



## Who is a Brahmin? Moral Virtue and Spiritual Attainment in the Dhammapada

**Anushka Singh**

Centre For Comparative Religion And Civilization, University, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

Email Id: Anushkaa.Singh96@Gmail.Com

---

### ARTICLE DETAILS

**Research Paper**

**Accepted:** 30-05-2025

**Published:** 10-06-2025

**Keywords:**

*Dhammapada, Brahmin, Brāhmaṇa-vagga, Early Buddhism, Moral virtue, Caste and identity, Spiritual attainment, Ethics and liberation, Pāli Canon.*

---

### ABSTRACT

This study examines how the Dhammapada, one of the most important books in the Pāli Canon, redefines the idea of the brahmin. In Brahmanical philosophy, the brahmin is traditionally linked to ritual purity and caste identification based on birth, but in Buddhist ethics, the brahmin experiences a profound moral and spiritual metamorphosis. With a primary focus on the Brāhmaṇa-vagga (Chapter on the Brahmin), this study explores how the Dhammapada reframes the concept of the real brahmin as someone who achieves spiritual freedom, self-control, and moral excellence along the Dhamma's path. The literature highlights inner values like non-violence, detachment, knowledge, and self-discipline as the real indicators of spiritual grandeur rather than preserving inherited status. By closely examining a few passages and using comparisons to other sections of the Pāli Canon, the study shows how early Buddhism aimed to challenge caste systems and shift social standing in favor of moral and spiritual accomplishments. The approach adds to more general conversations about religious reform, social identity, and the relationship between soteriological objectives and normative norms in early South Asian religious traditions.

---

**DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15660539>**

---

**Introduction:**

The last chapter of the Dhammapada, the Brahmana-Vagga, presents a novel interpretation of the Brahmin idea. The Brahmin class is considered as the priestly class in traditional Indian society, and they are frequently thought of as the guardians of religious rites, purity, and wisdom. But the Buddha presents a different perspective in the Dhammapada, one that questions the caste-based notion of a Brahmin and reorients it toward the cultivation of inward spiritual attributes like wisdom, compassion, and non-attachment.

Therefore, in the framework of the Buddha's teachings, the term "Brahmin" acquires a new meaning. Being a Brahmin now represents moral and spiritual achievements rather than being a sign of caste, place of birth, or ceremonial purity. This essay aims to investigate how the Buddha's teachings disrupt the conventional Brahmanical order, critically assess the essential verses of the Brahmana-Vagga, and consider the characteristics that the Buddha lists as essential for a true Brahmin.

**Historical and Cultural Context:**

With 423 verses that summarize the Buddha's teachings, the Dhammapada is one of the most venerated books in the Theravāda Buddhist canon. The Brahmana-Vagga, which consists of verses 383–423, is distinctive in that it concentrates on the Brahmin, a term with enormous social connotations in ancient India. Brahmins occupied the highest position in the varna hierarchy during the Buddha's time, carrying out religious rituals and safeguarding sacred information. But the Buddha opposed the caste system, especially the idea that spiritual superiority could be determined solely by one's place of birth.

The Brahmana-Vagga offers a different definition of a Brahmin, arguing that moral behavior and mental discipline, rather than ancestry, are what really qualify a person for the title, explicitly criticizing this social structure. This reinterpretation represents a larger criticism of ritualistic religiosity and the caste system found in Buddhist teachings, as opposed to a spiritual practice grounded in wisdom and self-control.

**Analysis of key Verses:**

The Brahmana-Vagga's verses redefine the Brahmin in several ways:

**1. Spiritual Attainment Over Birthright**



The Buddha highlights that a person's personal traits and spiritual accomplishments, rather than their place of birth or caste, define a true Brahmin. The Buddha says, "I do not call one a Brahmin merely because one is born of a Brahmin mother, in verse 393. He's just a conceited, attached person. However, I refer to someone who is unattached and unclinging as a Brahmin."

The Buddha is clearly differentiating here between the Brahmin as an ethical ideal and the Brahmin as a caste identifier. The absence of attachment, which is a trait that can only be developed via intense spiritual practice and is not inherited from one's family, characterizes a pure Brahmin.

## **2. Control of the Mind and Non-Violence**

The Brahmana-Vagga contains several lines that stress the value of mental restraint and nonviolence. In verse 389, it is stated, "He who has subdued his anger, who is pure, who is virtuous, without craving, self-controlled and has acquired the knowledge, him I call a Brahmin." This passage emphasizes the characteristics of a true Brahmin, which include intelligence, self-control, and non-attachment. A real Brahmin is one who does no harm to any living being, according to the Buddha, who also promotes nonviolence (verse 405).

## **3. Freedom from Illusions and Defilements**

The liberation of the Brahmin from delusions and mental impurities is another significant theme. "He who has cut the bonds of both hatred and attachment, who is indifferent to worldly things, him I call a Brahmin," the Buddha states in verse 396. Here, mental clarity, detachment, and severing ties that cause misery are emphasized.

This verse serves as another evidence that the true Brahmin is someone who has attained mental freedom, that is, someone who has triumphed over the vices of greed, hatred, and delusion that keep people trapped in the cycle of suffering (samsara).

## **4. Compassion and Selflessness**

According to the Dhammapada, compassion and selflessness are two other essential traits of a Brahmin. The Buddha bestows praise on the Brahmin in verse 420, saying that he has "put aside all desires, attained peace, and is devoted to the welfare of all beings." In a broader sense, this thought illustrates that a true Brahmin is someone who acts for the benefit of others and cultivates a sense of compassion and loving-kindness (metta). It represents the Mahāyāna ideal of the Bodhisattva.

**Research question:**

This inquiry delves at the ways in which the Dhammapada, a seminal Buddhist work, reinterprets what a Brahmin is. In Hindu society, a Brahmin is traditionally regarded as belonging to the highest caste and is inherently linked to ceremonial purity and religious authority. On the other hand, the Buddha offers an alternative viewpoint in the Brahmana-Vagga. The inquiry aims to ascertain:

1. What attributes and merits, in the Buddha's opinion, characterize a “true” Brahmin?
2. What aspects of the traditional Brahmanical view based on caste and birth are challenged or different from the definition given by the Buddha?
3. Which moral and spiritual virtues such as compassion, wisdom, and non-attachment are highlighted in the Dhammapada's new interpretation?

With an emphasis on the characteristics that genuinely elevate a person to spiritual purity beyond caste-based disparities, the research seeks to address the ethical and philosophical ramifications of the Buddha’s teachings and how they challenge social norms by providing a solution to this topic.

**Methodology:****1. Textual analysis**

- **Primary Source:** The Dhammapada, a key work in Buddhism, specifically the Brahmana-Vagga (verses 383–423), is the main subject of discussion. A close reading of these verses reveals how the Buddha reinterprets what it means to be a Brahmin.
- **Key Components Examined:**

Terms and Ideas: We examine terms like “Brahmin,” “non-attachment,” “compassion,” and “wisdom” to learn more about the Buddha’s precise definition of a true Brahmin.

Verse-by-Every verse in the Brahmana-Vagga is examined, with particular focus to how moral and spiritual attributes take precedence over caste and ancestry.

**2. Comparative Analysis**

- **Buddhist reinterpretation vs. Brahmanical Tradition:** The conventional Hindu Brahmanical definition of a Brahmin is contrasted with the Buddha's reinterpretation. This comparison includes the following:



- **Historical Context:** Examining the caste, birth, and ritual purity connections that characterized Brahmins' social position in ancient Indian culture.
- **Philosophical Differences:** Determining how the equality and individual spiritual practice of Buddhism are consistent with the Buddha's rejection of caste-based dominance.

### 3. Secondary Sources

- **Academic Commentaries:** In order to offer background information, context, and interpretations of the Brahmana-Vagga, extant Buddhist literature and commentaries on the Dhammapada are studied.
- **Cross-Referencing with Other Buddhist Texts:** Similar ideas on the reinterpretation of a Brahmin are looked for in other Buddhist scriptures, such as the Sutta Nipata.

### 4. Ethical Consideration

- Sensitivity to various customs and interpretations is maintained because this study deals with religious and cultural issues, particularly in relation to the caste system and religious identities.

By employing these techniques, the study seeks to offer a comprehensive and impartial examination of the Buddha's definition of a "true Brahmin" and how it differs from the dominant social and religious conventions of the day.

#### **Contrasts with Brahmanical Tradition:**

The Brahmanical tradition, which placed a strong focus on ceremonial purity, sacrificial rites, and caste divisions, is very different from the Brahmana-Vagga. According to the Brahmanical worldview, following the rules and obligations of one's caste (dharma) was a necessary condition for spiritual advancement. These ideas are challenged by the Buddha's criticism, which can be found in the Dhammapada and other writings like the Sutta Nipata. The Buddha advocates for a spiritual path that is accessible to everyone, regardless of caste or place of birth.

The Buddha's teaching in the Brahmana-Vagga asserts that anybody can become a Brahmin by pursuing the Noble Eightfold Path and developing the characteristics of knowledge, compassion, and detachment, in contrast to the Brahmanical belief that a Brahmin is born into spiritual superiority.

#### **Results:**



The outcomes of this study come from a thorough examination of the Dhammapada's Brahmana-Vagga. The main focus of these findings is how the Buddha reinterprets what it means to be a Brahmin, emphasizing moral and spiritual traits over caste or lineage. The main conclusions are as follows:

### **1. Brahmin Redefined: Moral and Spiritual Attributes**

- **Non-Attachment:** The verses stress that a person who has conquered attachment and cravings is a true Brahmin. For example, verse 393 says that a person is not automatically a real Brahmin just because they are born into a Brahmin family. Rather, the individual who is “free from attachment and clinging” is the one who meets the requirements.
- **Self-Restraint and Mental Hardship:** A real Brahmin is one who has mastery over his or her thoughts, feelings, and desires. The Buddha emphasizes in verse 389 that possessing traits like self-control over wrath, self-discipline, and moral purity is necessary to become a real Brahmin.
- **Wisdom and insight:** The Buddha places a higher value on insight than on ceremonial knowledge. Understanding the essence of reality and the functioning of the mind is what makes a person a Brahmin and ultimately leads to spiritual emancipation. It is emphasized in verses like 396 that the Brahmin has “cut the bonds of hatred and attachment,” a result of knowledge.
- **Compassion and Non-Violence:** Based on the findings, it is evident that a genuine Brahmin needs to be deeply compassionate and devoted to non-violence. Verse 405, which claims that a Brahmin does no harm to any living thing, emphasizes this.

### **2. Rejecting caste and birthright as defining characteristics**

- The ancient Brahmanical belief that one gains spiritual superiority by birth into the Brahmin caste is openly challenged by the Buddha. It is made plain in a number of lines, most notably 393 and 396, that a person's spiritual standing is not determined just by their birth. What elevates a person is their own moral and ethical behavior, not anything else.
- This interpretation implies that anyone can become a true Brahmin by spiritual practice, regardless of caste, and reflects the Buddha's larger criticism of the caste system.

### **3. Differs from Conventional Brahmanical Ideals**

As indicators of a Brahmin's superiority, the Brahmanical tradition prioritized ritual purity, sacrificial ceremonies, and the preservation of sacred knowledge. The findings show that the Buddha values inner spiritual attributes like:

- purity of thought and deed over these outward indicators.



- disengagement from worldly aspirations.
- selflessness and commitment to the well-being of others (verse 420).

#### 4. A Spiritual Path That Is More Inclusive

By redefining a Brahmin as someone who follows the path of moral behavior, wisdom, and meditation, the Buddha democratizes spiritual achievement and makes it accessible to people from all socioeconomic classes. The Buddha's more general teachings, which oppose caste-based prejudice and advance the notion that spiritual achievement is achievable for everyone through hard work, are inclusive in nature.

#### 5. Conformity to Fundamental Buddhist Precepts

The characteristics of a true Brahmin, such as wisdom, compassion, and non-attachment, are in line with the Noble Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths, which serve as the cornerstones of Buddhist practice. This implies that the Buddha's reinterpretation of the Brahmin is in line with his more comprehensive teachings regarding the cessation of suffering and the achievement of enlightenment.

#### Thematic Discussion:

This research's topic discussion is on how the Buddha redefined the term "Brahmin" and how this represents important aspects of Buddhist philosophy. The Dhammapada's Brahmana-Vagga defies conventional ideas of caste, spiritual authority, and social norms by placing an emphasis on internal characteristics rather than outward symbols. This analysis reveals several important motifs, including:

##### 1. Non- Attachment and Renunciation

- **Theme:** The Brahmana-Vagga revolves around two main themes: renunciation of worldly cravings and non-attachment (Pali: *virāga*). The Buddha emphasizes again and again that a person who has conquered attachment both to worldly possessions and emotional clinging is a true Brahmin.
- **Discussion:** The core of the Buddha's teachings on the end of suffering is this topic. The Buddhist concept of non-attachment is based on the idea that holding on to desires causes pain (*dukkha*) and that letting go of attachment is the path to liberation. The Buddha honors individuals who have "cut the bonds" of attachment and released themselves from the entanglements of earthly life in verses 383 and 396. This renunciation is applicable to anybody pursuing spiritual development, not just ascetics or monks.



- **Broader Relevance:** This concept contradicts the Brahmanical belief that caste or ritual practice are prerequisites for renunciation or purity. Rather, the Buddha democratizes spiritual practice by teaching that anybody can become a real Brahmin by practicing non-attachment.

## 2. Self-Discipline and Ethical Conduct

- **Theme:** It is stated that a real Brahmin must possess self-discipline (sīla) and ethical behavior. The Buddha lists moral rectitude, self-discipline, and self-control as the fundamental characteristics of real spiritual achievement.
- **Discussion:** According to verse 389, the Buddha, a Brahmin is someone who can manage their wrath, abstain from cravings, and exercise self-discipline. The Buddhist Noble Eightfold Path is consistent with this notion, especially with regard to the emphasis on right conduct (sammā kammanta), right effort (sammā vāyāma), and right mindfulness (sammā sati). Self-control and moral behavior produce wisdom and mental clarity, both of which are prerequisites for achieving emancipation.
- **Broader Relevance:** This refutes the Brahmanical belief that birth or outside rituals determine spiritual superiority. Rather, the Buddha emphasizes individual effort and moral living, calling on everyone, regardless of caste or background, to pursue self-discipline.

## 3. Compassion and Non-Violence

- **Theme:** The Buddha taught that compassion (karuṇā) and non-violence (ahiṃsā) are fundamental characteristics of the real Brahmin. These values, which are highly in line with Buddhist teachings on loving-kindness (metta) and interconnection, are valued above ritual sacrifices or caste-based obligations.
- **Discussion:** The Buddha emphasizes in verse 405, that a pure Brahmin lives in compassion for all living things and does no damage to any living being. This topic shows a strong devotion to nonviolence, in opposition to the Brahmanical tradition's custom of sacrifices. It is believed that compassion is a fundamental virtue that transcends one's immediate social or religious context, emulating the concept of universal compassion found in Buddhism.
- **Broader Relevance:** This topic criticizes ritualistic actions that use religious obligation to excuse harm or violence. Buddha envisioned a Brahmin as someone who does no harm to any sentient creature, representing a moral standard that goes beyond positions based on caste. It also reflects the Buddhist idea of the Bodhisattva in the later Mahāyāna traditions, where compassion for all beings is the mark of the highest spiritual achievement.



#### 4. Wisdom and Insight over Ritual Knowledge

- **Theme:** The Buddha emphasizes that the real indicators of a Brahmin are wisdom (paññā) and insight (vipassanā), not ceremonial expertise or knowledge of the scriptures. This subject highlights the value of having a firsthand awareness of reality as well as the transient character of all phenomena.
- **Discussion:** Verses such as 396 and 423 emphasize that a person who has “cut the bonds” of ignorance and delusion and replaced them with enlightened awareness and spiritual insight is a true Brahmin. Here, the Buddha criticizes the Brahmanical emphasis on ritual purity and scripture knowledge, both of which, in his view, do not always result in liberation. Rather, the path to becoming a true Brahmin is in wisdom, which is based on firsthand awareness of the true nature of reality (anicca, dukkha, and anatta).
- **Broader Relevance:** The Buddhist rejection of the idea that enlightenment may be attained by mere intellectual or ceremonial knowledge is reflected in this theme. The Buddha’s focus on knowledge as the hallmark of a Brahmin draws attention to how egalitarian Buddhist spirituality is anyone, regardless of social or religious background, can achieve insight with practice.

#### 5. Critique of Caste and Birth-Based Privilege

- **Theme:** The caste system and the idea of birth-based spiritual superiority are directly challenged by the Buddha's reinterpretation of what a Brahmin is. The Buddha makes it clear in multiple scriptures that one becomes a Brahmin by deeds and virtues rather than by birth.
- **Discussion:** The Buddha clarifies in verse 393 that being born into a Brahmin household does not guarantee spiritual position. The Buddha’s greater societal message, which aims to topple the Brahmin-dominated structures of ancient Indian society, is consistent with this critique of caste-based privilege. The teachings of the Buddha highlight that everyone can achieve spiritual freedom by practicing the correct virtues and traveling the road of self-discipline and wisdom, regardless of caste or social standing.
- **Broader Relevance:** By advocating for spiritual egalitarianism and opposing caste- and birth-based oppressive institutions, this concept has significant social and ethical ramifications. The Buddha’s reinterpretation of what a Brahmin is reflects his larger aspirations to establish a more inclusive spiritual path that is available to individuals from all backgrounds.

#### 6. The Brahmin as a Symbol of Spiritual Attainment



- **Theme:** The name “Brahmin” is no longer a literal caste identification but rather a metaphor for spiritual greatness in the Buddha's reinterpretation. Someone who has transcended social distinctions and attained a condition of purity, wisdom, and compassion is a real Brahmin.
- **Discussion:** Throughout the Brahmana-Vagga, the term “Brahmin” is transformed symbolically. It is not a title passed down through the generations; rather, it is the result of a lifetime of spiritual practice and moral behavior. This transition from an outward, birth-based identity to an inward, ethical one affects the idea of spiritual authority. A beacon of moral and spiritual excellence, the authentic Brahmin is accessible to everyone on the waking road.
- **Broader relevance:** This metamorphosis represents the Buddha’s wider attack on religious doctrine and society conventions, implying that genuine spiritual power is acquired by moral behavior and introspection rather than being inherited through caste or birth. Buddhist communities are still resonant with this ethos, which elevates spiritual meritocracy over social hierarchy.

### Conclusion:

The Dhammapada’s Brahmana-Vagga provides a compelling reinterpretation of what it means to be a Brahmin. By doing this, it opposes the caste-based social structures of traditional Indian culture and promotes a more egalitarian spiritual path that is founded on deeds rather than birthright. The Buddha defines a true Brahmin as someone who has conquered the defilements of the mind and reached a level of spiritual emancipation. This person possesses attributes like non-attachment, wisdom, compassion, and self-discipline. This reinterpretation, which represents the Buddha's wider criticism of ritualism and social inequity, has had a lasting impact on Buddhist philosophy and practice.

This study sheds light on the revolutionary spiritual concepts of the Buddha that permeate Buddhist thought throughout traditions and offers a textual and contextual analysis of the Brahmana-Vagga.

### References:

- *The Dhammapada: Teachings of the Buddha*. Translated by Thomas Byrom, Shambhala Publications, 1993.
- Gethin, Rupert. *The Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Harvey, Peter. *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*. Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Sutta Nipata. Translated by H. Saddhatissa, Curzon Press, 1985.



- Schaeffer, Kurtis R. *Dreaming the Great Brahmin: Tibetan Traditions of the Buddhist Poet-Saint Saraha*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Gombrich, Richard. *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Collins, Steven. *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.
- Olson, Carl. *The Different Paths of Buddhism: A Narrative-Historical Introduction*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005.
- King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and 'The Mystic East'*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Lopez, Donald S. Jr. *The Story of Buddhism: A Concise Guide to Its History and Teachings*. New York: HarperOne, 2001.
- Trainor, Kevin. *Buddhism: The Illustrated Guide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Keown, Damien. *Buddhism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Gombrich, Richard. *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Collins, Steven. *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.