Snp 3.9 — Vāseṭṭha Sutta — To the Young Brahmin Vāseṭṭha

English translation by Bhikkhu Candana.
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Text

Snp. 3.9

Vāseṭṭha Sutta

“To the Young Brahmin Vāseṭṭha”

I have personally heard this.

At one time, The Blessed One was living in the forest of Icchānaṅgala, close to the village of Icchānaṅgala. During that time, many well-known brahmin householders lived in the town of Icchānaṅgala, including the brahmins Caṅkī, Tārukkha, Pokkharasāti, Jāṇussoṇi, Todeyya, and other prominent brahmin householders.

It was during one of those days, that the two young brahmins, Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja, while walking and wandering for exercise, were having a conversation that soon turned into an argument, as one tried convincing the other thus:

“Friend, how does one become a brahmin?”

And the young brahmin Bhāradvāja replied:

“If, friend, someone is unsoiled and pure by birth on both the mother’s and father’s sides, as far back as seven generations, then he is to be known a ‘brahmin.’”

However, his friend the young brahmin Vāseṭṭha said:

“Actually friend, when someone lives with virtue and behaves with good conduct, only then does he become a ‘brahmin.’”

But no matter what either of them could try to say to convince the other with their argument, they kept disputing, until the young brahmin Vāseṭṭha said to his friend, the young brahmin Bhāradvāja:

“Friend Bhāradvāja, there is the recluse Gautama, Son of the Sākyans, who has gone forth from the Sākyan clan, and already gained the delightful reputation for:

‘Being an Arahant, the Perfectly Awakened One, endowed with Sublime Knowledge and Supremely Pure Conduct, the Well-Gone, the Knower of worlds, the Incomparable Tamer of those to be tamed, the Teacher of gods and humans, The Buddha and Most Blessed.’

“Let us now go and approach Him and ask Him this question. And as He explains it to us, so shall we go ahead and just accept it.”

“Agreed!” said the young brahmin Bhāradvāja, being delighted with the proposal made by his friend, the young brahmin Vāseṭṭha.

So, the two young men went and approached The Blessed One, and after exchanging friendly greetings with Him, they both sat to one side. Then, the young brahmin Vāseṭṭha addressed The Blessed One in verse:

594. “Sir, the two of us have been acknowledged by our respective teachers as experts in the three Vedas, which I have learned and mastered through my teacher Pokkharasāti, whereas my friend learned and mastered them through his teacher, Tārukkha.

595. “We both can recite the three Vedas in their entirety, in addition to explaining all its finer details through the meaning of words and their grammar, for truly, we are now authorities in our own right, just like our own esteemed teachers.

596. “O! Gautama, there is now a dispute between us two. The argument we are having has to do with birth and that of being a brahmin. Bhāradvāja here, keeps saying that only through birth can one truly be known as a brahmin. But I, on the other hand, insist that it is through one’s own actions that one becomes a brahmin. This, therefore, is our dispute, for the resolution of which we have come to You, O! Wise One, with Clear Vision.

597. “We each seem to be unable to convince the other. So, we have now come to ask for the answer to our query from the One who is recognized by the many, and renowned far and wide, as the Awakened One.

598. “Just as people greet the New Moon with so much reverence, with their hands in anjalī in front of their hearts, similarly, the world is worshipful towards You, as they come to pay homage to the Great Gautama, with so much veneration and respect.

599. “Therefore, we ask the Great Gautama the following question: does one become a brahmin by birth or by their actions? For we are unsure of the answer to this question ourselves. Please, kindly explain to us, while instructing us on how to identify a true brahmin.”

600. The Blessed One then said:

“Vāseṭṭha, I will give the answer to your question, as I explain it to you in a step-by-step manner, while instructing you on how the process takes place, whereby living beings come to be born, as they find themselves reappearing in the various classes of becoming.

601. “Look at the grass and the trees; although they are not self-aware, nevertheless, they have their own unique qualities, features, and attributes that are peculiar to each, indicative of their individual births, as distinct species among a widely diverse population of other plant life.

602. “And when you look at various insects, such as ants, beetles, mosquitoes, or grasshoppers, there too, you will find that they also have their own unique qualities, features, and attributes that are peculiar to each, indicative of their individual births as distinct species, among a widely diverse population of other insects.

603. “When you look at animals with four feet, whether small or large, there too, you will find that they also have their own unique qualities, features, and attributes that are peculiar to each, indicative of their individual births as distinct species among a widely diverse population of other four-legged animals.

604. “And if you were to look at the footless animals, such as snakes and serpents with their long backs, slithering as they move about on their bellies, there too, you will find that they also have their own unique qualities, features, and attributes that are peculiar to each, indicative of their individual births as distinct species among a widely diverse population of other footless animals.

605. “When you look at fish and other animals living and looking for food in water, there too, you will find that they also have their own unique qualities, features, and attributes that are peculiar to each, indicative of their individual births as distinct species among a widely diverse population of other aquatic animals.

606. “When you look at the birds and other animals with wings that fly through the air, there too, you will find that they also have their own unique qualities, features, and attributes that are peculiar to each, indicative of their individual births as distinct species among a widely diverse population of other avian animals.

607. “Now, as it relates to all these different living beings and animals, although the variety of attributes and features these beings possess, given their diversity as species, is entirely dependent on their individual birth, however, in the case of human beings, their diversity and unique qualities are not defined by one’s birth.

608. “Not by the hair, the head, the ears, nor the eyes; Not by the mouth, the nose, the lips, nor the eyelashes.

609. “Not by the neck, the shoulders, the belly, the stomach, nor the back; Not by the buttocks, the chest, and not by their reproductive organs.

610. “Not by the hands, the feet, the fingers, or the nails, nor by the knees or the calves; Not by the color of their skin or the voice; none of these qualities or attributes, nor the distinctive traits, could tell one of their birth nor identify one as belonging to a specific species, as it would in the case of other animals or living beings.

611. “For, such individual differences in appearance are mere designations for conventional purposes. The attributes or qualities of the bodies of humans do not designate the birth of the individual as higher or lower. Instead, valid designation of differences between individuals arises as a result of the activities of human beings.

612. “Thus, Vāseṭṭha, whoever among human beings makes their livelihood by raising and looking after cattle, he is designated as a ‘farmer,’ not a ‘Brahmin.’

613. “Whoever, Vāseṭṭha, among human beings makes their livelihood by engaging in various crafts and other professions, he is designated as a ‘craftsman’ or ‘professional,’ not a ‘Brahmin.’

614. “Also, Vāseṭṭha, whoever among human beings makes their livelihood by trading, he is designated as a ‘merchant,’ not a ‘Brahmin.’

615. “Similarly, Vāseṭṭha, whoever among human beings makes their livelihood by serving or working for others, he is designated as a ‘servant’ or ‘worker,’ not a ‘Brahmin.’

616. “Whoever, Vāseṭṭha, among human beings makes their livelihood by stealing and taking from others what is not freely given, he is designated as a ‘thief’ or ‘crook,’ not a ‘Brahmin.’

617. “Whoever, Vāseṭṭha, among human beings makes their livelihood as an archer or marksman, in service of those in power, he is designated as a ‘soldier,’ not a ‘Brahmin.’

618. “Whoever, Vāseṭṭha, among human beings makes their livelihood by means of priesthood and conducting rituals, he is designated as an ‘advisor to the king,’ or ‘one who engages in sacrifice,’ and not a ‘Brahmin.’

619. “And, Vāseṭṭha, whoever among human beings lives his life while forcing others to pay him taxes and tolls throughout the kingdom, meanwhile he enjoys all that those resources and wealth could provide, he is designated as a ‘ruler’ or ‘king,’ not a ‘Brahmin.’

620. “Therefore, I do not declare someone ‘a brahmin’ because he was born from the womb of a woman, whom the world designates a brahmin herself. For so long as someone has attachments to things, along with defiling impediments in his heart, then he is no brahmin at all, because, given his conceited tendencies and ignorance, he looks down at others, addressing them disrespectfully.

“However, if he has no attachments in his heart, desiring nothing, not wanting to seize or grab anything whatsoever, then, it is such a person whom I declare a ‘Brahmin.’

621. “Whoever, having successfully cut oneself free from all fetters that shackle and bind, now finds himself no longer agitated, worried or anxious, being thus fully detached and unyoked from all shackles; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

622. “By cutting the straps and tight belt of longing, while getting rid of the reins and all fastening tethers that hold everything together, and with every obstacle in between removed, one is finally awakened. It such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

623. “If one has the iron will to endure abuse, even while being imprisoned, or beaten up, while resisting even the tiniest amount of anger from flaring up in his heart, as he cultivates his army of patience, and does so against all odds; it would be such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

624. “Not getting angry or becoming irritable given unpleasant and painful situations; behaving with virtue, neither pretentious nor conceited, and while being restrained in his conduct throughout, he bears his very last body; it is such a person whom I call a true ‘Brahmin.’

625. “When a person does not allow himself to get soiled by sensual pleasures, just like water that does not cling or stay on a lotus leaf, or a mustard seed that cannot be balanced onto the tip of an arrowhead, which would instead, simply fall off; it is such a person whom I call ‘a Brahmin.’

626. “Whoever in this world has come to understand suffering for what it is, and how it is laid to rest, while he detaches himself from the personality view and all self- identification; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

627. “With deep wisdom in his heart, whoever becomes skillful at identifying what indeed is the Path, and therefore truly know and understand The Dhamma, from all that is not the Path, hence not the Dhamma (adhamma); it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

628. “The one who gives up the desire to socialize with either householders or with those who have gone forth alike; the one, thus living with the fewness of wants and needs; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

629. “The one who has given up violence and hatred towards all living beings, be they weak or strong; giving up killing and harming altogether, nor instigating others to kill or harm; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

630. “He who chooses to remain non-hostile among those who are hostile and vicious; cooled and peaceful among those who are prone to violence against oneself; not seizing or grabbing anything, even though one is surrounded by those who seize and grab; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

631. “With hatred and passions, along with conceit and contempt, all discarded from his heart and falling off, just like mustard seeds sliding off from the edge of a sword; it is such

a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

632. “The one who instructs with words that are based on Truth, delivered sweetly and with compassion; using speech that is clarifying and not harsh, nor with the intention to cause harm to others, but simply to bring out the truth while removing the dust of ignorance; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

633. “The one who does not take un-offered things that belong to others, be it small or large, something of much value or that which isn’t worth much, whether beautiful or ugly; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

634. “The one who lives without any hopes or longing for either this world or any other world, having unyoked himself from all expectations; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

635. “The one with no clinging left in him, and no place for him to settle and attach to; he who directly knows what should and should not be done, having already taken a deep dive into the Deathless; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

636. “The one who has gone beyond both actions of merit and demerit, the wholesome and the unwholesome, and now rests without any sorrow, free from defilements and pure; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

637. “The one being extremely pure, shining brightly and undisturbed like the clear Moon in the night sky, having fully exhausted all delight for further becomings; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

638. “The one who by crossing over, has gone beyond this very difficult obstacle, this ordeal of a world, journeying through this impassably deluded and decrepit existence, and thus having made it to the other shore, now rests at ease, as he meditates fearlessly. And with all doubts overcome, he is extinguished without seizing or grabbing onto anything, anymore; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

639. “The one who has given up sensual stimulations of all kinds, not turning his back to the very spirit of ‘Going Forth,’ as he keeps renouncing all the time, empty of all longing for things; he who has destroyed all chances for rebecoming in any realm within the sensual world; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

640. “The one who has given up craving altogether, not turning his back to the very spirit of ‘Going Forth,’ as he keeps renouncing all the time, empty of all longing for things; he who has destroyed all chances for rebecoming completely; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

641. “The one who not only discards the human yoke, but has entirely given up the heavenly yoke too, remaining unyoked from yokes of all kinds; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

642. “Having abandoned both enjoyment and loathing, becoming cooled and calmed, without any assets left in him that would otherwise lead one back to rebirth; the one who is a Conquering Hero of the whole world; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

643. “The one who sees the dying of beings and also their reappearance in various realms, and despite all that, remains unsoiled, blameless, the Well-Gone, a Buddha; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

644. “The one whose movements remain untraceable and unreachable even by the gods, their heavenly musicians, or the best of humans; he who, by destroying all the contaminants of the heart, has now become an Arahant; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

645. “The one for whom nothing of the past is left, nothing of the future to look forward to, and nothing in between to grab onto, and now dwells thus, undefiled; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

646. “The leader and most excellent among men is He, the Great Hero of a Sage, the Fearless Warrior, the one who has been washed clean, remaining imperturbable, the Buddha; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

647. “The one who knows his earlier births and is able to see both heavenly and hellish realms; the one who by destroying birth itself, has now come to the very end; it is such a person whom I declare ‘a Brahmin.’

648. “So, as you see, the name and clan of a person are mere conventions used in the world; sheer superficial designations predicated by conformity and mutual assent, dependent on the conditional circumstances, in reference to the individual in question.

649. “However, this wrong view has been perpetuated for a very long time, where generations of ignorant people have been entangled in lies. In this way, those who have no knowledge of reality and the truth in things, continue telling the masses that: ‘a person becomes a brahmin by birth.’

650. “The truth is that no one becomes a brahmin through birth, nor it is through birth that one becomes a non-brahmin either. It is only through one’s own deliberate and intentional actions that one can become a brahmin. Only through one’s own deliberate intentional actions does one become a non- brahmin.

651. “It is by deliberate actions that one becomes a farmer; through one’s own deliberate actions one turns into a craftsman; by actions alone does one become a merchant, and it is through deliberate actions that one becomes a servant or a worker.

652. “It is by deliberate and intentional actions that one becomes a thief and a crook; through one’s own intentional actions that one becomes a soldier; only through one’s deliberate actions does one become an advisor to the king, someone who engages in

sacrifice for the ruler, and it is through deliberate intentional actions too, that one becomes a king.

653. “In just this manner, the wise ones, by closely observing, understand as it truly is the truth in actions, and how it is the choice in one’s actions that is at the base of all things. Thus, by clearly seeing the principle of Dependent Arising at play everywhere, they directly come to know the fruits and consequences of deliberate intentional actions.

654. “It is through actions that the world keeps revolving, and it is through actions, by which people continue existing. Beings are bound to actions, and they keep going on, much like the linchpin of the chariot, that keeps the wheels rolling.

655. “It is through exerting energy and the necessary perseverance in leading the Holy Life; it is through self- restraint, and through the control and taming of oneself, whereby a brahmin is born. And that is what makes the most Noble of Brahmins.

656. “Thus, Vāseṭṭha, the one who possesses the three knowledges is peacefully appeased, and with rebirth completely destroyed, it is him you should recognize as none other than Brahmā and Sakka in the flesh; that is, for those who have eyes to see.”

When this was said, the two young brahmins, Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja, addressed The Blessed One by saying:

“It is excellent, Master Gautama! It is marvelous, O! Blessed One! The Blessed Lord has clarified the Dhamma for us in many ways, as though He were to turn upright what had been turned upside-down, revealing what was hidden, showing the way to one who was lost, holding up a lamp in the dark for those with eyesight to see.

“Bhante, we go for refuge to The Blessed One, to the Dhamma, and to the Sangha of Bhikkhus. May The Blessed One accept us as His lay disciples, who have taken refuge in Him, from today until the end of our lives.”