

## Stealing the Scent

*Samyutta Nikāya 9:14*

yam etaṃ vārijaṃ pupphaṃ  
adinnam upasiṅghasi  
ekaṅgam etaṃ theyyānaṃ  
gandhattheno si mārisā ti

**Devatā:** This lotus blossom which you sniff,  
Though it's not been offered to you,  
Is thus something that's been stolen.  
You, sir, are a stealer of scents!

na harāmi na bhañjāmi  
ārā siṅghāmi vārijaṃ  
atha kena nu vaṇṇena  
gandhattheno ti vuccati

**Bhikkhu:** But I don't take, nor do I break;  
I sniff the lotus from afar.  
So really what reason have you  
To call me a stealer of scents?

yvāyaṃ bhisāni khanati  
puṇḍarikāni bhuñjati  
evam ākiṅṅakammanto  
kasma eso na vuccati

He who uproots them by the stalk,  
And consumes the pale lotuses;  
The one engaged in such cruel work,  
Why do you not say this of him?

ākiṅṅaluddo puriso  
dhātī celam va makkhito  
tasmim me vacanaṃ natthi  
tañ cārahāmi vattave

**Devatā:** A person who's ruthless and cruel,  
Defiled like a workman's garment,  
To him my words would mean nothing.  
But it's fitting I speak to you.

anaṅgaṇassa posassa  
niccam sucigavesino  
vālaggamattam pāpassa  
abbhāmatam va khāyati

For an unblemished person, who's  
Always pursuing purity,  
Even a hair-tip of evil  
Seems to him as large as a cloud.

addhā maṃ yakkha jānāsi  
attho maṃ anukampasi  
puna pi yakkha vajjesi  
yadā passasi edisaṃ

**Bhikkhu:** Truly, O yakkha, you know me,  
And have concern for my welfare.  
Do please, O yakkha, speak again,  
Whenever you see such a thing.

neva taṃ upājivāmi  
na pi te katakammase  
tvam eva bhikkhu jāneyya  
yena gaccheyya suggatin ti

**Devatā:** I don't live to serve upon you;  
Nor will I do your work for you.  
You should know for yourself, O monk,  
How to go along the good path.

This lively exchange between a forest-dwelling monk and a benevolent deity is filled with poetic movement and gives us a glimpse of the care with which some people practiced in the time of the Buddha. Since the working definition of stealing was "taking what has not been given," the Devata is correct—in a very strict sense. Notice that the monk at first reacts defensively, denying that he is doing anything wrong, and then tries to shift the blame to others who do even worse. After recognizing a veiled compliment, he finally realizes that the Devata is trying to help him, at which point he encourages further help. The Devata ends the exchange sharply, revealing an intriguing and capricious character who is willing to help, but only on his own terms. This is a role often played by nature spirits and other minor deities in the Pali texts.

--Andrew Olendzki