

# **The Agganna Sutta**

**On Knowledge of Beginnings  
Of Humankind**

**The Buddhist Cosmology**



**A Gift of Dhamma**

# The Agganna Sutta

## On Knowledge of Beginnings

**Introduction:** This sutta provides a detail description of the origin of the human kind and the planet earth.. At the beginning known as world contraction, the human ancestry started with the living beings born from the **Abhassara Brahmas**. ( the same as said in the Abhidhamma) After some long period feeding on the earth soils, the Brahma lost their body radiance and slowly changed in their body features. Then, the sun and moon started to appear in the firmament to start day and night time on earth. Then, every one looks the same; there was no gender, only **asexual**. Later, after some long period, sex organs were formed on their body. And the women became excessively preoccupied with the men, and the men with the women. Owing to this excessive preoccupation with each other, passion was aroused, and their bodies burnt with lust. And later because of this burning, they indulged in sexual activity. Trees appeared and rice was available freely. This description of the beginning of mankind is so different from the modern theory of human evolution.

## The Agganna Sutta

**Thus have I heard:**

Once, the Lord Buddha was staying at Savatthi in the mansion of **Migara's** mother, in the East Park. And at that time **Vasettha** and **Bharadvaja** were living among the monks, hoping to become monks themselves. And in the evening, the Lord rose from his secluded meditation and came out of the mansion, and started walking up and down in its shade.

Vasettha noticed this and he said to Bharadvaja: 'Friend Bharadvaja, the Lord has come out and is walking up and down. Let us approach him. We might be fortunate enough to hear a talk on Dhamma from the lord himself.' Yes, indeed,' said Bharadvaja, so they went up to the lord, saluted him, and fell into step with him.

Then the lord said to Vasettha: 'Vasettha, you two are Brahmins born and bred, and you have gone forth from the household life into homelessness from Brahmin families. Do not the Brahmins revile and abuse you?'

‘Indeed, lord, the Brahmins do revile and abuse us. They don’t hold back with their usual flood of reproaches.’

‘Well, Vasettha, what kind of reproaches do they fling at you?’

‘Lord, what the Brahmins say is this, "The Brahmins caste is the highest caste—other castes are base; the Brahmin caste is fair, other castes are dark; Brahmins are purified, non-Brahmins are not, the Brahmins are the true children of Brahma, [1] born from his mouth, born of Brahma, heirs of Brahma. And you, you have deserted the highest class and gone over to the base class of shave-ling petty ascetics, servants, dark fellows born of Brahma’s Foot! It’s not right, it’s not proper for you to mix with such people!" That is the way the Brahmins abuse us, lord.’

‘Then, Vasettha, the Brahmins have forgotten their ancient tradition when they say that. Because we can see Brahmin women, the wives of Brahmins, who menstruate and become pregnant, have babies, and give milk. And yet these womb-born Brahmins talk about being born from Brahma’s mouth...These Brahmins misrepresent Brahma, tell lies and earn much demerit.

‘There are, Vasettha, these four castes: The Khattiyas, The Brahmins, the merchants and the artisans. And sometimes a Khattiya takes life, takes what is not given, commits sexual misconduct, tells lies, indulges in slander, harsh speech or idle chatter, is grasping, malicious, or of wrong views. Thus such things as are immoral and considered so, blameworthy and considered so, to be avoided and considered so, ways unbecoming an Ariyan and considered so, black with black result and blamed by the wise, are sometimes to be found among the Khattiyas, and the same applies to Brahmins, merchants, and artisans.

‘Sometimes too, a Khattiya refrains from taking life, does not take what is not given, refrains from sexual misconduct, speaks truth, shuns slander, harsh speech or idle chatter, is not grasping, malicious, or of wrong views. Thus such things are moral and considered so, blameless and considered so, to be followed and considered so, ways befitting an Ariyan and considered so, bright with bright results and praised by the wise, are sometimes found among the Khattiyas, and likewise among Brahmins, merchants, and artisans.

‘Now since both dark and bright qualities, which are blamed and praised by the wise, are scattered indiscriminately among the four castes, the wise do not recognize the claim about the Brahmin caste being the highest. Why is that? Because, Vasettha, anyone from the four castes who becomes a monk, an Arahant who has destroyed the corruptions, who has lived the life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached the highest goal, destroyed the fetter of becoming, and become emancipated through super-knowledge—he is proclaims supreme by virtue of Dhamma and not of non-Dhamma.

Dhamma is the best thing for people

In this life and the next as well.

‘This illustration will make clear to you how Dhamma is best in this world and the next. **King Pasenadi** of Kosala knows: "The ascetic Gotama has gone forth from the neighboring clan of the Sakyans." Now the Sakyans are vassals of the King of Kosala. They offer him humble service and salute him, rise and do him homage and pay him fitting service and just as the Sakyans offer the King humble service and salute him, rise and do him homage and pay him fitting service so likewise does the King offer humble service to the Tathágata, thinking, "If the ascetic Gotama is well-born, I am ill-born; if the ascetic Gotama is strong, I am weak; if the ascetic Gotama is pleasant to look at, I am ill-favored; if the ascetic Gotama is influential, I am of little influence." Now it is because of honoring the Dhamma, making much of the Dhamma, esteeming the Dhamma, doing reverent homage to the Dhamma that King Pasenadi does humble service to the Tathágata and pays him fitting service:

Dhamma is the best thing for people

In this life and the next as well.

Vasettha, all of you, though of different birth, name, clan and family, who have gone forth from the household life into homelessness, if you are asked who you are, you should reply: "We are ascetics, followers of the Sakyan." [2] He whose faith in the Tathágata is settled, rooted, established, solid, unshakable by any ascetic or Brahmin, any deva or mara or Brahma or anyone in the world, can truly say: "I am a true son of the Blessed Lord, born of his mouth, born of Dhamma, created by Dhamma, an heir of Dhamma." Why is that? Because, Vasettha, this designates the Tathágata: "The Body of Dhamma," that is "The Body of Brahma," [3] or "Become Dhamma," that is "Become Brahma." [4]

“The beginning of humankind”

‘There comes a time, Vasettha, when, sooner or later after a long period this world contracts. **At a time of contraction, beings are mostly born in the Abhassara Brahma world.** And there they dwell, mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous, moving through the air, glorious—and they stay like that for a very long time. But sooner or later, after a very long period, this world begins to expand again. At a time of expansion, the beings from the Abhassara Brahma world, having passed away from there, are mostly reborn in this world. **Here they dwell, mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous, moving through the air, glorious—[5] and they stay like that for a very long time.**

**Biology of Human Race**

‘At that period, Vasettha, there was just one mass of water, and all was darkness, blinding darkness. Neither moon nor sun appeared, no constellations or stars appeared, night and day were not yet distinguished, nor months and fortnights, nor years and seasons; **there**

was no male and female, beings being reckoned just as beings. [6] And sooner or later, after a very long period of time, savory earth spread itself over the waters where those beings were. It looked just like the skin that forms itself over hot milk as it cools. It was endowed with color, smell, and taste. It was the color of fine ghee or butter and it was very sweet, like pure wild honey.

### From Darkness to Day & Night

‘Then some being of a greedy nature said: "I say, what can this be?" and **tasted the savory earth on its finger**. In so doing, it became taken with the flavor, and craving arose in it. Then other beings, taking their cue from that one, also tasted the stuff with their fingers. They too were taken with the flavor, and craving arose in them. So they set to with their hands, breaking off pieces of the stuff in order to eat it. **And the result was that their self luminance disappeared**. And as a result of the disappearance of their self luminance the moon and the sun appeared, night and day were distinguished, months and fortnights appeared, and the year and its seasons. To that extent the world re-evolved.

### Evolution Cycle in Human Race

‘And those beings continued for a very long time feasting on this savory earth, feeding on it and being nourished by it. And as they did so, their bodies became coarser, and a difference in looks developed among them. Some beings became good looking, others ugly. And the good looking ones despised the others, saying: "We are better looking than they are." And because they became arrogant and conceited about their looks, the savory earth disappeared. At this they came together and lamented, crying, "Oh, that flavor! Oh, that flavor!" and so nowadays when people say, "**Oh, that flavor!**" when they get something nice, they are repeating an ancient saying without realizing it.

### The Human Food Chain

‘And then, when the savory earth disappeared, **a fungus cropped up, in the manner of a mushroom**. It was of good color, smell, and taste. It was the color of fine ghee or butter, and it was very sweet, like pure wild honey. And those beings set to and ate the fungus. And this lasted for a very long time. And as they continued to feed on the fungus, so their bodies become coarser still, and the difference in their looks increased still more. And the good looking ones despised the others...and because they became arrogant and conceited about their looks, the sweet fungus disappeared. **Next, creepers appeared, shooting up like bamboo**...and they too were very sweet, like pure wild honey.

‘And those beings set to and fed on those creepers. And as they did so, their bodies became even coarser, and the difference in their looks increased still more...and they **became still more arrogant, and so the creepers disappeared too**. At this they came together and lamented, crying: "Alas, our creepers gone! What have we lost!" and so now today when people, one being asked why they are upset, say: "Oh what have we lost!" they are repeating an ancient saying without realizing it.

## Sexual Evolution - Asexual to Male and Female

‘And then, after the creepers had disappeared, **rice appeared in open spaces, free from powder and from husks, fragrant and clean grained.** And what they had taken in the evening for supper had grown again and was ripe in the morning, and what they had taken in the morning for breakfast was ripe again by evening, with no sign of reaping. And these beings set to and fed on this rice, and this lasted for a very long time. And as they did so, their bodies became coarser still, and the difference in their looks became even greater. And the females developed female sex organs and the males developed male sex organs. And the women became excessively preoccupied with the men, and the men with the women. Owing to this excessive preoccupation with each other, passion was aroused, and their bodies burnt with lust. And later because of this burning, they indulged in sexual activity. But those who saw them indulging threw dust, ashes, or cow-dung at them, crying: "Die, you filthy beast! How can one being do such things to another!" Just as today, in some districts, when a daughter-in-law is led out, some people throw dirt at her, some ashes, and some cow dung, without realizing that they are repeating **an ancient observance.** What was considered bad form in those days is now considered good form.

‘And those beings who in those days indulged in sex were not allowed into a village or town for one or two months. Accordingly those who indulged for an excessively long period in such immoral practices began to build themselves dwellings so as to indulge under cover.

‘Now it occurred to one of those beings who was inclined to laziness, "Well now, why should I be bothered to gather rice in the evening for supper and in the morning for breakfast? Why shouldn't I gather it all at once for both meals?" And he did so. Then another one came to him and said, "Come on, lets go rice-gathering." "No need, my friend, I've gathered enough for both meals." Then the other, following his example, gathered enough rice for two days at a time, saying, "That should be about enough." Then another being came to that second one, "Come on, lets go rice gathering." "No need my friend, I've gathered enough for two days." (The same for four, then eight days.) However, when those beings made a store of rice and lived on that, husk-powder and husk began to envelop the grain, and where it was reaped it did not grow again, and the cut place showed, and the rice grew in separate clusters.

‘And then those beings came together lamenting, "Wicked ways have become rife among us: at first we were mind made, feeding on delight...(All the events are repeated down to the latest development, each fresh change being said to be due to ‘wicked and unwholesome ways)...and the rice grows in separate clusters! So now let us divide up the rice into fields with boundaries." So they did so.

## Corruption of Human Mind

‘Then, Vasettha, one greedy-natured being, while watching over his own plot, took another plot that was not given to him, and enjoyed the fruits of it. So they seized hold of

him and said, "You've done a wicked thing, taking another's plot like that! Don't ever do such a thing again!" "I won't," he said, but he did the same thing a second and a third time. Again, he was seized and rebuked, and some hit him with their fists, some with stones, and some with sticks. And in this way, Vasettha, taking what was not given, and censuring, and lying, and punishment took their origin.

‘Then those beings came together and lamented the arising of these evil things among them: taking what was not given, censuring, lying, and punishment. And they thought: "Suppose we were to appoint a certain being who would show anger where anger was due, censure those who deserved it, and banish those who deserved banishment! And in return we would grant him a share of the rice." So they went to the one among them who was the handsomest, the best-looking, most pleasant and capable, and asked him to do this for them in return for a share of the rice, and he agreed.

### How the Caste was instituted

"**The People's Choice**" is the meaning of Maha-Sammata, [7] which is the first regular title to be introduced. "Lord of the Fields" is the meaning of **Khattiya**, the second such title. And "He Gladdens Others With Dhamma" is the meaning of Raja, the third title to be introduced. This, then, Vasettha, is the origin of the class of Khattiyas, in accordance with the ancient titles that were introduced for them. They originated among the very same beings, like ourselves, no different and in accordance with Dhamma, not otherwise.

Dhamma is the best thing for people

In this life and the next as well.

### Brahmin Caste Formation

‘Then some beings thought, "Evil things have appeared among beings, such as taking what is not given, censuring, lying, punishment and banishment. We ought to put aside evil and unwholesome things." And they did so. "**They Put Aside Evil and Unwholesome Things**" is the meaning of **Brahmin**, which is the first regular title to be introduced for such people. They made leaf-huts in forest places and meditated in them. With the smoking fire gone out, with pestle cast aside, gathering alms for their evening and morning meals, they went away to a village, town, or royal city to seek their food, and then they returned to their leaf-huts to meditate. People saw this and noted how they meditated. "They Meditate" is the meaning of Jhayaka, which is the second regular title to be introduced.

‘However, some of those beings, not being able to meditate in leaf huts, settled around towns and villages and compiled books. People saw them doing this and not meditating.

‘Now "These Do Not Meditate" is the meaning of Ajjhayaka, which is the third regular title to be introduced. At that time it was regarded as a low designation, but now it is the higher. This, then, Vasettha, is the origin of the class of Brahmins in accordance with the

ancient titles that were introduced for them. Their origin was from among the very same beings, like themselves, not different, and in accordance with Dhamma, not otherwise.

Dhamma is the best thing for people

In this life and the next as well.

‘And then, Vasettha, some of those beings, having paired off, adopted various trades, and this "various" is the meaning of Vessa, which came to be the regular title for such people. This then is the origin of the class of Vessas, in accordance with the ancient titles that were introduced for them. Their origin was from among these very same beings like themselves, no different, and in accordance with Dhamma, not otherwise.

‘And then, Vasettha, those beings that remained went in for hunting. "They Are Base Who Live By The Chase," and that is the meaning of Sudda, which came to be the regular title for such people. This, then, is the origin of the class of Suddas [8] in accordance with the ancient titles that were introduced for them. Their origin was from among these very same beings like themselves, no different, and in accordance with Dhamma, not otherwise.

‘And then, Vasettha, it came about that some Khattiya, dissatisfied with his own Dhamma, went forth from the household life into homelessness, thinking, "I will become an ascetic." And a Brahmin did likewise, a Vessa did likewise, and so did a Sudda. And from these four classes the class of ascetics came into existence. Their origin was from among these very same beings, like themselves, no different, and in accordance with Dhamma, not otherwise.

Dhamma is the best thing for people

In this life and the next as well.

‘And, Vasettha, a Khattiya who has led a bad life in body, speech and thought, and who has wrong view will, in consequence of such wrong views and deeds, at the breaking up of the body after death, be reborn in a state of loss, an ill fate, the downfall, the hell-state. So too will a Brahmin, a Vessa or a Sudda.

‘Likewise, a Khattiya who has led a good life in body, speech, and thought, and who has right view will, in consequence of such right view and deeds, at the breaking up of the body after death, be reborn in a good destiny, in a heaven-state. So too will a Brahmin, a Vessa or a Sudda.

‘And a Khattiya who has performed deeds of both kinds in body, speech and thought, and whose view is mixed will, in consequence of such mixed views and deeds, at the breaking-up of the body after death, experience both pleasure and pain. So too will a Brahmin, a Vessa, or a Sudda.



‘And a Khattiya who is restrained in Body, speech and thought, and who has developed the seven requisites of enlightenment, will attain to parinirvana in this very life. So too will a Brahmin, a Vessa, or a Sudda.

And, Vasettha, whoever of these four castes, as a monk, becomes an Arahant who has destroyed the corruptions, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, attained to the highest goal, completely destroyed the fetter of becoming, and become liberated by the highest insight, he is declared to be chief among them in accordance with Dhamma, and not otherwise.

Dhamma’s the best thing for people

In this life and the next as well.

Vasettha, it was **Brahma Sanankumara** who spoke this verse:

The Khattiya’s best among those who value clan;

He with knowledge and conduct is best of gods and men.

This verse was rightly sung, not wrongly, rightly spoken, not wrongly, connected with profit, not unconnected. I too say, Vasettha:

The Khattiya’s best among those who value clan;

He with knowledge and conduct is best of gods and men.

Thus the lord spoke, and Vasettha and Bharadvaja were delighted and rejoiced at his words.

## Footnotes:

[1] These are, naturally, the Priests of Brahma.

[2] Literally, "Son of the Sakyans"

[3] ‘Brahma’ in this passage means ‘Highest.’ The Buddha used it because he was speaking to Brahmins.

[4] The Tathágata, by his gaining of Enlightenment by his own efforts, has become ‘The

Highest.'

[5] Though born on Earth they are still Devas, not human beings.

[6] As Devas from the Brahma World, they are Sexless.

[7] The Name of the First King of the Solar Race and Ancestor, among others, of the Sakyan rulers (and hence of Gotama.)

[8] Literally, "Artisans" or "Craftsmen,

**Sadhu! Sadhu! Sadhu!**