

Khadira Sutta

The Acacia Discourse

[To be liberated is to know the four noble truths]
(Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.32/5:438 f)
Translated by Piya Tan ©2007

Introduction

Like **the Sīmsapā Sutta** (S 56.31),¹ the Khadira Sutta (the Acacia Discourse) is a statement on the necessity of properly understanding the four noble truths as a prerequisite for spiritual liberation. The Buddha applies two sets of simple plant similes to illustrate this vital truth. The first set of similes illustrate that it is impossible to be spiritually liberated without having fully realized the four noble truths: it is like trying to building a bag or basket from the tiny leaves of the Indian long-leaf pine, or of the emblemic myrobalan, or of the acacia.

The scientific name of the acacia tree (P/Skt *khadira*; Pkt *khayara*, *khair*; Tamil *vēl*)² is *Acacia catechu*. It is a deciduous tree (generally leafless during late spring to early summer, with full foliage in June-July) with very hard wood, and the resin is used in medicine. Locally it is called catechu or khayar. It grows to about 10 m in 55 years. Acacia leaves are compound and tiny. [Fig 1]³

The *salala* is scientifically named *Pinus roxburghii*, and is commonly called the chir pine. It is native to the Himalaya region (500-2300 m), and is a large tree, reaching 30-50 m tall. Its leaves are needle-like, in fascicles of three, very slender, 20-35 cm long, and distinctly yellowish green. [Fig 2]⁴



Fig 1. The acacia

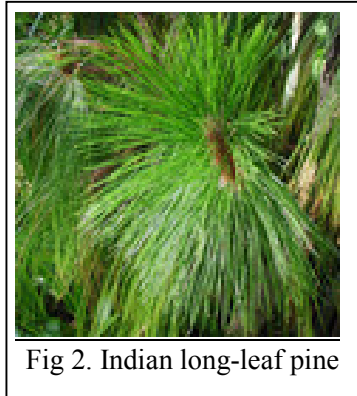


Fig 2. Indian long-leaf pine



Fig 3. Amalaka or emblic myrobalan

¹ S 56.31/5:437 f = SD 21.7.

² See <http://www.haryana-online.com/Flora/khair.htm>.

³ Picture credit: <http://www.botanical.com/botanical/mgmh/c/catbla35-1.jpg>. All these leaves [Figs 1-3] are small and delicate. On *salala* as *sarala, patta* (Be), see J Liyanaratne, "South Asian Flora as reflected in the twelfth-century Pāli lexicon *Abhidhānappadīpikā*," JPTS 20 1994: §170, which renders it as the long-leaved Indian pine.

⁴ Picture credit: http://www.treedazzled.com/photos/kew_gardens/dscn0825w-thumb.jpg.

The *āmalaka* (ts) (locally called *amlaka*, *amlaki*) has the scientific name of *Phyllanthus emblica* or *Emblca officinalis*, emblic myrobalan, or Malacca tree (after which Melaka, Malaysia is named) and its bitter-sour fruit is an adaptogen, which means it is a food grade, nontoxic herb that normalizes body function, balances the neuroendocrine system and improves immunity.⁵ The leaves are very small, petioled, ovate or oblong, and composite 7-10 cm long [Fig 3].⁶ The second set of plant similes makes use of large and durable leaves: those of the lotus (*paduma*), the kino (*palāsa*) and the maluva (*māluvā*) plants.

The lotus (*paduma*; Skt *padma*) mentioned here is the *Nelumbium speciosum*, and is often confused with the water lily, *Nymphaea alba*. Whole the lotus leaves stand above the water, the water lily leaves float on it. The lotus leaf is large, durable and water-proof, and often used food wrapper. [Fig 4]⁷

The kino or dhak (*palāsa*) has the scientific name of *Pterocarpus marsupium* and is a medium to large deciduous tree, growing up to 30 m tall. Its heartwood, broad leaves, and flowers have medicinal value. It is often mentioned in the early texts.⁸ [Fig 5]⁹

The maluva (*māluvā*; BHSD, *mālu(latā)*; AMg *māluvā*) is also known as *pattra vallī* or *pattra latā* in Sanskrit. This plant is probably the *Bauhinia vahlii*, a giant climber and one of the most common *Bauhinia* species found in the sub-Himalayan region up to 3000 m. Its leaves vary in size from 20 to 40 cm in diameter, and are bilobed at the apex, and are used for making cups and plates and for wrapping food. [Fig 4]¹⁰



Fig 4. Lotus leaf



Fig 5. Kino leaf

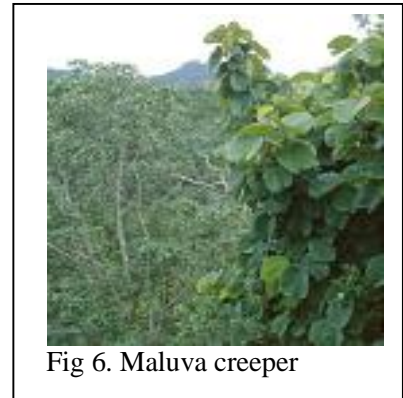


Fig 6. Maluva creeper

⁵ Its fruit looks like Indian gooseberry (amla), with which it is sometimes confused, but is botanically unrelated. See <http://www.itmonline.org/arts/amla.htm>.

⁶ Picture credit: <http://www.payer.de/ayurveda/caraka010513.jpg>.

⁷ Picture credit: http://www.sciam.com/media/inline/00088C40-BE58-1E5F-A98A809EC5880105_1.jpg.

⁸ *Cūḷa Dhamma, samādāna S* (M 45.4/1:306 f); *Sūciloma S* (S 810/10.3/1:207); *Mūla S* (A 3.69.5/1:202, 11/1:204); Dh 162, 334.

⁹ Picture credit: www.biotox.cz/botanicus/jpg/bph_0037.jpg.

¹⁰ Picture credit: http://online-media.uni-marburg.de/biologie/nutzpflanzen/bilder/vs/12a24_bauhinia_vahlii.jpg.

The Acacia Discourse

(S 56.32/5:438 f)

2 Bhikshus, if anyone were to speak thus:

“Without realizing the noble truth that is suffering according to reality,
without realizing the noble truth that is the arising of suffering according to reality,
without realizing the noble truth that is the ending of suffering according to reality,
without realizing the noble truth that is the path to the ending of suffering according to reality,

I shall make a total end of suffering”—this is impossible.

3 Just as, bhikshus, someone were to speak thus:

“Having made a basket [bag] of acacia leaves,¹¹ or of pine needles, or of myrobalan leaves, [493] I will carry water or a palm fruit¹²—this is impossible.

Even so, bhikshus, if anyone were to speak thus:

“Without realizing the noble truth that is suffering according to reality,
without realizing the noble truth that is the arising of suffering according to reality,
without realizing the noble truth that is the ending of suffering according to reality,
without realizing the noble truth that is the path to the ending of suffering according to reality,

I shall make a total end of suffering”—this is impossible.

4 But, bhikshus, if anyone were to speak thus:

“Having realized the noble truth that is suffering according to reality,
having realized the noble truth that is the arising of suffering according to reality,
having realized the noble truth that is the ending of suffering according to reality,
having realized the noble truth that is the path to the ending of suffering according to reality,

I shall make a total end of suffering”—this is possible.

5 Just as, bhikshus, someone were to speak thus:

“Having made a basket [bag] lotus leaves,¹³ or of kino leaves,¹⁴ or of maluva leaves,¹⁵ I will carry water or palm fruit”—this is possible.

Even so, bhikshus, if anyone were to speak thus:

“Having realized the noble truth that is suffering according to reality,
having realized the noble truth that is the arising of suffering according to reality,
having realized the noble truth that is the ending of suffering according to reality,
having realized the noble truth that is the path to the ending of suffering according to reality,

I shall make a total end of suffering”—this is possible.

6 Therefore, bhikshus,

Devoted effort should be made to understand, ¹⁶	‘This is the suffering.’
Devoted effort should be made to understand,	‘This is the arising of suffering.’
Devoted effort should be made to understand,	‘This is the ending of suffering.’
Devoted effort should be made to understand,	‘This is the path to the ending of suffering.’

— evaṃ — 071119; 081205; 081210

¹¹ On the acacia and the foll 2 plants, see Intro.

¹² Following Ce *tāla, pakkam* (It 84,20), but other Ce MSS read *tāla, pattam* (“a palm leaf”) which does not make good sense.

¹³ On the lotus leaves and the foll 2 plants, see Intro.

¹⁴ *Palāsa, patta*: *palāsa* usu means “foliage,” but here refers to a tree, which J Liyanaratne identifies as a kind of *kimsuka* (“South Asian Flora,” JPTS 20 1994: §44), but not the one in S 35.245 which is identified at 1994: §43. The English name for *palāsa* is Bengal kino tree or dhak tree.

¹⁵ *Māluvā* isa broad-leaved creeper (S 810/10.3/1:207): see also M 1:306f; A 1:202, 204; Dh 163, 334. See S:B 476 n568.

¹⁶ *Yogo karaṇīyo*.