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Āsaṃsa Bhikkhu Sutta

The Discourse on the Hopeful and the Monks | A 3.13

Theme: Who we are, what we are, and beyond

Translated by Piya Tan ©2015, 2017, 2025

1 Sutta summary

1.1 SUMMARY

The **Āsaṃsa Bhikkhu Sutta** (A 3.13) is about our attitude towards what matters most in our lives, especially with regards to spiritual training. This theme is applied to the world and those who have renounced the world, as shown in the Sutta's 2 parts:

1.1.1 The first triad [§§1-4] is about the 3 kinds of persons in the world:

- | | | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|---|------|
| (1) The “hopeless” | (<i>nirāso</i>) | one unable and unwilling to work for progress socially, | [§2] |
| (2) The “hopeful” | (<i>āsaṃso</i>) | one willing to progress, and | [§3] |
| (3) The “hope-free” | (<i>vigat’āso</i>) | one who is enjoying the fruits of his progress. | [§4] |

1.1.2 The second triad [§§5-8] is about the 3 kinds of people in monastic life:

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|---------------------|--|------|
| (4) The “hopeless” | one who is immoral but pretends to be a renunciant, | [§6] |
| (5) The “hopeful” | a renunciant who desires for progress, and | [§7] |
| (6) The “hope-free” | a renunciant who is enjoying the fruits of his progress (awakening). | [§8] |

2 Sutta Highlights

2.1 INDIVIDUALS

2.1.1 It is interesting to note that all the 6 people in the 2 triads are referred to individually, not in the plural as a generic group. Clearly, the Buddha is addressing us as *individuals* who need and can change for the better through self-reliance, self-understanding and self-liberation. The self here is, of course, our own mind as the tool of wisdom, the application of knowledge for growth and awakening.

2.1.2 That the subjects in this Sutta are addressed as individuals reflect our potential for personal evolution, a pattern of transition from the crowdedness of *the world* to the spaciousness of the individual, and ultimately, true individuality, that is, arhathood. **A true individual** (*sappurisa*) is one who is consistently morally virtuous, mentally stable, insightfully wise and free of worldliness.¹

2.2 PERSONS

2.2.1 What is a person?

To be able to evolve, change for the better, even reach the ideal, we must first realize and accept the fact that we are each a **person** (*puggala*). The question is: What is a “person”? Not *Who* is a person.

¹ On the true individual (*sappurisa*), see **Sappurisa S** (M 113) SD 23.7; **Bāla Paṇḍita S** (M 129,27-50) SD 2.22.

“Who” is what culture, society, tribe or class demand of us. The brahminical society of the Buddha’s time created the notion of “classes” or “castes”² and relegated the “low families” (*nīca, kula*) and “out-castes” (*caṇḍāla*), that is, the “fifth” (*pañcama*), unnamed class of non-persons.³

2.2.2 We become *what* we believe

2.2.2.1 Brahminical religion initiates and supports the caste system (hence, allows class oppression); social conditioning—along with poverty and lack of education—make and keep the “outcastes” (here used in a generic sense) “who” they are, as *non-persons*. Hence, says **the Āsaṃsa Bhikkhu Sutta**, when an outcaste member hears that a nobleman (*khattiya*) has been consecrated, “It does not occur to him, thus: ‘Now, when will the kshatriyas anoint me, too, with the kshatriya consecration?’” [§2.4]. It does not occur to him that he can be noble, too, by way of his diligence and moral virtue.

2.2.2.2 The outcastes—indeed, all of the class-based society—are conditioned to think of *who* they are: members of their respective classes, and to act accordingly. **The Āsaṃsa Bhikkhu Sutta** essentially teaches that they should think of—not *who*—but **what** an outcaste really is—a human person, like anyone else—they are all made up of and function as the 5 aggregates of form, feeling, perception, formations and consciousness⁴—just like any other human being.

2.2.2.3 Desperate theologians and cunning gurus work to control our minds, bodies and lives by creating imaginative (even inspiring) stories, scriptures and structures—such as gods, demons, the Lotus Sutra,⁵ the Bhagavad-gita⁶ and the caste-system. Such mind-blowing tools are used to stop us from thinking for ourselves and to accept their views and submit to them.

Once we accept even a bit of such polemics, we begin to be conditioned to think that “they must be right.” Then, we have handed them our remote—they can do what they like with our minds and lives, as they have been doing for others for millennia, that is, until wise and courageous dissenters and reformers stand up, expose and reject these false and insidious views for humanistic, life-centred and liberating teachings and practices. It is gratifying to see significant aspects of the history of religion as a struggle between the ubiquitous and overwhelming darkness of religion and the lightening liberation of education and self-transformation.

2.2.2.4 We are attracted to such faiths and ideologies often because of our similar views, fear of punishment, deference for authority, sense of inferiority, personal attraction, sexual guilt-feeling, social inadequacy, past conditioning, or some sense of innate lack. Hence, we desire acceptance or approval of others. We should instead urgently and wisely understand and correct such difficulties and conditionings to truly overcome our delusion and ignorance. Then, we will truly evolve as socially wholesome individuals capable of inspiring and enjoying truth and beauty in our actions, speech and thoughts.

² On classes or castes (*jāti*), see **Te, vijja S** (D 13) n, SD 1.8.

³ See **The person in Buddhism**, SD 29.6b.

⁴ See SD 29.2b (6): The free person.

⁵ See SD 10.16 (3.5.3.1); SD 36.1 (1.8.1.5); SD 66.13 (3.7.1).

⁶ Scholars regard such texts as being polemic, “of or pertaining to controversy, controversial, disputatious,” ie, to discredit and demean Buddhism, esp early Buddhism. On Bhagavad, gītā, see SD 36.1 (1.7.1).

2.2.3 Individuation: the making of an independent person

2.2.3.1 It is the brahminical class system that makes the outcaste “**hopeless**” (*nirāso*) by birth; but in terms of humanity, he is as “**hopeful**” as any 5-aggregate human being, a member of a free society, and just as capable of attaining awakening as anyone who rejects being defined by a few elitists who try to mislead society. The Buddha is that catalyst to such a humanization and “**individuation**” (becoming an individual, especially a true individual).

To be a **true individual** or **person** we must learn to be independent of others, that is, not to merely seek approval and acceptance of others we imagine to be “better” than we are in the sense of wealth, class, reputation or appearance. A true individual is to be a morally accountable human, one who understands and accepts the truth and reality that all our actions—thoughts, speech and deeds—have their effects, good or bad, upon us and others, in the present and on posterity. Hence, we *avoid evil, promote the good and purify the mind* (Dh 183).⁷

2.2.3.2 Just as humans have evolved as a *species*, the **person** can and must evolve into an individual, one who is able to think, speak and act for himself in wholesomely karmic terms, that is, being accountable for the greater evolution of other individuals, so that we have a society of evolving humans and evolved beings—not a mere tribe or herd of people defined by only birth and power. On the contrary, we should be defined and inspired by personal goodness, merit and vision, and the capacity for truth and beauty that finally blossom into awakening into the unconditioned, the blessed freedom that is nirvana.

2.3 HOPE, PRINCES AND RAJAHS

2.3.1 The hopeful

2.3.1.1 The 2nd kind of person in the world—according to the Āsaṃsa Bhikkhu Sutta—is **the crown-prince** (*yuva, rāja*), the kshatriya rajah’s eldest son [§3]. Upon hearing of another kshatriya being anointed for the kshatriya-rajah consecration, the crown prince, too, feels **hopeful** (*āsaṃsa*) of becoming the rajah himself. The theme here is that of birthright: in ancient kingship, kings produce heirs who, in their turn, become kings.

2.3.1.2 This spiritual import of this metaphor is that we all have **the potential for buddhahood**. This is the natural possibility for the human state to rise above itself, transcend the self, that is, the ability and need to understand the nature of non-self. It is basically this human potential for wisdom that frees us from all conditionality, that is, to attain the unconditioned, nirvana.⁸

It is best not to give any technical name to such a potential. To see something as technical is to limit it to some kind of fixed state or idea. The next stage is that we are likely to ritualize it, that is, to consider that buddhahood is a fixed process beginning with some kind of vow, supported by some ritual action. Then, we start to measure and compare it with arhathood and other aspects of sainthood.⁹

2.3.1.3 Finally, instead of working to attain awakening here and now, we may triumphantly but falsely promote the Buddhahood (with the big B) as being “superior” to arhathood. Then, we consider attaining

⁷ Dh 183 is part of the Buddha’s “admonitory code” (*ovāda pāṭimokkha*), given to the early arhats (MA 3:209): SD 16.1 (6.1); SD 56.1 (4.2.1.2); SD 61.5a (5.4.2.6).

⁸ On nirvana as the unconditioned, see **Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta S 1** (U 8.1), SD 50.1.

⁹ On ritualization, see SD 40a.8 (5). On buddhahood and arhathood in terms of awakening, see **Sambuddha S** (S 22.58), SD 49.10.

it as if we have a choice, without making any effort to better ourself in this life, despite the Buddha's admonition on the urgency of attaining liberation here and now.¹⁰

Once we begin to accept the notion that the Buddha must go through some kind of "rites of passage" or ritual process of meeting another Buddha, making a vow, another Buddha endorsing it, etc—this makes the whole idea of Buddhahood a fixed or deterministic process.¹¹ Then, later Buddhist theologians further revise "Buddhism" to proclaim that all the natural human struggle and spiritual quest that Sakya-muni goes through, and the actions and teachings he gives—indeed the whole appearance of the Buddha in the world—is but a cosmic play, a docetic¹² "projection," from the Dharmakāya as some cosmic God-head or "Buddhahead"!¹³ [2.3.1.4]

2.3.1.4 The early Buddhist sense of *dharmā, kāya* is that the Buddha, after he has awakened, is ontologically—his state of being in philosophical terms—in the light of non-self, as a person (the teacher), is identical with the Dharma (the teaching and truth). In early Buddhism, this simply means that, even after the Buddha's death, he can be "seen" in the form of the teaching (*dharmā*). Hence, it is famously said, "Vakkali, one who sees Dharma sees me; one who sees me sees Dharma" (*yo kho vakkalī dhammaṃ passati maṃ passati, yo maṃ passati dhammaṃ passati*), as famously stated in **the Vakkali Sutta** (S 22.87).¹⁴ Here, "sees" means both knowing and understanding buddhahood, leading to self-transformation and awakening.¹⁵

In Mahāyāna and later Buddhism, however, the *dharmā, kāya* (Sanskrit) is considered to be synonymous with perfect enlightenment (*sambodhi*), primordially or eternally existent, transcending all perceptual forms or signless (*animitta*), and hence impossible to perceive. Amongst its qualities (*guṇa*) are freedom from all conceptualization (*nirvikalpa*), liberation from all defilements, and the intrinsic ability to act in various ways.

In later forms of Indian and Tibetan Buddhism, under the influence of Tantric thought, the Dharmakāya is considered to be equivalent to the Buddha-mind. Philosophically, then, where the suttas teach that the after-death state of the Buddha or any arhat cannot be described in any way (exist, not exist, both, neither), later Buddhism *hypostatized* even such an apophatic¹⁶ statement—made it into a "reality" or "thing." The serious disadvantage of this is that it is still a **view**. In early Buddhism, any kind of view is a plank¹⁷ in the eye that blinds us from seeing true reality.¹⁸

2.3.1.5 We can imagine **religion** to be like a robotics class. We are taught how to make robots. So we create a most beautiful looking humanoid, fully limbed and featured, of just the right colours and proportions, and just rightly clothed. It is even able to talk and reply intelligently to us—so it seems. And we fall in love with it—we even worship it since it seems far better than we are. Are we human or are we robot now?

¹⁰ On the urgency of working towards the path of awakening in this life, see SD 51.17 (3.4.2.4).

¹¹ Also, see **Aspiration for Buddhahood and disciplehood**, SD 62.11.

¹² **Docetism** [9h] is the view that the Buddha is an eternal being (or at least one who lives for a world-cycle or an incalculable cycle) and who appears on earth as in a phantom-being performing phantom acts to save real beings. See SD 9 (9.3.2.4; 9.8). On docetism in Mahāyāna, see SD 36.2 (7.1): The deified Buddha.

¹³ Further see SD 49.10 (2.6.1.3).

¹⁴ S 22.87/3:120,28 (SD 8.8).

¹⁵ See SD 8.8 (1.3).

¹⁶ On apophasis (negative language), see SD 40a.1 (6.3).

¹⁷ "Plank," a wordplay on "a long narrow flat piece of wood" and "a main point in the policy of an organization, esp a political party." (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary).

¹⁸ See Oxford Dictionary of Buddhism, 2003: dharma-kāya.

This is called **the Pygmalion effect**, named after the Greek myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor who falls in love with a statue of Galatea he has carved.¹⁹ In our own times, this is also called the Rosenthal effect, a situation where a teacher's expectation shapes his students, for example, his higher expectations lead to an increase in performance. Broadly, we can say a student becomes what his teacher wants him to be—what is he, then?²⁰

2.3.1.6 When we are burdened with beliefs and dogmas, because of their very nature, we have to prove or defend them. Instead of working on how to understand how views arise, and to clear up our views, we are inexorably forced to defend our tenets and theology. We become the victims of our own views.

Instead of claiming that such an imaginative and grand hagiography as being “real” (hagiography and hagiology are rarely historical), we should usefully understand all such “stories” to be that—*stories*—that is mythical²¹ tools presenting motifs and symbolic actions depicting the human struggle for self-awakening. These are stories and teachings that are “provisional” (*pariyāya*),²² whose senses need to be “drawn out” (*neyy’attha*).²³

2.3.1.7 The qualities of the “hopeful monastic” are given in 2 related texts: **the Patthāna Sutta 1** (A 5.135) and **the Patthāna Sutta 2** (A 5.136). In the former, he is compared to a crown prince yearning to become king in due course, while in the latter, he is compared to a crown prince who yearns to become a viceroy. (SD 51.22)

2.3.2 The hope-free king

2.3.2.1 The 3rd person in the first triad of people existing in the world is the kshatriya rajah *who has been consecrated by anointment*, that is, crowned as a legitimate king. Even when he hears of another kshatriya being anointed, he does not *hope* to be anointed, too, since he has already been anointed and enjoying his kingship. He is said to be “**hope-free**” (*vigatāsa*) on account of not having to worry or hope about the past what has been fulfilled.

2.3.2.2 On a simple level, the import of the parable of the anointed kshatriya rajah is that when we have done good, we rest easy without having to worry about any negative consequences. On a higher level, it refers to the arhat as one who is awakened—with release from the influxes of sensual desire, existence and ignorance, and so is “freed” (*vimutta*), that is, has attained nirvana—of whom the suttas famously declare (in this “**essential arhathood stock passage**”):

With release, there is the knowledge,²⁴ ‘Freed (am I)!’
He understands thus:
‘Birth is ended,

vimuttasmim vimuttam iti ñāṇam hoti
(*pajānāti*)²⁵
khīṇā jāti

¹⁹ See Morford, Lenardon & Sham, *Classical Mythology* [1971], NY & London: Longman, 3rd ed 1985:117 f; 10th ed 2015:196 f; 12th ed 2024:344 f (Myth & Culture ch 6). See also

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pygmalion\(mythology\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pygmalion(mythology)).

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pygmalion_effect.

²¹ On the meaning and usefulness of the “mythical,” see SD 2.19 (1); SD 51.11 (3.1.1).

²² See “provisional” teaching, see SD 3.9 (7.5.1); SD 50.25 (1.4); *Pariyāya nippariyāya*, SD 68.2.

²³ See *Neyy’attha Nīt’attha S* (A 2.3.5+6), SD 2.6b.

²⁴ This is the arhat’s review-knowledge (*paccavekkhaṇa, ñāṇa*), the details of which follow.

²⁵ This verb is at the end of the para. Sometimes, the verb *abbhaññāsīm*, “I directly knew,” is used—as in *Bhaya Bherava S* (M 4,31/1:23), SD 44.3.

the holy life has been lived,
done is that which needs to be done.²⁶
There is no more of this state of being.²⁷

*vusitaṃ brahma, cariyāṃ
kataṃ karanīyaṃ
nāparaṃ itthatāyāti (pajānati)*

This is also called the “**arhat’s review-knowledge pericope**.”²⁸ It affirms that the arhat has attained the highest goal;²⁹ there is nothing more to be done,³⁰ not even a need even to become buddha.³¹

2.4 HOPE AND MONASTICS

2.4.1 The hopeless amongst the renunciants

2.4.1.1 In the 2nd triad, the Buddha first mentions an “**immoral person**” (*dussīla*) who is a false monastic. Significantly, this person is *not* referred to as a monk, but ominously said to be one of those “found existing amongst the monks” (*santo saṃvijjamānā bhikkhūsu*). When the Buddha himself admitted renunciants themselves—probably during the first 10 years (or perhaps during the 1st period)³²—they were either already arhats or soon enough became arhats. They are all de facto renunciants—generally known by the term “sons of family” (*kula,putta*).³³

2.4.1.2 However, in due course, when the Buddha allows the monks as a sangha, that is, as a legal person, to ordain monks through a monastic act (*saṅgha,kamma*), especially by that of an “act of a motion and 3 proclamations” (*ñatti,catuttha kamma*).³⁴ With such a dispensation of the Buddha, there arise, by a legal act of the sangha, the “monastic person.”³⁵

The term “monastic person” refers to a de jure monastic, one who has been duly accepted into the sangha by a monastic act. As such, he is mandated to undergo at least a 5-year tutelage (*nissaya*) with a competent teacher, so that he is properly trained to be a true monastic renunciant in the Dharma spirit. A monastic who reneges on this basic tutelage is likely to fail as a monastic and renunciant, or at best would be going on his own steam, that is, effectively without communion (*asaṃvāsa*) with the sangha. He is out of touch with the sangha, and hence a “false monk.”

2.4.1.3 The primary task of a monastic is to know **the Vinaya** so that he understands the meaning of being a monk and lives accordingly. As in secular law,³⁶ “ignorance of the law is no excuse,” so in monastic discipline, “ignorance of the Vinaya is no excuse.”

²⁶ This and the next line, cf “Nothing more beyond this”: **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39,21.6), SD 10.13.

²⁷ *Nāparaṃ itthatāya*: lit “there is no more of ‘thusness’.” This is the climax and conclusion for all the instructions where the Buddha says, “There is still something to be done,” beginning with §§3.3-3.5. See **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39,21.3/1:280), SD 10.13.

²⁸ See **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9,56.4) SD 7.14; **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39,21.3), SD 10.13 ; SD 51.18 (2.3.2.2).

²⁹ See **Mahānidāna S** (M 15,36.3) SD 5.17; SD 30.8 (6.4.4).

³⁰ See **Poṭṭhapāda S** (D 9,56.2/1:203) n, SD 7.14; SD 15.10a (1.1.1).

³¹ See **Mahā Assa,pura S** (M 39,21.6) SD 10.13. On “something more to be done” by the unawakened, see SD 51.17 (3.4.2.5).

³² That is, the 1st 20 years or so. See the 2 periods in the Buddha’s ministry: SD 1.1 (2.2); SD 40a.1 (1.3).

³³ See **Dhātu Vibhaṅga S** (M 140,3) n SD 4.17.

³⁴ See **Pabbajjā: A very short history**, SD 45.16 (0.2).

³⁵ SD 29.6b (4.3).

³⁶ *Ignorantia juris non excusat*, “ignorance of the law excuses not,” or *ignorantia legis neminem excusat* (“ignorance of the law excuses no one”), also *ignorantia legis non excusat: ignorantia juris haud excusat* (*Black’s Law*

Once the monastic has some basis in the Vinaya, he should go on to more diligently study the **Dharma**³⁷ so that he understands the purpose of being a monk—to attain awakening in this life itself—and acts accordingly.³⁸ “Ignorance of the Dharma is no excuse,” since our ignorance creates delusion which brings suffering. The Dharma clears things up and frees us from worldliness, and, in due course, frees us from suffering, with the attaining of nirvana.

2.4.1.4 A monastic who flouts the Vinaya is said to be “immoral” (*dussīla*), while one who neglects or misuses the Dharma is said to be “evil in nature” (*papa, dhamma*)—but the two terms are interchangeable. A monastic who neglects and disrespects both the Dharma and Vinaya also knows neither the meaning nor the purpose of monastic life. Hence, he is “not a recluse but claiming (or pretending) to be one; not a brahmachari (celibate practitioner) but claiming to be one” (*assamaṇo samaṇa, paṭiñño abrahmacārī brahmacārī, paṭiñño*). [§6]

The Sutta describes how such a “**hopeless**” (*nirāso*) person upon hearing the awakening of another as an arhat does not feel compelled to do the same for himself. Such a “*hopeless* person” is described as being one who “is immoral, evil in nature, impure and suspicious in conduct, secretive in action, not a recluse but claiming to be one, not a celibate but claiming to be one, rotten to the core, corrupt, a heap of filth” (*dussīlo hoti, papa, dhammo asucī saṅkassara, samācāro paṭicchanna, kammanto assamaṇo samaṇa, paṭiñño abrahmacārī brahmacārī, paṭiñño anto, pūti avassuto kasambu, jāto*). [§6]

2.4.1.5 The main problem with the immorally “**hopeless**” person amongst the monastics is that he neither appreciates his spiritual potential, much less works to attain arhathood when it is possible for him. Unlike the 1st “hopeless” person who is a *classless outcaste* without any opportunity for ever becoming a king, not even a crown prince, nor any warrior noble (*khattiya*), the hopeless monastic person is hopeless in the sense that he is capable of attaining the highest liberation, but is blinded by ignorance and fettered by craving.

2.4.1.6 The metaphor of the hopeless amongst the monastics also applies to the **lay person** who thinks nothing when hearing of others attaining the spiritual path. It does not occur to him that he, too, is able to attain the path in this life itself. This hopelessness of the layperson is usually due to the tribalizing effect on Buddhism, or perhaps the subtle demand of a teacher —himself a hopeless and insecure guru—that he has found the “answer,” or holds his followers in his charismatic fancy and fanship.

When a layperson takes a *person* as his teacher instead of the Dharma, then, he is unlikely to ever be better than the teacher. A good teacher invariably reminds his followers that he is but a Dharma-shower—that even the Buddha is only the shower (*akkhātāra*) of the way—and both teacher and the follower should progress in the direction of the noble path. Then, they are both hopeful in Dharma terms.

2.4.2 The hopeful renunciant

2.4.2.1 The 2nd kind of person in the 2nd triad is the hopeful (*āsaṁsa*) monastic. He is *hopeful* in the sense that, on hearing of the arhathood of another, it occurs to him that he, too, is capable of it, and diligently goes on to work for awakening. He understands his own spiritual potential and applies himself to realize that potential of awakening in this life itself.

Dictionary, 9th ed, 2004:815) is a legal principle holding that a person who is unaware of a law may not escape liability for violating that law merely because one was unaware of its content.

³⁷ See SD 3.2 (2).

³⁸ On “something more to be done” by an unawakened person, see (Ānanda) **Subha S** (D 10,1.31+passim) SD 40a.13; **Sevitabbāsevitabba S** (M 114) SD 39.8 (1.1.1.8); (**Gaha,pati**) **Potaliya S** (M 54,14) SD 43.8; SD 51.17 (3.4.2.5).

2.4.2.2 Like culture, **religion** can become a system of belief, values and practices that deprives us of our personhood so that we become only a sheep in the herd, a cog and wheel in the religious machine, a creature of God at the disposal of his earthly embodiment, emissary or elite. In such a system, we, the minions of the religious tribe are really **hopeless** as far as self-effort and self-awakening are concerned. We are made to be *forever* dependent on an external agency: a preacher, pastor, priest, pedagogue, deity, God.

If religion is a life of *faith* dependent on the experiences, efforts and authority of others, **spirituality** is a life of *wisdom* that frees us from the power-mode to cultivate the love-mode of unconditional self-acceptance and embrace of others in the spirit of mental calm, clarity and joy in the realization of the true individuality of self-awakening. In short, while religion is about other's experiences, spirituality is based on our own true understanding of reality.

2.4.3 The hope-free renunciant

2.4.3.1 The 3rd kind of person in the 3rd triad is the monastic ideal: **the arhat**. He is described in the Suttas as one who hears of another attaining arhathood but no thoughts of *hope* for that state arises in him because he *has* already attained it. He rejoices in the fact that there are others who are able to attain the same state as he has attained.

2.4.3.2 In the **Sambuddha Sutta** (S 22.58), the Buddha clearly states that there is *no* difference whatsoever between his awakening and that of the arhat. The only difference is that the Buddha “gives rise to the unarisen path ... and his disciples now dwell as followers of that path, accomplishing it afterwards [after him].”³⁹

Awakening is not a status or religious position we attain or licenced by some teacher or lineage. We awaken to true reality by *personally* understanding impermanence, suffering and non-self in all things—it is a self-realization.

2.4.3.3 Some Mahāyāna teachers and their followers, it seems, think of the “path” in substantial terms, that there is the Buddha Path, the Pratyeka Buddha Path, and the Śrāvaka Path. Like the hierarchy of the feudal society they come from, they seem to think of these “Paths” in hierarchical terms. Hence, they claim that the Buddha Path is the highest, and the Śrāvaka Path is the most inferior, and so on.

Such ideas apparently infiltrated into later Pali Buddhism, too. Although we can speak of such paths, they are actually the *same* awakening, but named after the one awakened. Awakening is the same in all cases: how can it ever be different? Just as the ocean has but one taste—that of salt, so, too, the Dharma has only one taste—that of freedom (*vimutti, rasa*).⁴⁰

The noble eightfold path leads to awakening. The path is just a figure of speech: it is the journey that changes us as we move on the path towards nirvana. The path does *not* change for the traveler: it is the traveler himself who is transformed as he journeys to awakening. Everyone reaches the same ancient city, so to speak.⁴¹

Those who hear about the path, the travelers, and ancient city and its ancients, but make no effort to take the path are said to be “**hopeless**.” Those who hear about them and diligently head for the path are said to be “**hopeful**.” Those who have reached the ancient city are said to be “**hope-free**.” This is

³⁹ S 22.58 (SD 49.10).

⁴⁰ See the parable of the ocean, see **Paharada S** (A 8.19,7) SD 45.18.

⁴¹ The ancient city: Nagara Sutta (S 12.65), SD 14.2.

only a parable: we should not turn it (not hypostatize it) into some paradise lorded over by some Cosmic Buddha. There is no such teaching in the suttas.

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Āsaṃsa Bhikkhu Sutta

The Discourse on the Hopeful and Monks

A 3.13

The 3 kinds of persons in the world

1 Bhikshus, there are these **3 kinds of people** found existing in the world. What are the three? The hopeless [without hope] (*nirāso*), the hopeful (*āsaṃso*), the hope-free (*vigat'āso*).⁴²

2 And what, bhikshus, is a person who is **hopeless** (*nirāso*)?

(1) 2.2 ⁴³Here, bhikshus, a certain person is one reborn into a low family—

a family of outcastes [chandalas],

or of bamboo-workers, or of hunters, or of cart-makers, or of flower-scavengers⁴⁴—

poor, with little food and drink, who lives in difficulty, where food and clothing are difficult to get.

And he is of poor complexion [swarthy], ugly, deformed [dwarfish],

with much illness, purblind, deformed (in either arm or both),

lame (in either or both legs), or paralyzed [quadriplegic].⁴⁵

He receives neither food, drink, clothing nor transport; neither garlands, scents nor unguents; neither bedding, dwelling nor lights.

2.3 He hears, “It is said kshatriya [the nobleman] named so-and-so has been anointed by the kshatriyas with kshatriya consecration.”⁴⁶

2.4 It does not occur to him, thus: “Now, when will the kshatriyas anoint me, too, with the kshatriya consecration?”

This person, bhikshus, is said to be hopeless.

⁴² These 3 words are all derived from *āsaṃsati* or *āsiṃsati* (or *Be āsīsati*) [Skt *ā* + *śAMS*, to praise, “to hope for, expect, desire, wish”; (f) *āsā* (Skt *āśā*), “hope, expectation, desire, longing, need.”

⁴³ This passage is stock: (**Tamo,joti**) **Puggala S** (S 3.21/1:93), SD 18.6 = **Āsaṃsa Bhikkhu S** (A 3.13/1:107), SD 51.18 = (**Saṅkhitta**) **Puggala S** (*A 4.85, SD 82.11) = Pug 4.19, SD 18.6.

⁴⁴ *Caṇḍāla,kule vā veṇa,kule vā nesāda,kule vā ratha,kāra,kule vā pukkusa,kule vā*. The outcastes (*caṇḍāla*) are the most despised of the outcastes: Madan Mohan Singh, *Life in North-Eastern India in Pre-Mauryan Times*, 1967: 16-20. SA glosses *veṇa,kula* as *vilīva,kāra,kula*, “family of basket weavers” (SA 1:162 = AA 2:175 = 3:111 = PugA 227); but the occupations are listed separately at Miln 331. *Nesāda,kula* = *miga,luddakādinaṃ kule*, “such families as deer hunters, etc”; *ratha,kāra,kula* = *camma,kāra,kula*, “family of leather workers” [Bodhi: “Because the straps of carts are made of leather”(?), *rathesu cammena hanana,karaṇato*, SAṬ:VRI 1:170; *rathesu cammena nahana,-karaṇato*, AAT:VRI 2:79]; and *pukkusa,kula* = *puppha,chaḍḍaka,kula*, “family of those who discard (wilted) flowers” (SA 1:162 = AA 2:175 = 3:111 = PugA 227). “Perhaps the latter more generally included all sweepers and refuse removers.” (S:B 409 n250)

⁴⁵ *So ca hoti dubbaṇṇo duddasiko okoṭimako bāvā'ābādho, kāṇo vā kuṇī vā khañjo vā pakkhahato vā*: = M 3:169,-30 = S 1:94,18 = A 1:107,25 = Pug 51,25; ≈ V 2:90,22 (*idh'ekacco* instead of *so ca hoti*).

⁴⁶ *So suṇāti itthan,nāmo kira khattiyo khattiyehi khattiya'ābhisekena abhisitto ti*.

3 And what, bhikshus, is a person who is **hopeful** (*āsaṃso*)? [108]

(2) 3.2 Here, bhikshus, there is a head-anointed kshatriya rajah's eldest son who is worthy of being anointed,⁴⁷

but not yet anointed, and has reached the age of discretion.⁴⁸

3.3 He hears, "It is said kshatriya named so-and-so has been anointed by the kshatriyas with kshatriya consecration."

3.4 It occurs to him, thus: "Now, when will the kshatriyas anoint me, too, with the kshatriya consecration?"

This person, bhikshus, is said to be hopeful.

4 And what, bhikshus, is person who is **hope-free** (*vigatāso*)?

(3) 4.2 Here, bhikshus, there is a head-anointed kshatriya rajah.

4.3 He hears, "It is said kshatriya named so-and-so has been anointed by the kshatriyas with kshatriya consecration."

4.4 It does not occur to him, thus: "Now, when will the kshatriyas anoint me, too, with the kshatriya consecration?"

4.5 Why is that? Because his past hope of anointment was stilled when he was anointed.⁴⁹

This person, bhikshus, is said to be hope-free.

These, bhikshus, are the 3 kinds of persons found existing in the world.

The 3 kinds of monks

5 Even so, bhikshus, there are 3 kinds of persons found existing **amongst the monks**.

What are the three?

The hopeless [without hope] (*nirāso*), the hopeful (*āsaṃso*), the hope-free (*vigat'āso*).

6 ⁵⁰And what, bhikshus, is the person that is **hopeless**?

(1) 6.2 Here, bhikshus, a certain person is immoral, evil in nature, impure and suspicious in conduct, secretive in action, not a recluse but claiming to be one, not a celibate but claiming to be one, rotten to the core, corrupt, a heap of filth.⁵¹

⁴⁷ "Worthy of being anointed," *ābhisekā*.

⁴⁸ *Idha bhikkhave rañño khattiyassa muddhā, vasittassa jeṭṭho putto hoti ābhiseko anabhisitto-m-acala, patto*. Be *ābhiseko anabhisitto acala-p, patto*; Be-Ph(ayre) + Ke *abhisekena anabhisekena acala, patti*; Be:RD, Be:T(urnour), Be:Tr(enckner) + Comy *abhiseko anabhisitti-m-acalla, patto*; Ce *ābhiseko anabhisitto-m-acalappatto*; Se *abhisekena anabhisitto-m-acala-p, patto*. "Age of discretion," *acala, patta* (I follow A:W 1:92 + n4). Comy: When the eldest, one worthy of anointment but yet to be anointed, is but an infant, he does not show any wish to be anointed. But when he reaches 16 and his beard begins to appear, he is called "one who has reached the age of discretion." He is able to rule over a great realm; hence, he is "one who has reached the age of discretion" (*Acala-p, patto'ti jeṭṭho'pi ābhiseko anabhisitto mando uttāna, seyyako, so'pi abhiseke āsaṃ na karoti. Soḷasa, vass'uddesiko pana paññāyamāna, -massu, bhedo acala-p, patto nāma hoti, mahantam pi rajjaṃ vicāretum samattho, tasmā acala-p, patto'ti āha*, AA 2:176)

⁴⁹ *Yā hi'ssa bhikkhave pubbe anabhisittassa abhisekāsā sā'ssa paṭippassaddhā*.

⁵⁰ The foll 3 questions recur at Pug 3.1/27. See §2(1) n for other recurrences.

⁵¹ *Idha bhikkhave ekacco puggalo dussīlo hoti papa, dhammo asuci, saṅkassara, samācāro paṭicchanna, kammanto assamaṇo samaṇa, paṭiñño abrahmacārī brahmacārī, paṭiñño anto, pūti avassuto kasambu, jāto*. This stock on a bad

6.3 He hears, “Monk so-and-so, it is said, by realizing for *himself* through direct knowledge, right here and now, with the destruction of the mental influxes, attains and dwells in the influx-free freedom of mind, freedom by wisdom.”

6.4 It does not occur to him, thus: “Now, when will I, too, by realizing for *myself* through direct knowledge, right here and now, with the destruction of the mental influxes, attain and dwell in the influx-free freedom of mind, freedom by wisdom.”

This person, bhikshus, is said to be hopeless.

7 And what, bhikshus, is the person that is **hopeful**?

(2) 7.2 Here, bhikshus, a certain person is morally virtuous, good in nature.

7.3 He hears, **[109]** “Monk so-and-so, it is said, by realizing for *himself* through direct knowledge, right here and now, with the destruction of the mental influxes, attains and dwells in the influx-free freedom of mind, freedom by wisdom.”

7.4 It occurs to him, thus: “Now, when will I, too, by realizing for *myself* through direct knowledge, right here and now, with the destruction of the mental influxes, attain and dwell in the influx-free freedom of mind, freedom by wisdom.”

This person, bhikshus, is said to be hopeful.

8 And what, bhikshus, is the person that is **hope-free**?

(3) 8.2 Here, bhikshus, a certain person is an arhat whose mental influxes are destroyed.

8.3 He hears, “Monk so-and-so, it is said, by realizing for *himself* through direct knowledge, right here and now, with the destruction of the mental influxes, attains and dwells in the influx-free freedom of mind, freedom by wisdom.”

8.4 It does not occur to him, thus: “Now, when will I, too, by realizing for *myself* through direct knowledge, right here and now, with the destruction of the mental influxes, attain and dwell in the influx-free freedom of mind, freedom by wisdom.”

8.5 Why is that? Because his past hope of freedom is stilled when he was freed.⁵²

This person, bhikshus, is said to be hope-free.

These, bhikshus, are the 3 kinds of persons found existing amongst monks.⁵³

— evaṃ —

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monk recurs at in the accusative at Cv 9.1.2 (V 2:236,25-28), and below at **Jigucchitabba S** (A 3.27/1:126,14-17), SD 72.1.

⁵² *Yā hi'ssa bhikkhave pubbe avimuttassa¹ vimuttāsā sāssa² paṭippassaddhā*. (1) Be:Ph *adhimutassa*; Be:RD *adhimuttassa*; Be:T *abhivimuttassa*; Be:Tr *anadhimuttassa*; Ee *vimuttasā*. (2) Be *sā*; Ce Ee Se *sāssa*; Pug 27,29 *sā hi*.

⁵³ Here “monks” (*bhikkhū*) should be taken in the generic sense to incl nuns, as well as other renunciants (novices and probationers).