

Sutta-Nipāta 3.9: Vāseṭṭha Sutta

The Discourse to Vāseṭṭha

Translated by Bhante Suddhāso

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling in the forest grove near Icchānaṅgala. On this occasion many famous, wealthy brahmins were living in Icchānaṅgala, such as the brahmin Caṅki, the brahmin Tārukkha, the brahmin Pokkharasāti, the brahmin Jāṇussoni, the brahmin Todeyya, and other famous, wealthy brahmins. Then while the students Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja were walking for exercise, this conversation arose: "How is one a brahmin?"

The student Bhāradvāja said, "Sir, when one is well-born on both one's maternal side and paternal side, of pure descent as far back as the seventh ancestor with no disruption, irreproachable in terms of birth - then one is a brahmin."

The student Vāseṭṭha said, "Sir, when one is virtuous and well-behaved, then one is a brahmin."

Bhāradvāja was not able to convince Vāseṭṭha, and Vāseṭṭha was not able to convince Bhāradvāja.

Then Vāseṭṭha said to Bhāradvāja, "Sir Bhāradvāja, the contemplative Gotama, a son of the Sakyan clan who become a renunciate, now dwells in the forest grove near Icchānaṅgala. A good rumor has been spread about that honorable Gotama which says, 'He is the Blessed One, the Worthy One, the fully self-enlightened one, perfect in knowledge and conduct, sublime, the world-knower, the unsurpassed teacher of devas and humans, the Awakened One, the Blessed One.' Come, Sir Bhāradvāja, we will approach the Blessed One and ask him about this. We will hold it in whatever way the Blessed One explains it."

"Yes, sir," Bhāradvāja replied to Vāseṭṭha.

Then Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja approached the Blessed One and conversed with him. When the appropriate polite conversation was finished they sat to one side. When they were seated to one side, Vāseṭṭha addressed the Blessed One in verse:

"We are both sanctioned and acknowledged as bearers of the Three Knowledges; I am a student of Pokkharasāti, and this is a student of Tārukkha.

"We are completely familiar with everything stated in the Three Knowledges; We know the words and the explanations, we are equal to our teachers in recitation.

"There is a dispute between us about birth, Gotama. Bhāradvāja says one is a brahmin by birth, and I say it is by action. You know the way it is, Seer.¹

1 *Cakkhuma*. Lit. "one who has eyes."

“We are not able to convince each other,
So we came to ask you, the honorable one, reputed to be a completely enlightened being.

“Just as people salute the moon when it becomes full,
In this world, they respectfully honor Gotama.

“We ask Gotama, the Eye that has arisen in the world:
Is one a brahmin by birth, or by action?
Explain to us what we do not understand - how to know a brahmin.”

[The Buddha replies:]

“Vāseṭṭha, I will explain to you, sequentially and accurately,
An analysis of the distinctions in birth among beings.

“Know the grass and the trees, although they make no claim;
Birth has produced their distinctive characteristics,
And by birth they are different from each other.

“Then the moths, butterflies, ants, and termites;
Birth has produced their distinctive characteristics,
And by birth they are different from each other.

“Know the four-legged beings, both small and large;
Birth has produced their distinctive characteristics,
And by birth they are different from each other.

“Know those who move on their stomachs - long-backed snakes;
Birth has produced their distinctive characteristics,
And by birth they are different from each other.

“Know the fish, and all those who live in water;
Birth has produced their distinctive characteristics,
And by birth they are different from each other.

“Know the birds, and all the winged beings who fly through the sky;
Birth has produced their distinctive characteristics,
And by birth they are different from each other.

“In this way we see that their differences are produced by birth.
But among humans there is no difference produced by birth.

“Not by the hair or the head, not by the ears or the eyes,
Not by the mouth or the nose, not by the lips or the eyebrows,

“Not by the throat or the shoulders, not by the stomach or the back,
Not by the buttocks or the chest, not by the anus or the genitals,

“Not by the hands or the feet, not by the fingers or the nails,
Not by the knees or the thighs, not by the color or the voice -
There is no difference produced by birth, as it is with other beings.

“In human bodies no discrimination can be found.
Different human types are spoken of by designation alone.

“Among humans, know one who makes a living by herding cattle
As a farmer, Vāseṭṭha, not a brahmin.

“Among humans, know one who makes a living by crafting
As a craftsman, Vāseṭṭha, not a brahmin.

“Among humans, know one who makes a living by trading
As a merchant, Vāseṭṭha, not a brahmin.

“Among humans, know one who makes a living by serving others
As a servant, Vāseṭṭha, not a brahmin.

“Among humans, know one who makes a living by stealing
As a thief, Vāseṭṭha, not a brahmin.

“Among humans, know one who makes a living by archery
As a warrior, Vāseṭṭha, not a brahmin.

“Among humans, know one who makes a living by priesthood
As a priest, Vāseṭṭha, not a brahmin.

“Among humans, know one who rules a town or country
As a ruler, Vāseṭṭha, not a brahmin.

“I do not call one a brahmin based on a mother’s womb.
Nor is one called a brahmin if one possesses anything.
But one who has nothing and attaches to nothing - that one I call a brahmin.

“Having severed all fetters, one who is never disturbed,
Who has transcended all limitations, free of fetters - that one I call a brahmin.

“Having cut the leash and harness, the chain and tether,
An Awakened One who has removed the lock - that I call a brahmin.

“Even when abused, attacked, imprisoned, one who flawlessly² endures it
With patience as strong as an army - that one I call a brahmin.

“Free of anger, acting appropriately, virtuous and humble,
A tamed one, bearer of its final body - that one I call a brahmin.

2 *Aduṭṭha*. Lit. “uncorrupted.” This can also mean “free of hate.”

“Like water from a lotus leaf, like a mustard seed from a needle tip,
One to whom sensual pleasure does not stick - that one I call a brahmin.

“One who understands dukkha and has personally eliminated it here,
Unburdened and unfettered - that one I call a brahmin.

“With profound wisdom and intelligence, skilled in what is and is not the path,
Who has attained the highest goal³ - that one I call a brahmin.

“Not entangled with either householders or monastics,
Not valuing any abode, with few wishes - that one I call a brahmin.

“One who has set aside violence towards living beings, whether weak or strong,
Who neither injures nor kills - that one I call a brahmin.

“Unobstructed amidst the obstructed, enlightened amidst those who harm themselves,
Unattached amidst the attached - that one I call a brahmin.

“One from whom lust, hatred, conceit, and denigration have fallen away
Like a mustard seed from a needle - that one I call a brahmin.

“One who communicates gently, who speaks truthfully,
And who does not adhere to anything - that one I call a brahmin.

“One who does not steal anything, whether large or small, tiny or huge,
Beautiful or ugly - that one I call a brahmin.

“One in whom no aspiration can be found for this world or another,
Free of aspiration and unfettered - that one I call a brahmin.

“One in whom no underlying tendency can be found,
Who, from direct knowledge, is free of uncertainty,
And has attained immersion in the deathless - that one I call a brahmin,

“One who has transcended both good and evil,
Sorrowless, stainless, and pure - that one I call a brahmin.

“As spotless and pure as the moon, with a bright and tranquil mind,
Who has completely eliminated delight - that one I call a brahmin.

“A meditator who has crossed beyond *saṃsāra* -
This dangerous, difficult domain of delusion and death -
Unagitated, free of uncertainty, enlightened through non-attachment -
That one I call a brahmin.

“One who has abandoned sensuality, a homeless renunciate,
Who has completely eliminated sensual desire - that one I call a brahmin.

³ *Attha*. This can also mean “benefit.”

“One who has abandoned craving, a homeless renunciate,
Who has completely eliminated craving - that one I call a brahmin.

“One who has abandoned connection to the human world,
And transcended connection to the divine,
One who is not bound to any connection - that one I call a brahmin.

“Having abandoned liking and disliking, cooled, free of acquisition,
A hero who has conquered the entire world - that one I call a brahmin.

“One who knows the death and rebirth of all beings,
Unstuck, sublime, and awakened⁴ - that one I call a brahmin.

“One whose destination is not known, by devas, gandhabbas, or humans,
An Arahant whose corruptions have been eliminated - that one I call a brahmin.

“One for whom there is nothing before, after, or in the middle,
Having nothing, attached to nothing - that one I call a brahmin.

“A bull, a distinguished hero, a great sage, victorious,
Unagitated, cleansed, and awakened - that one I call a brahmin.

“One who knows past lives and sees both heaven and hell,
And has attained the elimination of birth - that one I call a brahmin.

“It is a convention in this world to assign a name and clan,
Produced by convention, they are assigned here and there.

“For a long time, those who do not know this have tended towards a [wrong] perspective,
Not understanding, they say that by means of birth one is a brahmin.

“It is not by birth that one is a brahmin; it is not by birth that one is not a brahmin.
By action one is a brahmin, and by action one is not a brahmin.

“One is a farmer by action. One is a craftsman by action.
One is a merchant by action. One is a servant by action.

“One is a thief by action. One is a warrior by action.
One is a priest by action. One is a ruler by action.

“The world goes by action; the populace goes by action.
Beings are bound to their actions, like the axle on which a wheel moves.

“By means of austerity, spiritual conduct, self-restraint, and training -
By means of this one is a brahmin; this is the ultimate brahmin.

4 *Buddha.*

“One who has the Three Knowledges⁵, who is peaceful, done with further existence - Vāseṭṭha, know such a one as Brahmā and Sakkā.”

When this was said, Vāseṭṭha and Bhāradvāja said to the Blessed One, “Magnificent, Sir Gotama! Magnificent, Sir Gotama! Just one one might turn upright what has been overturned, or reveal what was hidden, or explain the path to one who is confused, or bring a lamp into the darkness so those with eyes can see - in the same way Sir Gotama has explained the Dhamma in many ways. We go for refuge to Sir Gotama, to the Dhamma, and to the monastic Saṅgha. May Sir Gotama remember us as lay disciples who have gone for refuge for life.”

5 Knowledge of past lives, knowledge of rebirth, and knowledge of how to eliminate one’s corruptions.