanskrit fragments discovered in Central Asia show that
the author of this version was Kumāralāta and the title of the work
Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā. According to Kato, Kumāralāta lived in the period
immediately preceding that of Harivarman, Śrīlāta, Vasubandhu and Saṃghabhadra.
Probably one is not very wrong in stating that
Kumāralāta lived in the first half of the fourth century. The seventy-
seventh story deals with the refutation of the Hindu caste system, and in
his translation Huber refers to the Vajrācārya and Manusmṛti.

The Buddhist texts which deal with the caste system can be divided
into two groups. First the canonical Pāli texts in which no reference is
made to Hindu texts at all, and secondly the Vajrācārya, the Śārīra-
kaṇḍakārṣīnuṇa and the Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā, the authors of which seem to have
been well versed in the Hindu scriptures. In all these texts, however, the
opposition to the caste system is absolute. It is therefore a great surprise
to discover that in another Buddhist text, the Manusmṛti, is quoted not
with a polemical intention but with approval. In the first chapter of
Bhāvakīveka’s commentary on Nāgārjuna’s Mālamadhyamakakārikās,
the Prajñāpradīpa, one finds the following passage: “Er [i.e. Bhagavat]
hat ... den Nektar der Wahrheit über alle Gegebenheiten gewonnen, der
vom Netz der Vielfalt vollkommen frei, durch fremde Hilfe nicht zu
erkennen und dem begrifflichen Denken nicht zugänglich ist, und hat
auf die beschränkte und höchste Wahrheit (saṃvṛti-, paramārthasatyan)
gestützt mit Worten wie Entstehen und Nichtentstehen denen, welche
im vorzüglichsten Fahrzeug (des Mahāyāna) fahren, den herrlichen
Edelstein des abhängigen Entstehens (pratītyasamutpādān) mitgeteilt,
welcher (des Hörers) Geburt, Alter, Geschlecht, Ort und Zeit nicht
unberücksichtigt lasst, und den alle fremden Lehrer (tīrthikāh), Jünger

34 Translated by Édouard Huber: Ācārya, Sūtrālaṃkāra, traduit en français sur la
version chinoise de Kumārajīva, Paris 1908.
35 Heinrich Lüders, Bruchstücke der Kalpanāmaṇḍitikā des Kumāralāta, Leipzig 1926.
See further Yamada Ryūjō, Bongo butten no shobunke, Kyōto 1959, 72 and IIJ 12, 1969-
1970, 270.
36 J. Kato, “Notes sur les deux maîtres bouddhiques Kumāralāta et Śrīlāta”, in:
Indianisme et Bouddhisme. Mêlages offerts à Mgr Étienne Lamotte, Louvain-la-Neuve
1980, 213.
37 Cf. Huber, op. cit., 437-441.
(śrāvakāḥ) und Einzelbuddhas (pratyekabuddhāḥ) nicht besitzen”\textsuperscript{38}. In a note Kajiyama refers to Avalokitavrata’s commentary on Bhāvaviveka’s work and remarks: “Was die Kaste betrifft, so ist es z.B. einem Brahmānaḥ oder Kṣatriyaḥ zu verkündigen, aber nicht einem Vaiśyaḥ oder Śūdraḥ”\textsuperscript{39}. In this connection Avalokitavrata quotes a verse from a work of the heretics:

\begin{verbatim}
phyi-rol-pa rnams-kyi gzūn-las /
dmañs-rigs la ni blo-gros daṅ // lhag-ma bsreg-byas sbyin mi-byas //
de-la chos-bstan mi bya-ziṅ // de-la bṛtul-žugs bstan mi-byas //
\end{verbatim}

This verse is a literal translation of \textit{Manusmrīty} IV.80:

\begin{verbatim}
na śūdrāya matim dadyān nocchiṣṭam na haviṣṇtram /
na cāsyopadiṣed dharmam na cāsya vrataṃ ādiṣet //
\end{verbatim}

Bühler translated this verse as follows: “Let him not give to a Śūdra advice, nor the remnants (of his meal), nor food offered to the gods; nor let him explain the sacred law (to such a man), nor impose (upon him), a penance”\textsuperscript{40}.

It is difficult to find a verse more contrary to the spirit of Buddhism than the one quoted above. Kajiyama points out that according to the Chinese tradition, Bhāvaviveka lived in the middle of the sixth century. With regard to Avalokitavrata, Kajiyama remarks that he is unable to say anything about his date apart from the fact that Avalokitavrata knew both Dharmakīrti and Candrakīrti. Avalokitavrata’s \textit{Prajñāprādipatikā} was translated by Jñānagarbha and Cog-ro Klui rgyal-mtshan who translated texts in the beginning of the ninth century\textsuperscript{41}, and Avalokitavrata must therefore have lived between 625 and 800.

In his review of Lüders’s \textit{Philologica Indica}, Renou uses the term “brāhmanisation bouddhique”\textsuperscript{42}. However, that Buddhist brahmanisation would go to such lengths as to approve of the Hindu caste system is something one would not have expected. It would be too hazardous to build a theory on the strength of a single quotation, but one wonders whether we do not have here an indication of a tendency among Buddhist scholars, authors of learned philosophical śāstras, to assimilate tenets found in brahmanical learning.

\textsuperscript{38} Y. Kajiyama, “Bhāvaviveka’s Prajñāprādipāḥ (1. Kapitel)”, in: \textit{WZKS} 7, 1963, 40-41. The word translated by Kajiyama as ‘Geschlecht’ is Tibetan \textit{rigs} which here probably renders Sanskrit \textit{varṇa}.

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Op. cit.}, 41 n. 3.

\textsuperscript{40} G. Bühler, \textit{The Laws of Manu}, Oxford 1886, 141.

\textsuperscript{41} Cf. “Notes à propos des colophons du Kanjur”, in: \textit{ZAS} 6, 1972, 524.

\textsuperscript{42} Cf. \textit{OLZ} 45, 1942, Sp. 191.
### ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DN</td>
<td>Dīghanikāya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IIJ</td>
<td>Indo-Iranian Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JA</td>
<td>Journal asiatique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MN</td>
<td>Majjhimanikāya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OLZ</td>
<td>Orientalistische Literaturzeitung</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WZKS</td>
<td>Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- und Ostasiens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZAS</td>
<td>Zentralasiatische Studien</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>