

We become what we believe

Source: **Āsaṃsa Bhikkhu Sutta**, who we are, what we are, and beyond. Translated by Piya Tan ©2015, 2017, 2025¹.

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. “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 “outcastes” (*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 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 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 methods. It is gratifying to see significant aspect 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.

¹ (A 3.13, SD 51.18): <https://www.themindingcentre.org/dharmafarer/wp-content/uploads/51.18-Asamsa-Bhikkhu-S-a3.13-piya.pdf>

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).

2.2.2.4 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, desiring acceptance or approval of others, past conditioning, or some sense of innate lack. We should instead urgently and wisely understand and correct such difficulties and conditions 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.

2.2.3 “Personization”

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 **an individual or person** 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.

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.

R937 Inspirations 578

Piya Tan ©2025