SN 20.9 — SN 20:9 Bull Elephants | Nāga Sutta

English translation by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu.

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Text

Bull Elephants

Nāga Sutta (SN 20:9)

I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Sāvatthī in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s monastery. And on that occasion a certain newly-ordained monk was spending too much time visiting lay families. The monks said to him, “Friend, don’t spend so much time visiting lay families.” He, admonished by the monks, said, “But these elder monks suppose that lay families should be visited. So why not me?”

Then many monks went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As they were sitting there, they said to him, “Lord, there is a certain newly-ordained monk who is spending too much time visiting lay families. The monks have

said to him, 'Friend, don't spend so much time visiting lay families.' He, admonished by the monks, said, 'But these elder monks suppose that lay families should be visited. So why not me?'"

[The Blessed One said:] "Once, monks, there was a great lake in the wilderness, and bull elephants were living in dependence on it. Plunging into the lake, they would pull up lotus roots & stalks with their trunks and—having washed them so that they were well washed, having chewed them when they were free of mud—would swallow them. This led to beauty & strength for them, and from that cause there came neither death nor death-like pain.

"But young calf elephants, imitating them, plunged into the lake and pulled up lotus roots & stalks with their trunks. Without washing them so that they were well washed, they chewed them while they were still muddy and swallowed them. This did not lead to beauty & strength for them, and from that cause there came either death or death-like pain.

"In the same way, monks, there is the case where elder monks, early in the morning, having adjusted their lower robes and, carrying their bowls & outer robes, enter a village or town for alms. There they speak Dhamma. The lay people, confident in them, do acts of confidence [give gifts]. They [the elder monks] partake of those gains unattached to them, uninfatuated, guiltless, seeing the drawbacks [of attachment to them], and discerning the escape from them. This leads to beauty & strength for them, and from that cause there comes neither death nor death-like pain.

"But newly-ordained monks, imitating them, early in the morning, having adjusted their lower robes and, carrying their bowls & outer robes, enter a village or town for alms. There they speak Dhamma. The lay people, confident in them, do acts of confidence. They [the newly-ordained monks] partake of those gains attached to them, infatuated, guilty, not seeing the drawbacks [of attachment to them], and not discerning the escape from them. This does not lead to beauty & strength for them, and from that cause there comes either death or death-like pain.1

"Therefore, monks, you should train yourselves: 'We will partake [of our gains] unattached, uninfatuated, guiltless, seeing the drawbacks [of attachment to them], and discerning the escape from them.' That's how you should train yourselves."

Note

1. For what counts as beauty and strength among monks, see DN 26 and AN 3:99. For what counts as their death or death-like pain, see SN 20:10.

Publisher references (not part of the sutta)

See also: SN 17:3; SN 17:5; SN 17:8; AN 4:28; AN 5:114