AN 9.20 — AN 9:20 About Velāma | Velāma Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

About Velāma

Velāma Sutta (AN 9:20)

On one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta’s Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s monastery. Then Anāthapiṇḍika the householder went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, bowed down to him and sat to one side. As he was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him, “Householder, are gifts still given in your family?”

“Gifts are still given in my family, lord, but they are coarse: broken rice cooked with bran, accompanied by pickle brine.”1

“Householder, regardless of whether a gift is coarse or refined, if it is given inattentively, disrespectfully, not with one’s own hand, as if throwing it away, with the view that nothing will come of it: Wherever the result of that gift comes to fruition, one’s mind will not incline to the enjoyment of splendid food, will not incline to the enjoyment of splendid clothing, will not incline to the enjoyment of splendid vehicles, will not incline to the enjoyment of the splendid five strings of sensuality. And one’s sons & daughters, slaves, servants, & workers will not listen to one, will not lend ear, will not make their minds attend for the sake of knowledge. Why is that? Because that is the result of inattentive actions.

“Householder, regardless of whether a gift is coarse or refined, if it is given attentively, respectfully, with one’s own hand, not as if throwing it away, with the view that something will come of it: Wherever the result of that gift comes to fruition, one’s mind will incline to the enjoyment of splendid food, will incline to the enjoyment of splendid clothing, will incline to the enjoyment of splendid vehicles, will incline to the enjoyment of the splendid five strings of sensuality. And one’s sons & daughters, slaves, servants, & workers will listen to one, will lend ear, will make their minds attend for the sake of knowledge. Why is that? Because that is the result of attentive actions.

“Once, householder, there was a brahman named Velāma. And this was the nature of the gift, the great gift, he gave: He gave 84,000 gold trays filled with silver, 84,000 silver trays filled with gold, 84,000 copper trays filled with gems. He gave 84,000 elephants with gold ornaments, gold banners, covered with nets of gold thread. He gave 84,000 chariots spread with lion skins, tiger skins, leopard skins, saffron-colored blankets, with gold ornaments, gold banners, covered with nets of gold thread. He gave 84,000 milk cows with tethers of fine jute and copper milk pails. He gave 84,000 maidens adorned with jeweled earrings. He gave 84,000 couches spread with long-fleeced coverlets, white wool coverlets, embroidered coverlets, rugs of kadali-deer hide, each with a canopy above & red cushions on either side. He gave 84,000 lengths of cloth—of finest linen, of finest cotton, of finest silk.2 To say nothing of the food & drink, staple & non-staple food, lotions & beddings: They flowed, as it were, like rivers.

“Now, householder, if the thought should occur to you, ‘Perhaps it was someone else who at that time was Velāma the brahman, who gave that gift, that great gift,’ that’s not how it should be seen. I was Velāma the brahman at that time. I gave that gift, that great gift. But in that gift there was no one worthy of offerings; no one purified that gift.

“If one were to feed one person consummate in view, that would be more fruitful than the gift, the great gift, that Velāma the brahman gave.

“If one were to feed one once-returner, that would be more fruitful than the gift, the great gift, that Velāma the brahman gave, and if one were to feed one person consummate in view, and if one were to feed 100 people consummate in view.

“If one were to feed one non-returner, that would be more fruitful than… if one were to feed 100 once-returners.

“If one were to feed one arahant, that would be more fruitful than… if one were to feed 100 non-returners.

“If one were to feed one Private Buddha, that would be more fruitful than… if one were to feed 100 arahants.

“If one were to feed one Tathāgata—a worthy one, rightly self-awakened—that would be more fruitful than… if one were to feed 100 Private Buddhas.

“If one were to feed a Saṅgha of monks headed by the Buddha, that would be more fruitful than… if one were to feed a Tathāgata—a worthy one, rightly self-awakened.

“If one were to have a dwelling built and dedicated to the Community of the four directions, that would be more fruitful than… if one were to feed a Saṅgha of monks headed by the Buddha.

“If one with a confident mind were to go to the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha for refuge, that would be more fruitful than… if one were to have a dwelling built and dedicated to the Community of the four directions.

“If one with a confident mind were to undertake the training rules—refraining from taking life, refraining from taking what is not given, refraining from sexual misconduct, refraining from lying, refraining from distilled & fermented drinks that cause heedlessness—that would be more fruitful than… if one with a confident mind were to go to the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha for refuge.

“If one were to develop even just one whiff of a heart of goodwill, that would be more fruitful than… if one with a confident mind were to undertake the training rules….

“If one were to develop even for just a finger-snap the perception of inconstancy, that would be more fruitful than the gift, the great gift, that Velāma the brahman gave, and if one were to feed one person… 100 people consummate in view, and if one were to feed one once-returner… 100 once-returners, and if one were to feed one non-returner… 100 non-returners, and if one were to feed one arahant… 100 arahants, and if one were to feed one Private Buddha… 100 Private Buddhas, and if one were to feed a Tathāgata—a worthy one, rightly self-awakened—and if one were to feed a Saṅgha of monks headed by the Buddha, and if one were to have a dwelling built and dedicated to the Community of the four directions, and if one with a confident mind were to go to the Buddha, Dhamma, & Saṅgha for refuge, and if one with a confident mind were to undertake the training rules—refraining from taking life, refraining from taking what is not given, refraining from sexual misconduct, refraining from lying, refraining from distilled & fermented drinks that cause heedlessness—and if one were to develop even just one whiff of a heart of goodwill.”

Notes

1. The Commentary states that Anāthapiṇḍika is here referring to alms that he gives to the poor; his alms to the Saṅgha remained of high quality. However, it might have been that this discourse took place during a time of famine, when even Anāthapiṇḍika was reduced to giving only the coarse food both to the Saṅgha and to the poor. If that is the case, then we can read the Buddha's remarks to Anāthapiṇḍika as reassuring him that in straitened circumstances it is still fruitful to give, even when one can only give coarse things. The merit of the gift is determined more by the state of mind with which it is given than by the external quality of the gift.

2. This translation follows the Thai edition of the Pali Canon. The Burmese and Sri Lankan editions list four kinds of cloth—rather than just the three listed here—adding wool as the third of the four.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: SN 3:19–20; AN 3:15; AN 5:148; AN 6:37