

6 (Sappurisāsappurisa) Vassa,kāra Sutta

The Discourse to Vassakāra (on the good person and the false person) | A 4.187
 Ce **Dutiya Vassa,kāra Sutta = Vassa,kāra Sutta 2** The Second Discourse to Vassakāra
 Theme: The good person and the false person on a worldly level
 Translated & annotated by Piya Tan ©2014

1 Sutta highlights

1.1 The (Sappurisāsappurisa) Vassa,kāra Sutta (A 4.187) is a short dialogue between the Buddha and the brahmin Vassa,kāra, chief minister of Magadha. The Sutta opens very much like the Cūḷa Puṇṇama Sutta (M 110), where the Buddha starts off by asking the monks about the two kinds of persons, while here in the (Sappurisāsappurisa) Vassa,kāra Sutta (A 4.187), it is Vassa,kāra who asks the Buddha the same questions [§§1.3-4.2].

1.2 The (Sappurisāsappurisa) Vassakāra Sutta is a short teaching on **the false person and the good person** given to Vassakāra, king Ajātasattu's chief minister [§5], who, as a man of the world, gives historical examples of them [§6]. However, in this Sutta, dealing with a worldly level of definition, *sappurisa* should be translated simply as “good person,” while *asappurisa* as a “false person.”¹

2 Key names

2.1 VASSA,KĀRA

2.1.1 Politician and strategist. Vassa,kāra is the interlocutor in the (Sappurisāsappurisa) Vassa,kāra Sutta, which is named after him. He was chief minister to king Ajātasattu of Magadha, and a crafty politician and strategist. **The Vassa,kāra Sutta** (A 7.20/4:17-21) relates how Ajātasattu, wishing to wage war against the Vajjīs, sends Vassa,kāra to ask the Buddha about their weaknesses.²

Ajātasattu later applied his cunning or desperation through his chief minister, Vassa,kāra, who pretended that he had barely escaped with his life from Ajātasattu. Having been given refuge and hospitality at Vesālī, Vassa,kāra lived there for three years, secretly sowing dissension amongst the Vajjīs. However, it was only after 16 years that the Vajjīs finally fell under his sway.

Since then, the most important Vajjī tribe, **the Licchavīs**, remained subdued for many centuries until the 4th century CE, when they would regain their power under the Imperial Guptas, with Candragupta I marrying Kumāra,devī, a daughter of the Licchavīs and becoming the mother of Samudragupta.³

2.1.2 Vassa,kāra and Sunīdha. Vassa,kāra is often paired with Sunīdha (as in the dvandva, *sunīdha,vassakāra*), such as in **the Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16),⁴ where they are referred to as “chief ministers” (*mahāmatta*), in charge of the Magadha capital, Pāṭaligāma's fortifications against any attacks from the Vajjīs.⁵ To establish a public connection with the Buddha (and so project a favourable public image), they follow the Buddha's progress through the town, and called the gate through which the Buddha departs as “the Gotama Gate” (*gotama,dvāra*).

However, their efforts to name the nearby ford as “Gotama's Crossing” (*gotama,tittha*) fail, because the Buddha does not descend into the river there, but uses his psychic power to cross over the flooded Ganges.⁶ Nothing else is known of Sunīdha beyond this.

2.1.3 Vassa,kāra and Mahā Kaccāna. The Majjhima Commentary on the Gopaka Moggallāna Sutta (M 108) has a curious story about Vassa,kāra. It is said that once, upon seeing Mahā Kaccāna descending

¹ A 4.187 @ SD 45.6.

² A 7.20/4:17-21 @ SD 72.14. This teaching is also found in **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16,1.1-5/2:72-76), SD 9.

³ DA 99; *Journal of the Asiatic Soc of Bengal* (JASB) 17 1921:269-271. For details, see Piya Tan, *The Buddha and His Disciples*, Singapore, 2004: ch 8 “The Thundering Silence” §9b.

⁴ Eg D 16,1.26 @ SD 9.

⁵ On their rank, see **Mahā Parinibbāna S** (D 16,1.2) n, SD 9. On Pāṭali,gāma, see D 16,1.26 n, SD 9.

⁶ U 90 & UA 2:424 (see UA:M 1114 n595).

Mt Vulture Peak, he remarks that Mahā Kaccāna looks just like a monkey. Hearing this, the Buddha says that unless Vassakāra asks for the elder’s forgiveness, he would be born as a monkey in Veḷu,vana.

Vassa,kāra, however, was more of a politician than a man of faith, and does not seek forgiveness from Maha Kaccāna. Fearing that the Buddha’s prophecy would come true, he has various fruit trees and other trees planted in Veḷu,vana, to be of use to him as a monkey in due course. After his death, he is actually reborn as a monkey who answers to the name Vassa,kāra! (MA 4:73)⁷

2.2 THE BRAHMIN TODEYYA. The Aṅguttara Commentary says that he is so called because he resides in the village of Tudi (*tudi.gāma,vāsika*, AA 3:164), near Sāvattihī.⁸ He is the head of the Todeyya clan of brahmins.⁹

As a prominent brahmin, Todeyya is often listed with other brahmins peers, that is, Caṅkī, Tārukkha, Pokkhara,sāti, and Jānussonī.¹⁰ **The Vera,haccāni Sutta** (S 35.133) says that he is the owner of the mango grove at Kāmaṇḍa.¹¹ His son is the famous Subha Todeyya,putta.¹²

2.3 KING EḷEYYA AND HIS ATTENDANTS

2.3.1 Commentarial note. The Aṅguttara Commentary explains Vassa,kāra’s account of king Eḷeyya as follows. The brahmin, being himself a good person himself, praises king Eḷeyya, his retinue, and Uddaka Rāma,putta. For, a false person is like a one blind, and good person like one with sight. As the blind sees neither the blind nor one with sight, so a false person knows neither a good person nor a false person.

But just as one with sight sees both the blind and the one with sight, so a good person knows both the good and the false person. The brahmin (Vassa,kāra), thinking, “Todeyya, being a good person, knows who are the false persons,” was delighted because of this, said, “It is wonderful, master Gotama!” Having approved of the Tathagata’s word, he left. (AA 4:164)

2.3.2 Vappa’s verse. The Commentary is probably alluding to the **Vappa Thera,gāthā**, which actually tersely and poetically restates the Sutta’s 4 main statements [§§1.3-4.2] and the parable here as follows:

<i>Passati passo passantam</i>	The seeing see the seeing,
<i>apassantañ ca passati</i>	and sees the not-seeing, too.
<i>apassanto apassantam</i>	The not-seeing neither sees the not-seeing
<i>passantañ ca na passatīti</i>	nor sees the seeing. (Tha 61)

2.4 UDDAKA RĀMA,PUTTA. The Sutta commentary identifies Rāma,putta (“Rāma’s son”) [§6] as Uddaka Rāma,putta (AA 4:163). As such, he is one of the first 2 teachers of the ascetic Gotama (the Buddha during his pre-awakening self-mortification days). The other is Āḷāra Kālāma.¹³

Interestingly, unlike Āḷāra, who does teach meditation to the Bodhisattva, ascetic Gotama, that is, up to the sphere of nothingness (*ākiñcaññ’āyatana*),¹⁴ Uddaka probably only transfers his father, Rāma’s teaching¹⁵ on the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception (*n’eva,saññā,nāsaññ’āyatana*) to the Bodhisattva.¹⁶ In other words, Uddaka has still neither awakened nor attained any high level of meditation.¹⁷

⁷ On Vassa,kāra’s destiny and other details, see **Gopaka Moggallāna S** (M 108), SD 33.5 (1.2.4).

⁸ DA 2:384; MA 5:8.

⁹ DA 2:399; MA 3:443; AA 3:164.

¹⁰ D 13,2/1:235; Sn p115.

¹¹ S 35.133/4:121 @ SD 46.14.

¹² See **Cūḷa Kamma Vibhaṅga S** (M 135) (also called Subha S) @ SD 4.15 (1) & **(Brahma,vihāra) Subha S** (M 99) & SD 38.6 (3).

¹³ See **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,16/1:165 f) + SD 1.11 (4); **Uddaka S** (S 35.103), SD 96.2; & SD 33.1b (3): the 2 teachers.

¹⁴ **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,16(1)/1:165), SD 1.11.

¹⁵ On Rāma’s identity, see M 26,16.4 n + SD 1.11 (4.2).

¹⁶ **Ariya Pariyesanā S** (M 26,16(3)/1:166), SD 1.11.

¹⁷ See **Uddaka S** (S 35.103), SD 96.2.

The Discourse to Vassa,kāra (on the good person and the false person)

A 4.187

1 At one time the Blessed One was staying in the squirrels' feeding-ground in the Bamboo Grove near Rāja,gaha.

1.2 Then, the brahmin Vassa,kāra,¹⁸ chief minister of Magadha, approached the Blessed One and exchanged greetings with him. When this courteous and friendly exchange was concluded, the brahmin Vassa,kāra, chief minister of Magadha, sat down at one side.

Vassa,kāra question the Buddha

1.3 Sitting thus as one side, the brahmin Vassa,kāra, chief minister of Magadha, said this to the Blessed One,

“Is it possible, master Gotama, for a false person to know a false person, thus, ‘This worthy one is a false person?’”

1.4 “It is not possible, brahmin, there’s no way that *a false person would know another false person, thus: ‘This worthy one is a false person’.*”¹⁹

2 “Is it possible, then, master Gotama, for a false person to know a good person,²⁰ thus, ‘This worthy one is a good person?’”

2.1 “It is not possible, brahmin, there’s no way that *a false person would know a good person, thus: ‘This worthy one is a good person’.*”

3 “Is it possible, then, master Gotama, for a good person to know a good person, thus, ‘This worthy one is a good person?’”

3.1 “It is possible, brahmin, there’s a way that *a good person would know a good person, thus: ‘This worthy one is a good person’.*”

4 “Is it possible, then, master Gotama, for a good person to know a false person, thus, ‘This worthy one is a false person?’”

4.2 “It is possible, brahmin, there’s a way that *a good person would know a false person, thus: ‘This worthy one is a false person’.*”

Vassa,kāra’s refrain

5 “It’s wonderful, master Gotama! It’s marvellous, master Gitama! How [180] well said this is by master Gotama, that is to say,

‘It is not possible, brahmin, there’s no way that *a false person would know another false person, thus: ‘This worthy one is a false person.’*”

It is not possible, too, brahmin, there’s no way that *a false person would know a good person, thus: ‘This worthy one is a good person.’*”

It is possible, brahmin, there’s a way that *a good person would know a good person, thus: ‘This worthy one is a good person.’*”

It is possible, too, brahmin, there’s a way that *a good person would know a false person, thus: ‘This worthy one is a false person.’*”

¹⁸ On Vassa,kāra, see Intro (2.1).

¹⁹ *Aṭṭhānam kho etaṃ brāhmaṇa anavakāso yaṃ asappuriso asappurisaṃ jāneyya ‘asappuriso ayam bhavan’ti.* This is an example of “historical present,” also called “dramatic present” or “narrative present.” See Huddleston & Pullum, *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*, 2002:129-131.

²⁰ “Good person,” *sappurisa*: on tr see (1.2).

Vassa.kāra's testimony

6 Once, master Gotama, carping against others arose in the assembly of the brahmin Todeyya,²¹ thus,²²

“This king Eḷeyya is foolish to be deeply faithful [deeply devoted] in the recluse Rāma,putta,²³ to show him supreme honour, that is, by saluting him, rising from his seat, putting his palms in lotus gesture, and showing him respect.²⁴

6.2 These attendants [retinue] of king Eḷeyya²⁵—Yamaka, Moggalla, Ugga, Nāv'indakī, Gandhabba and Aggi,vessa—too, are *foolish to be deeply faithful in the recluse Rāma,putta, to show him supreme honour in such ways as saluting him, rising from his seat, putting his palms in lotus gesture, and showing him respect.*

6.3 Thereupon, the brahmin Todeyya led them to this conclusion,²⁶

‘What do you think, sirs, isn't king Eḷeyya wise in being one amongst the more insightful in seeing the benefits of his various duties and various proclamations?’²⁷

‘Yes, sir, *king Eḷeyya is wise in being one amongst the more insightful in seeing the benefits of his various duties and various proclamations.*’

6.4 ‘Now, sirs,²⁸ it is because the recluse Rāma,putta is wiser than king Eḷeyya in being wise in seeing the benefits of his various duties and various proclamations,

that king Eḷeyya is deeply faithful *in the recluse Rāma,putta, to show him supreme honour, that is, by saluting him, rising from his seat, putting his palms in lotus gesture, and showing him respect.*

6.5 What do you think, sirs, the attendants of the wise king Eḷeyya—Yamaka, Moggalla, Ugga, Nāv' -indakī, Gandhabba and Aggi,vessa—are they amongst the more insightful in seeing the benefits of his various duties and various proclamations?’

‘Yes, sir, *the attendants of the wise king Eḷeyya—Yamaka, Moggalla, Ugga, Nāv'indakī, Gandhabba and Aggi,vessa*²⁹— *they are amongst the more insightful in seeing the benefits of his various duties and various proclamations.*’

6.6 ‘Now, sirs,³⁰ it is because the recluse Rāma,putta is the wiser than the attendants of king Eḷeyya—Yamaka, Moggalla, Ugga, Nāv'indakī, Gandhabba and Aggi,vessa—

that the attendants of king Eḷeyya are deeply faithful *in the recluse Rāma,putta, to show him supreme honour, that is, by saluting him, rising from his seat, putting his palms in lotus gesture, and showing him respect.*³¹

7 It is wonderful, master Gotama! It is marvellous, master Gotama! *How well said this is by master Gotama, that is to say,*

²¹ Todeyya: see Intro (2.2).

²² *Ekam idaṃ bho gotama samayaṃ todeyyassa brāhmaṇassa parisati* [Be Se so; Ce *parisatiṃ*; Ee *parisati*] *par-ūp'ārambhaṃ vattenti.*

²³ Ie Uddaka Rāma,putta (AA 4:163). See Intro (2.4).

²⁴ *Bālo ayaṃ rājā eḷeyyo samaṇe rāma,putte abhippasanno, samaṇe ca pana rāma,putte eva,rūpaṃ parama,nipacca,kāraṃ karoti, yad idaṃ abhivādanaṃ paccuṭṭhānaṃ añjali,kammaṃ sāmīci,kammaṃ'ti.*

²⁵ Eḷeyya, only mentioned here: prob a “king of Magadha” (DPPN), The other were his “attendants” (*parihāraka*), glossed as “servants, retainers or followers” (*paricāraka*, AA 4:164).

²⁶ *Tyāssu'daṃ todeyyo brāhmaṇo iminā nayena neti.* Comy glosses *iminā nayena neti* as meaning “he won them over, showed them by this means” (*iminā kāraṇena anuneti jānāpeti*, AA 3:164).

²⁷ *Taṃ kiṃ maññanti bhonto, pañḍito rājā eḷeyyo karaṇīyādhikaraṇīyesu vacanīyādhivacanīyesu alam-attha,-dasa,tarehi alam-attha,dasa,taro'ti.*

²⁸ Text reads *bho* (pl), rare (here at §6.4 (A 2:180,27) & below §6.6 (A 2:181,7); elsewhere 2nd pl, *bhonto*), but *bho* as 2nd pl does occur, eg **Ambaṭṭha S** (D 3,1.16.2/1:93,1), SD 21.3; **Sundarika Bhāra,dvāja S** (Sn 457a), SD 22.2.

²⁹ The names (as Eḷeyya's attendants) are only found here.

³⁰ Text reads *bho* (pl): see prec n.

³¹ On Comy's explanation for Vassa,kāra's account of **Eḷeyya and his attendants**, see Intro (2.3),

‘It is not possible, brahmin, there’s no way that a false person would know another false person, thus: “This worthy one is a false person.”

It is not possible, too, brahmin, there’s no way that a false person would know a good person, thus: “This worthy one is a good person.”

It is possible, brahmin, there’s a way that a good person would know a good person, thus: “This worthy one is a good person.”

It is possible, too, brahmin, there’s a way that a good person would know a false person, thus: “This worthy one is a false person.”

7.2 Well now, master Gotama, we must be going. We have much work, much to be done.”³²

“Brahmin, please do now as you deem fit.”³³

7.3 Then the brahmin Vassa,kāra, chief minister of Magadha, rejoicing and approving of the word of the Buddha, rose from his seat and left.³⁴

— evaṃ —

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³² *Handa ca dāni ma yaṃ bho gotama gacchāma bahu,kiccā mayaṃ bahu,karaṇīyā’ti.* See foll n.

³³ *Yassa’dāni tvaṃ brāhmaṇa kālaṃ maññasīti.* The prec and this are stock: see **Sāmañña,phala S** (D 32,103) n @ SD 8.10 for details.

³⁴ *Atha kho vassa,kāro brāhmaṇo magadha,mahāmatto bhagavato bhāsitaṃ abhinanditvā anumoditvā uṭṭhāy’āsanaṃ pakkāmīti.*