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## Bhikkhaka Sutta

The Discourse on the Mendicant | S 7.20 [Ee S 7.2.10]  
 Theme: The true purpose of living on alms (renunciation)  
 Translated by Piya Tan ©2017

1 Introduction

## 1.1 SUTTA HIGHLIGHT

Both the **Bhikkhaka Sutta** (S 7.20) and its preceding text, the **Māt’uposaka Sutta** (S 7.19), SD 50.39, centre on brahmins who are mendicants (*bhikkhaka*). The latter Sutta does not mention “mendicant,” but this is implied by the word “alms” (*bhikkha*) in S 7.19. There is, however, a significant difference between the mendicants in the two Suttas.

In the **Māt’uposaka Sutta**, the brahmin is not a religious mendicant, but is merely discharging his filial duties—collecting almsfood to support his parents. The Buddha praises this act as being wholesome (as an act of filial piety).

In the **Bhikkhaka Sutta**, the brahmin claims to be a religious mendicant—like a monk (*bhikkhu*). In this case, the Buddha rejects the mendicancy since it is merely a ritualistic brahminical life-style that does not lead to spiritual awakening and liberation, as in the case of true renunciation of good monastics, that is, as a renunciant (*pabbajita*).

## 1.2 THE 2 PAIRS OF VERSES

**1.2.1 A true renunciant.** In the Saṃyutta, the verses are each addressed to a brahmin who is a beggar or mendicant (*bhikkhaka*) and who want, on that account, to be called a “monk” (*bhikkhu*). In the first verse (S 703 = Dh 266) [4], the Buddha says that mere begging does not make one a monk, nor could someone who is a brahmin, still living at home—hence, not a renunciant (*pabbajita*)—be called a *bhikkhu*.

1.2.2 A true bhikkhu

**1.2.2.1** The second verse (S 704 = Dh 267) [5] states that a *bhikkhu* merely wanders in society, “the world” (*loke carati*), implying that he cannot be a householder. Dh 142b gives a remarkably broad and beautiful insight into the nature of a **bhikkhu** in terms of practice rather than looks:

<p><i>Alaṅkato ce pi samañ careyya          santo danto niyato brahma,cārī          sabbesu bhūtesu nidhāya daṇḍam          so brāhmaṇo so samaṇo sa bhikkhu.</i></p>	<p>Though well adorned [finely clad], if he fares in calmness,          at peace, tamed, self-controlled, living the holy life,          having put down the rod towards all beings—          he is a brahmin, he is a recluse, he is a monk. (Dh 142)<sup>1</sup></p>
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**1.2.2.2** The Commentary to this verse gives the spiritual or soteriological derivation of *bhikkhu* as follows: “A monk (*bhikkhu*) is one who has destroyed the defilements” (*bhinna,kilesattā bhikkhūti*, DhA 3:83). The more common etymology is that a *bhikkhu* is one who lives by alms (*bhikkha*) (*bhikkhatīti bhikkhu*).<sup>2</sup> While this latter etymology focuses on how a monastic supports himself (what he does for a living), the former highlights the goal of renunciation—that of awakening and liberation.

<sup>1</sup> See also DA 3:756 = MA 1:241; VbhA 216 f; cf SnA 251; Kvu 1:267 f :: Kvu:SR 157 f.

<sup>2</sup> Vbh 245; ThaA 2:71; VbhA 327.

### 1.3 REJECTION OF BRAHMANISM

**1.3.1** The Dhammapada story behind **Dh 266-267** adds to the background story of the Bhikkhaka Sutta, presumably to make it more intelligible, especially when the meaning of *viṣṣa* (Dh 266c) [2.2] has been forgotten. The Commentary seems to have forgotten its original meaning of “house or household life”—from the Sanskrit *veśma*, still found in the Gāndhārī Dharmapada, verse 67, and the Udāna,varga 32.18 [2.2.4].

Hence, the Commentary tries to explain why the brahmin is begging, by simply stating that he has gone forth—thereby destroying the point of the Dhammapada verse. The Commentary further explains why he cannot be regarded as a *bhikkhu*, by adding the detail that he has gone forth in an “outside congregation” (*bāhira,samaye*), that is, heretical order.

**1.3.2** Clearly, these two verses [**Dh 266 f = S 703 f**] refer to a brahminical view of the householder, and to its incompatibility with being a *bhikkhu* in the Buddhist sense of the word. We see another anti-brahminical verse in **Dh 344**:

<p><i>Yo nibbanatho vanādhimutto vana,mutto vanam eva dhāvati tam puggalam eva pasatha mutto bandhanam eva dhāvati</i></p>	<p><b>Dh 344</b></p>	<p>One who has come from the forest, forest-free, out of the forest, runs back to that same forest— just look at that man! Set free, <span style="float: right;">d</span> he only runs back to bondage [prison] again!</p>
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The Dhammapada Commentary tells the story of a young man who joins the order but later returns to lay life, and explains the verse in the same way [1.3.1]. These explanations, however, do not highlight the pun on the senses of *vana* as “forest” and “desire.” The best known example of such a wordplay<sup>3</sup> is found in **Dh 283** [1.3.3].

#### 1.3.3 The forest dweller

**1.3.3.1** The Dhammapada verse **Dh 283** has perhaps the most famous wordplay on *vana* as “forest” and “desire” in the Pali canon:

<p><i>Vanam chindatha mā rukkham vanato jāyati bhayam chetvā vanañ ca vanathañ ca nibbaṇā hotha bhikkhavo</i></p>	<p><b>Dh 283</b></p>	<p>Cut down the forest, but not the tree. From the forest arises fear. Having cut down forest and growths, O bhikshus, you are forest-free!</p>
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**1.3.3.2** This beautiful verse is about the true practice of the forest-dweller (*vana,pattha*), often mentioned in the suttas.<sup>4</sup> Apparently, the brahmins, too, have taken up and modified this idea as a counter-measure to the rising influence of the Buddha and his monastics. They are those who leave their home and family, and lead a reclusive live in the forest.

The wordplay is that the brahmin’s going to the forest—not on account of renunciation or the task of awakening—is still that of running to desire or comfort (perhaps running away from domestic duties or social obligations, or from family discord)—and therefore to bondage.

<sup>3</sup> For other wordplays in the Dhammapada, see Dh 9 f, 44 f, 71, 79, 81, 92 f, 229, 230, 283, 294 f, 313, 344, 347, 410.

<sup>4</sup> D 1:71, 2:242, 3:49; M 1:104 (multiple), 346, 2:226; A 1:241, 3:92, 4:437, 5:207. For a full list of occurrences, search CSCD with a wildcard: vanapatth\*.

**Dh 266** [2.1] = **S 704** [§5] is a further example of the Buddha's criticism of another ritualistic brahminical practice, in imitation of the Buddhist practice or to counter that practice. It is such religious dexterity and cunning that has kept the brahminical religions of India as the mainstream and dominant culture to this day, that is, by trying to project the ideology, the false notion, that Buddhism is actually merely a manifestation of Brahmanism, or in its modern form, Hinduism.

**1.3.3.3** The early Buddhists, too, are adept in countering Brahminism and presenting the Dharma in the language of the masses. It is likely, then, that this verse [**Dh 266** = **S 704**] is a response to the notion of the brahminical forest dweller (*vana,pattha*), which later came to be part the institution of the 4-stage ashram (*aśrama*) system, that is, of the student (*brahma,carī*), the householder or family man (*grhastha*), the hermit (*vāna,prastha*), and the wandering mendicant (*sannyāsin*). This was clearly to prevent male caste members from renouncing the world to become Buddhist monks.<sup>5</sup>

For further analysis of this verse, see SD 10.6 (5.3).

## 2 Related texts

### 2.1 THE STORY OF THE MENDICANT BRAHMIN (DhA 19.7)

The Dhammapada Commentary titles it as “the story of a certain brahmin” (*annatara,brāhmaṇa vatthu*).

### SD 50.40(2.1)

## Aññatara,brāhmaṇa Vatthu

The Story of a Certain Brahmin • DhA 19.7/3:392 f  
Theme: On the qualities of a true monastic

**1** “One is not a monk that way” (*Na tena bhikkhu so hotīti*). This Dharma teaching was given by the Teacher while he was residing in Jeta's grove in connection with a certain brahmin.

**2** It is said that this brahmin went forth and joined an outside [heretical] order.<sup>6</sup> As he was going on his almsround, he thought:

“The recluse Gotama addresses his own disciples as ‘monks,’ those who go about collecting. He should address me as a monk, too.”

**3** He approached the Teacher and said:

“Master Gotama, I, too, live by going on almsround. Address me as a monk, too.”

**4** The Teacher, however, said to him:

“Brahmin, I do not call one a monk merely because he receives alms.<sup>7</sup> One who goes about taking up domestic habits is not called a monk.<sup>8</sup>

**5** But one who conducts himself with care regarding all formations—him I call a monk.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The ashram system, however, was known even in the Buddha's own time: see Doṇa Brāhmaṇa S (A 5.192), SD 36.14 (1.2.3). P Olivelle proposes that the ashram system was introduced, not so much as a reactionary strategy, but rather as “a scheme within which the pivotal category of *dharma* could be extended to include religious modes of life different from that of the Brāhmaṇical householder.” In short, it was an effort to liberalize the brahminical religious life (1993:100 f). Prob, after the Buddha's time, the system was enhanced as a reaction against Buddhist monasticism. See also SD 36.1 (1.7.1).

<sup>6</sup> So kira bāhira,samaye pabbajitvā.

<sup>7</sup> Atha naṃ satthā nāhaṃ brāhmaṇa bhikkhana,mattena bhikkhūti vadāmi.

<sup>8</sup> Na hi vissaṃ dhammaṃ samādāya vattanto bhikkhu nāma hoti.

<sup>9</sup> Yo pana sabba,saṅkhāresu saṅkhāya carati, so bhikkhu nāmāti.

- 6 Having said that, he uttered these verses:
- 7 *Na tena bhikkhu so hoti  
yāvatā bhikkhate pare  
vissam<sup>10</sup> dhammam samādāya  
bhikkhu hoti na tāvatā* Dh 266<sup>11</sup> One is not a monk that way,  
merely from begging others for alms.  
Having taken up the domestic life,  
one, as such, is not a monk [bhikkhu].
- 8 *Yo'dha<sup>12</sup> puññañ ca pāpañ ca  
bāhetvā brahma,cariyavā  
saṅkhāya<sup>14</sup> loke carati  
sa ve bhikkhūti vuccati* Dh 267 But who has abandoned both good and bad,<sup>13</sup> *b*  
one who lives the holy life, *a*  
fares in the world with understanding—  
he is indeed called a monk [bhikkhu].
- 9 At the end of the teaching, many attained the fruits of streamwinning and so on.<sup>15</sup>

## 2.2 Vissa (S 703c = Dh 266c) [4b]

**2.2.1** Some modern scholars have understood the Pali *vissa* to be equivalent to *viśva* (PED), or even *viṣvak*: “He who adopts the whole law is a mendicant, not he who adopts only a part”; or “He is not a mendicant simply because he adopts the whole law of the mendicant.”<sup>16</sup> These interpretations are fuzzy, and clearly do not seem bear out the Pali.

**2.2.2** Buddhaghosa, in fact, seems to know nothing of the original meaning of *vissa*, too. He explains the word *vissa* in **Dh 266c** as meaning either *visamaṃ* (which can be understood as “partial; intermittent; uneven”) or as *vissa,gandham* (Skt *visra-*) “smelling of raw meat,” that is, “an uneven quality (*visamaṃ dhammaṃ*); a state of stench (*vissa,gandham vā*), that is, the state of the karma of the body, etc” (*kāya,kamm'ādikaṃ dhammaṃ*, DhA 3:393,2) on **Dh 266**.

In his commentary on **S 703**, he glosses *vissa* figuratively as “the foul-smelling that is unwholesome karma” (*duggandham akusala,dhammaṃ*, SA 1:266).<sup>17</sup> However, it is difficult to make any good sense of this in connection with the context of either verse (Dh 266 and S 703).

**2.2.3** The misinterpretation of *vissa* as *visama* is probably old, since it is also found in **the Mahāvastu** (Mvst 3:422), which has *viṣamāṃ dharmāṃ*, “wrong states of mind.”<sup>18</sup> Norman suggests that *viṣama/-viṣama* and *vissa/veṣma* depend upon an earlier form *\*visma*, “domestic,” which was assimilated in *vissa* (a western form) and also resolved to *visama* (an eastern form).<sup>19</sup> But this does not seem to fully bring out the spirit of the passage, as we will clearly soon see.

<sup>10</sup> Dh:G 67 *veśma*; Uv 32.18 (T 19) *veśmāṃ*; Mvst 3:422 *viṣamāṃ*. See (2.2).

<sup>11</sup> This verse is missing in Uv ed Nakatani, 1987.

<sup>12</sup> *Yo'dha*: Comy glosses “in this teaching” (*yo'dhāti yo idha sāsane*, DhA 3:393,4-5). But ‘*dha* here is prob an old error for *ca*; cf *yo'dha* in Dh 409, 412, 415, 416. Uv 32.19 has *tu*; Dh:G *du*; Mvst 3:422,14\* *ca*. For the alternation *dha/ca/tu* meaning “but,” see Tha:N 237.

<sup>13</sup> On the arhat as having gone beyond good and bad (*puñña,papa,pahīna*), see SD 2.10 (3.2.3.4).

<sup>14</sup> Comy glosses *saṅkhā* as “knowledge, understanding” (*ñāṇa*, DhA 3:394).

<sup>15</sup> The native commentary has been omitted.

<sup>16</sup> Radhakrishnan (tr), *The Dhammapada*, Oxford, 1950.

<sup>17</sup> *Vissa* (cf Skt *visra*), a smell like raw flesh, as in *visa,gandha* DhS 265; DhS 319; SnA 286; DhA 3:393. Cf Dh 266, explained as “disagreeable, toxic smell” (*visama, visa,gandha*, DhA 3:393); *viss'antaram* (It 32,17; It:M 31 + n53): PED sv *vessantaram*. None of these glosses seem to bring out any helpful sense of *vissa* or its context here.

<sup>18</sup> Mvst 3:422; Mvst:J 3:423.

<sup>19</sup> See Dh:N 125 n266; Norman 1980:71 f; 1976b:52-55; 1997.

The **Udāna,varga**, on the other hand, has *veśyām dharmān*, “of the nature of a garb or external appearance,”<sup>20</sup> helpfully explained as “a man does not become a monk merely by undertaking the meretricious<sup>21</sup> *dharmā*” (“such as for their bellies sake, creep and intrude, and climb into the fold”), or, simply, “an easy, accessible *dharmā*.”<sup>22</sup>

**2.2.4 The Tibetan version** hardly agrees with this, having *groñ pañi chos*, where *groñ* means “house,” which is probably a good clue to the original sense of the *viśsa* or its original form. This suggests that *veśma* (“house”) is the more likely original form of the word than *veśya* (BHSD).

Fortunately, part of the verse has been preserved in a bilingual Agnean (East Tocharian or Tocharian A)<sup>23</sup> fragment: *bhikṣur na tāvatā bhavati ... veśma,dharmām samādāya*, the last phrase being translated as Tibetan “house” (*groñ*). This reading is further supported by **the Gāndhārī Dharmapada**, *veśma dharmā samadai* (Dh:G 67) and **the Udāna,varga**, *veśmām dharmām samādāya* (Uv 32.18).

**2.2.5** It is likely that the original sense of the first line of **Dh 266 and S 703** (which are almost synonymous) is something like “A *dhamma* no better than that of one living in a house,” that is, a state or lifestyle concerned merely with obtaining food to sustain oneself. Such an explanation, handed down orally, could then have given rise to the Pali *visama* and Buddhist Sanskrit *viśama*, when the sense of *\*vesma* or *\*visma*—both meaning “house”—was forgotten.

The word *vesma* actually occurs in Pali in a verse of **the Paṇḍara Jātaka** (J 518), spoken by the Garuda king, after catching the Nāga king and then, when he begged for mercy, sparing the Nāga king’s life:

<i>Ātañkinaṃ yathā kusala bhisakko pipāsītānaṃ [udaka] rahado va sīto vesmaṃ yathā hima,sit’atṭitānaṃ  evam pi te saraṇaṃ ahaṃ bhavāmīti</i>	Just as a doctor is skilled regarding the sick, or a cool lake (of water) to the thirsty, (or) as a house shelters one from the distress of snow and cold— even so, too, am I a refuge to you. (J 518/5:84,17*)
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The Sanskrit and the North-western Prakrit, on the hand, were able to preserve *veśma*- (“house”) [2.2.4] but, as in the other cases, failed to retain the original wordplay.<sup>24</sup> But now, putting all these clues together, we are able to reconstruct what can only be the original sense of the passage.

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<sup>20</sup> BHSD sv *veśya*.

<sup>21</sup> “Meretricious,” (1) having the nature of prostitution; (2) tawdrily or falsely attractive.

<sup>22</sup> From *Udāna,varga* fragments: see L de la Vallée Poussin, “Documents Sanscrits de la seconde collection M A Stein,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Soc* 1912:376, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.70560>.

<sup>23</sup> Tocharian is an extinct Central Asian branch of the Indo-European language family. It is known from manuscripts dating from the 6<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> cent CE, which were found in oasis cities on the northern edge of the Tarim Basin (now part of Xinjiang in NW China). See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tocharian\\_languages](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tocharian_languages).

<sup>24</sup> For a somewhat dated, but partly helpful, lengthy analysis, see John Brough, *The Gāndhārī Dharmapada*, 1962: 191 f. Most of the points above have been summarized and updated from Brough.

## The Discourse on the Mendicant

S 7.20

- 1 Originating in Sāvattḥī.
- 2 Then, a mendicant brahmin<sup>25</sup> approach the Blessed One and greeted him. When the courteous and friendly exchange was concluded, he sat down at one side.
- 3 Sitting thus at one side, the mendicant brahmin said to the Blessed One:  
“I, master Gotama, am a mendicant, and you, too, sir, is a mendicant. What is there between us?”<sup>26</sup>
- 4 *Na tena bhikkhako hoti  
yāvatā bhikkhate pare  
Vissam̐ dhammam̐ samādāya  
bhikkhu hoti na tāvatā.* 703 One is not a mendicant that way,<sup>27</sup>  
merely from begging others for alms.  
Having taken up the domestic life,<sup>28</sup>  
one, as such, is not a monk [bhikkhu].
- 5 *Yo’dha<sup>29</sup> puññañ ca pāpañca  
bāhitvā<sup>30</sup> brahma,cariyavā<sup>31</sup>  
sañkhāya loke carati  
sa ve bhikkhūti vuccatīti.* 704 But who has abandoned both good and bad, *b*  
one who lives the holy life, *a*  
fares in the world with wisdom—  
he is indeed called a monk [bhikkhu].
- 6 When this was said, the mendicant brahmin clan said to the Blessed One:  
“Wonderful, master Gotama! Wonderful, master Gotama! Just as if one  
were to place upright what had been overturned, or  
were to reveal what was hidden, or  
were to show the way to one who was lost, or  
were to hold up a lamp in the dark so that those with eyes could see forms,  
in the same way master Gotama has, in numerous ways, made the Dharma clear.  
I go to master Gotama for refuge, and to the Dharma, and to the community of monks, too.  
May master Gotama remember me as a layman who has gone for refuge from this day forth for  
life.”

— evaṃ —

170517 170518 170614r

<sup>25</sup> “Mendicant brahmin,” *bhikkhako brāhmaṇo*.

<sup>26</sup> Aham pi kho bho gotama bhikkhako, bhavam pi bhikkhako, idha no kiṃ nānā,karaṇan’ti.

<sup>27</sup> This verse is identical to Dh 266, except that *bhikkhako* here is replaced by *bhikkhu* [2.1].

<sup>28</sup> On *vissa*, see (2.2).

<sup>29</sup> See Dh 267a ad loc [2.1].

<sup>30</sup> Be Ce Ee *bahitvā*; Se *pavāhetva* (“having removed”).

<sup>31</sup> Be Ee Se *brahma,cariyam̐*; Ce Dh 267 *brahma,cariyavā*. *Brahmacariyam̐* does not fit the syntax, as the verb cannot apply to it (neither as subject nor object). The implied subject here is clearly the arhat, “who has abandoned bot good and bad” [2.1(8)].