
THE SĀL — AN ALTERNATIVE BUDDHIST HOLY TREE?

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Frontispiece: the calligraphy in Chinese characters by Ven Thích Huyền-Vi reads:

*When the learned man thrusts
away carelessness by carefulness
climbing on to the palace of knowledge,
he gazes griefless on the grieving people.
The wise man gazes on fools as one
standing on a mountain gazes on those
standing on the ground (below).*

Dhammapada II v.28 (tr. K R Norman)
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The sāl tree (*sāla-* or *sāka-rukkha*, *Shorea robusta*) played a significant part in the life of the Buddha as recorded in Pāli literature¹, although its role has been overshadowed by the Holy Fig, the Bodhi Tree, beneath which the Buddha is said to have attained Enlightenment. The Bodhi Tree (*Ficus religiosa*) was associated with Indian religion even before the Buddha's time, with *yakkha*-shrines, with local and tribal guardian deities to whom offerings were made and yogins and holy men who meditated beneath its shade. It is appropriate, therefore, that the Buddha should have attained Enlightenment sitting beneath it.

Whereas the Bodhi Tree rarely occurs outside the context of the Enlightenment, the sāl tree is mentioned many times in the suttas. Indeed it is actually the sāl tree that played a more intimate role in the Buddha's life. It was while standing holding a flowering sāl branch that Mahāmāyā gave birth to the Buddha-to-be and it was between two flowering sāl trees that the Buddha lay when he finally passed away. It is appropriate that the sāl tree should figure in these contexts when it is remembered that the Buddha was born in the Sakyan clan, *Sakya* or *Sakiya* meaning 'the people of the *sāka*² forest'. The sāl (or *sāka*) is indigenous to what is called the Nepal Terai, the tract of forest between the foothills of the Himalayas and the plains, the homeland of the Sakyan people. The legendary ancestors of the Sakyans were the sons of King Okkāka, who were banished when the king

1 Cf. E.J. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History*, 3rd ed., London 1949, pp.7, 33, 158.

2 This is to assume *sāka* is a synonym of *sāla*. Although the PED refers to the *sāka* as the teak (*Tectone grandis*), this tree is not indigenous to the Terai forests. See Thomas, *ibid.*, p.7, footnote, referring to Dr Hoey, JRAS, 1906, p.453.

wished to make their younger half-brother his heir. They then went to live on the slopes of the Himalayas by the banks of a lotus pool where there was a grove of sāl trees, hence the name. This place became the site of the chief city of the Sakyans, Kapilavatthu ('Kapila's Place'), said to be named after the brahmin hermit Kapila who was living there in a leaf-hut when the princes arrived. There was still a sāl grove there at the time of the Buddha.

The traditional date of the birth, Enlightenment and passing away (*parinibbāna*) of the Buddha is the full-moon day of Vesākha (April-May). The sāl tree would be in full bloom at this time, which accords with the story of his birth in the Lumbinī sāl tree grove and his mother being attracted by the sight of the flowers. However, in the *Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta*, when the Buddha was to pass away, it is said that the twin sāl trees were flowering out of season while raining their blossoms down upon him in homage. The Parinibbāna probably occurred in December-January, taking into account the chronology suggested by the text. At the end of the last rains-retreat (September-October) spent at the village of Beluva near Vesāli, the encounter with Māra occurred, when the Buddha stated that he would attain final Nibbāna in three months' time. This would, of course, be December-January and too early for the normal flowering of the sāl.

The sāl is a tall forest tree yielding a useful timber, but is chiefly remarked upon for its flowers. In S I 131, Māra speaks of the beauty of the bhikkhuṇī Uppalavaṇṇā as she stands at the foot of a sāl tree as if crowned in blossom. At A IV 259, the Buddha observes that even sāl trees would benefit from keeping the *uposatha* if they had minds — and would be proclaimed *sotāpannas* if they could know what is well-spoken or not (S V 377; also A II 194). These remarks are never said of any other kind of tree and may indicate an affectionate regard for it possibly because of its connection with his original home and people.

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ON SOME FRAGMENTS OF THE BHIKṢUṆĪPRĀTIMOKṢA OF THE SARVĀSTIVĀDINS

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In 'Zwei kleine Fragmente aus den Bhikṣuṇīprātimokṣa'¹, K. Wille identifies two fragments of the Pelliot manuscripts², i.e., Pelliot Sanskrit (= P.Skt.) Bleu 46 and 47, found near Kučā, as possibly belonging to the Bhikṣuṇīprātimokṣa (= Bhīpra) of the Dharmaguptaka school. The fragment P.Skt. Bleu 46 contains the first eight *pācattika*³ precepts for bhikṣuṇīs, the fragment P.Skt. Bleu 47 contains two other *pācattika* precepts. In the introduction preceding this category of precepts, P.Skt. Bleu 46 says that there are (1)7(8) pāc precepts⁴. Only two schools have this number of precepts for bhikṣuṇīs, namely the Dharmaguptaka and Sarvāstivāda schools. Yet, the identification of the Pelliot fragments poses a problem: the fifth pāc. precept mentioned in P.Skt. Bleu 46 is lacking in T 1437, *Shih-sung Pi-ch'iu-ni Po-lo-i'i-mu-ch'a Chieh-pen*, i.e., the Chinese Bhīpra of the Sarvāstivādins compiled by Fa-ying between 465 and

1 In H. Bechert, S. Bretfeld & P. Kieffer-Pülz, *Untersuchungen zur buddhistischen Literatur*, Zweite Folge, SWTF 8, Göttingen 1997, pp.307-14.

2 On these Mss, see J.-U. Hartmann and K. Wille, 'Die nordturkistanischen Sanskrit-Handschriften der Sammlung Pelliot' in Bechert *et al*, *op. cit.*, pp.131-82.

3 This technical term appears in P.Skt. Bleu 47. The usual term is Pāli *pācittiya*, Skt *pāṭayantikā*, *pāyantikā*, Dharmaguptaka school: *pācittika* (E. Waldschmidt, *Sanskrihandchriften aus den Turfanfunden* I, Wiesbaden 1965, pp.297-8, SHT I 656), Mahāsāṃghika-Lokottaravāda school: *pācittika* (for alternative forms, see F. Edgerton, BHSD, p.340, s.v. *pāṭayantika*) — hereafter all pāc. The original form and meaning of the word cannot be confidently reconstructed. According to A. Hirakawa, *Monastic Discipline for the Buddhist Nuns*, Patna 1982, p.191, n.1, it probably means 'expiation'. The *pācattika* concern minor offences, entailing confession.

4 'ptati[p]ā[c]a[t]tikā(dha) O [rmā]. . .', completed by K. Wille, *op. cit.*, p.311, n.29: *aṣṭasaptati*.