Snp 3.9 — Sn 3:9 Vāseṭṭha

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

3:9 Vāseṭṭha

(This sutta is identical with MN 98.)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying at Icchānaṅgala in the Icchānaṅgala forest grove. And on that occasion many well-known wealthy brahmans were dwelling in Icchānaṅgala, i.e., Caṅkī the brahman, Tārukkha the brahman, Pokkharasāti the brahman, Jānusoṇin the brahman, Todeyya the brahman, and many other well-known wealthy brahmans.

Then, while the young brahmans Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja were walking and wandering about to exercise their legs, this conversation arose between them: “How is one a brahman?”

The young brahman Bhāradvāja said, “When one is well-born on both sides, the mother’s & the father’s, is of pure descent for seven generations of fathers—uncriticized & irreproachable in the telling of one’s birth: It’s to that extent that one is a brahman.”

The young brahman Vāseṭṭha said, “When one is virtuous & consummate in one’s practices, it’s to that extent that one is a brahman.”

But neither was the young brahman Bhāradvāja able to win over the young brahman Vāseṭṭha, nor was the young brahman Vāseṭṭha able to win over the young brahman Bhāradvāja.

Then the young brahman Vāseṭṭha said to the young brahman Bhāradvāja, “Bhāradvāja, this Gotama the contemplative—a son of the Sakyans, gone forth from the Sakyan clan—is staying at Icchānaṅgala in the Icchānaṅgala forest grove. And of that Master Gotama this fine reputation has spread: ‘He is indeed a Blessed One, worthy & rightly self-awakened, consummate in clear-knowing & conduct, well-gone, an expert with regard to the cosmos, unexcelled trainer of people fit to be tamed, teacher of devas & human beings, awakened, blessed.’ Come, let’s go to Gotama the contemplative and, on arrival, ask him about this matter. However he answers, that’s how we’ll hold it.”

“As you say, master,” the young brahman Bhāradvāja responded to the young brahman Vāseṭṭha. So the young brahmans Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, they sat to one side. As they were sitting there, the young brahman Vāseṭṭha addressed the Blessed One in verses:

Master, we’re acknowledged & self-proclaimed

as masters of the three knowledges1:

I, a student of Pokkharasāti,

this one, of Tārukka.

Whatever is taught

by masters of the three knowledges,

in that we are adept—

grammarians & philologists,

on a par with our teachers in recitation.

We have a dispute, Gotama,

on the topic of birth.

Bhāradvāja says that one is a brahman

through birth,
I say through action.2
Know this, One with Eyes.
Neither of us can win over the other.
We come, asking the master
reputed to be self-awakened.
As people going
with hands palm-to-palm over the heart
pay homage, venerating
the moon when it's just past new,
in the same way in the world, Gotama,
we ask Gotama, the Eye arisen in the world:
Is one a brahman through birth
or is it through action?
Tell us, who don't know,
how we might know a brahman."

The Buddha:
"I will answer you step-by-step
as it really is.
Animals are divided by nature,
for their species differ, one from another.3
You know grasses & trees,
even though they don't proclaim themselves:
Their distinguishing markings are made by nature,
for their species differ, one from another.
Then beetles & moths, down to white ants:
Their distinguishing markings are made by nature,
for their species differ, one from another.
You know four-footed beasts,

small & large:
Their distinguishing markings are made by nature,
for their species differ, one from another.
You know belly-footed, long-backed snakes:
Their distinguishing markings are made by nature,
for their species differ, one from another.
Then you know fish in the water, with water their range:
Their distinguishing markings are made by nature,
for their species differ, one from another.
Then you know birds, with wings as their vehicles,
coursing through the sky:
Their distinguishing markings are made by nature,
for their species differ, one from another.

While these species
have many distinguishing marks
made by nature,
human beings don’t
have many distinguishing marks
made by nature:
not through hair or head
not through ears or eyes,
not through face or nose,
not through mouth or lips,
not through neck or shoulders,
not through belly or back,
not through buttocks or chest,
not through groin or intercourse,
not through hands or feet,
not through fingers or nails,

not through calves or thighs,
not through complexion or voice.
Their distinguishing mark is not made by nature
as it is for other species.
In human beings that’s not found
individually in their bodies,
but their identification is described
in terms of convention:
Whoever, among human beings,
makes a living by guarding cows,
you know him thus, Vāseṭṭha,
as a farmer, not as a brahman.
Whoever, among human beings,
makes a living through various crafts,
you know him thus, Vāseṭṭha,
as a craftsman, not as a brahman.
Whoever, among human beings,
makes a living through trade,
you know him thus, Vāseṭṭha,
as a merchant, not as a brahman.
Whoever, among human beings,
makes a living by serving others,
you know him thus, Vāseṭṭha,
as a servant, not as a brahman.
Whoever, among human beings,
makes a living through stealing,
you know him thus, Vāseṭṭha:
This is a thief, not a brahman.
Whoever, among human beings,

makes a living through arrow & sword,
you know him thus, Vāseṭṭha,
as a soldier, not as a brahman.
Whoever, among human beings,
makes a living through priesthood,
you know him thus, Vāseṭṭha,
as a sacrificer, not as a brahman.
Whoever, among human beings,
makes a living partaking of city & state,
you know him thus, Vāseṭṭha,
as a king, not as a brahman.

I don’t call one a brahman
for being born of a mother
or sprung from a womb.
He’s called a ‘bho-sayer’
if he has anything at all.
But someone with nothing,
who clings to no thing:
He’s what I call
a brahman.4
Having cut every fetter,
he doesn’t get ruffled.
Beyond attachment,
unshackled:
He’s what I call
a brahman.
Having cut the strap & thong,
cord & bridle,
having thrown off the bar,5

awakened:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

He endures—unangered—

insult, assault, & imprisonment.

His army is strength;

his strength, forbearance:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

Free from anger,

duties observed,

principled, with no overbearing pride,

trained, a ‘last-body’:

He’s what I call

a brahman.6

Like water on a lotus leaf,

a mustard seed on the tip of an awl,

he doesn’t adhere to sensual pleasures:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

He discerns right here,

for himself,

on his own,

his own

ending of stress.7

Unshackled, his burden laid down:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

Wise, deeply

discerning, astute
as to what is the path
& what's not;
his ultimate goal attained:
He's what I call
a brahman.
Uncontaminated
by householders
& houseless ones alike;
living with no home,
with next to no wants:
He's what I call
a brahman.
Having put aside violence
against beings fearful or firm,
he neither kills nor
gets others to kill:
He's what I call
a brahman.
Unopposing among opposition,
unbound among the armed,
unclinging among those who cling:
He's what I call
a brahman.
His passion, aversion,
conceit, & contempt,
have fallen away—
like a mustard seed
from the tip of an awl:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

He would say

what’s

non-grating,

instructive,

true—

abusing no one:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

Here in the world

he takes nothing not-given

—long, short,

large, small,

attractive, not:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

His longing for this

& for the next world

can’t be found;

free from longing, unshackled:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

His attachments,

his homes,

can’t be found.

He, through knowing,8

is unperplexed,

has reached a footing

in the deathless9:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

He has gone

beyond attachment here

for both merit & evil—

sorrowless, dustless, & pure:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

Spotless, pure like the moon

—limpid & calm—

his delights, his becomings,

totally gone:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

He has made his way past

this hard-going path:

delusion, wandering-on.

He’s crossed over,

has gone beyond,

is free from want,

from perplexity,

absorbed in jhāna,

through no-clinging

unbound:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

Whoever, abandoning sensual passions here,

would go forth from home—

his sensual passions, becomings,
totally gone:
He's what I call
a brahman.
Whoever, abandoning craving here,
would go forth from home—
his cravings, becomings,
totally gone:
He's what I call
a brahman.
Having left behind
the human bond,
having made his way past
the divine,
from all bonds unshackled:
He's what I call
a brahman.
Having left behind
delight & displeasure,
cooled, with no acquisitions—
a hero who has conquered
all the world,
every world:
He's what I call
a brahman.
He knows in every way
beings' passing away,
and their re-
arising;

unattached, awakened,

well-gone:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

He whose course they don’t know

—devas, gandhabbas, & human beings10—

his effluents ended, an arahant:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

He who has nothing

—in front, behind, in between—

the one with nothing

who clings to no thing:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

A splendid bull, conqueror,

hero, great seer—

free from want,

awakened, washed:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

He knows his former lives.

He sees heavens & states of woe,

has attained the ending of birth11:

He’s what I call

a brahman.

For this is a convention in the world:

the name & clan determined,

come into being from common consent,

here & there determined.
Taking a position unknowingly
for a long time obsessively,
those who don't know
say that one is a brahman by birth.
Not by birth is one a brahman,
not by birth a non-brahman.
By action is one a brahman.
By action one is a non-brahman.
By action is one a farmer.
By action one is a craftsman.
By action is one a merchant.
By action one is a servant.
By action is one a thief.
By action one is a soldier.
By action is one a sacrificer.
By action one is a king.
The wise see action in this way
as it has come to be,
seeing dependent co-arising,
cognizant of action's results.
Through action the world rolls on.
People roll on through action.
In action are beings held bound together,
as in a linchpin,
a chariot traveling along.

Through austerity, the holy life,
through restraint & self-control:
That's how one is a brahman.

That's a brahman

unexcelled.

Consummate in the three knowledges,12

further-becoming ended, at peace:

Know, Vāseṭṭha: That's Brahmā, that's Sakka,13

for those who directly know."

When this was said, the young brahmans Vāseṭṭha & Bhāradvāja said to the Blessed One: "Magnificent, Master Gotama! Magnificent! Just as if he were to place upright what was overturned, to reveal what was hidden, to show the way to one who was lost, or to carry a lamp into the dark so that those with eyes could see forms, in the same way has Master Gotama—through many lines of reasoning—made the Dhamma clear. We go to Master Gotama for refuge, to the Dhamma, & to the Saṅgha of monks. May Master Gotama remember us as lay followers who have gone for refuge from this day forward, for life."

vv. 594–656

Notes

1. In the Brahmanical tradition, this means the three Vedas. Later in this poem, the Buddha will give "three knowledges" a Buddhist definition.

2. In this context, Vāseṭṭha is referring to action in this lifetime, rather than action in previous lifetimes.

3. In this and the following verses, the Buddha is playing with three meanings of the word jāti: birth, species, and nature. This point becomes clear when he later contrasts these natural distinctions in the animal world with the conventional distinctions in the human world.

4. This verse begins a section where the verses are identical with Dhp 396–423, except that the last verse in the series is missing a line present in Dhp 423: "He is a sage who has mastered full-knowing, his mastery totally mastered."

This section redefines "brahman" to mean an arahant (although see note 9, below).

As for "bho-sayer": Brahmans, when surprised or amazed, tended to use the word bho, or master, as an exclamation. "If he has anything" (reading sa ce with the Burmese and Sri Lankan editions) = if he/she lays claim to anything as his/her own.

5. The three commentaries explaining this verse—SnA, MA, and DhpA—treat these symbols in slightly different ways. They all agree that the strap = hatred and the thong =

craving. As for the remaining symbols, MA simply states that cord = views, bridle = view-obsession, and bar = ignorance.

SnA and DhpA, however, try to make more of the image by exploring the interconnections of the chariot parts. In their explanation, cord = 62 wrong views (listed in the Brahmajāla Sutta, DN 1) and bridle = obsessions (sensuality, becoming, anger, conceit, views, uncertainty, ignorance (AN 7:11-12)). They note the connection between the 62 wrong views and the obsessions (one of which is views), which is apparently similar to the way the cord and bridle are connected. They go on to note that when one has cut all these things, the bar, which equals ignorance, has been lifted. The fact that the cutting of these chariot parts automatically accomplishes the lifting of the bar is apparently symbolic of the fact that ignorance is one of the obsessions.

6. "With no overbearing pride": reading anussadaṁ with the Thai, Burmese, and Sri Lankan editions. "Last-body": Because an arahant will not be reborn, this present body is his/her last.

7. "For himself, on his own, his own ending of stress": three different ways that the one word attano functions in this verse.

8. According to SnA, "attachments/homes (ālaya)" = cravings. "Knowing": the knowledge of full Awakening (aññā).

9. "A footing in the deathless": The image here derives from a standard analogy comparing the practice to the act of crossing a river. According to AN 7:15, the point where the meditator gains footing on the river bottom, but before getting up on the bank, corresponds to the third stage of awakening, the attainment of non-return. To reach the fourth stage, becoming an arahant, is to go beyond the river and stand on firm ground. Either this verse is using the image differently, equating the gaining of a footing with arahantship, or else it is the only verse in this set to apply the term "brahman" to a non-returner.

10. On the fact that even devas and brahmās cannot know the course of the arahant, see MN 49, SN 23:2, AN 11:10, and Dhp 92–93.

11. The forms of mastery listed in this verse correspond to the three knowledges that comprised the Buddha's Awakening: knowledge of previous lives, knowledge of how beings pass away and are reborn in the various levels of being, and knowledge of the ending of the effluents that maintain the process of birth (see MN 4). It's in this verse that the Buddha redefines the three knowledges claimed by Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja, showing that they don't qualify as masters of the three knowledges that constitute the knowledge of a genuine brahman in his eyes.

12. Here, of course, the Buddha is referring to the three knowledges as defined by him, not as earlier defined by Vāseṭṭha.

13. Sakka is the chief of the devas of the heaven of the Thirty-three.