

Who dares knows¹

A long time before our Buddha has arisen in the world, at a time before the lands of our world had taken its present shapes and places, there was a king named Brahmadata. He ruled over a mighty continent named Simha-dvipa, the lion continent, and he ruled from his glorious capital called Simha-pura, the lion city. The country had abundant grain, food, gold and wealth so that no one in the land needed to work, and were regularly given ample food, clothing, houses, health care, even wives or husbands, and teachers. Understandably, all the king's subjects were contented, loved and respected him.

Yet, living in such a paradise, where people did not have to work or earn a living, had its challenges. People easily became bored. So the king decreed some helpful activities that would entertain, or even educate, them. The people were told to ask before him any questions that would challenge the wisdom of his best advisors.

One day, an intelligent young boy, named Siddhattha, came before the king and asked, "Your majesty, **what is greater than all your wealth and power?**" The king was delighted with the question because he did not know the answer. The king's advisers and the whole court concurred because he was delighted.

"All right, young boy," said the king, "What is the answer to the question?"

"I honestly don't know, your majesty. You only ask us to ask questions!"

Brahmadatta laughed at the boy's astuteness. Then, recalling that he still did not know the answer, scowled slightly and asked his advisers, but none of them could agree on any answer. In fact, no one in the court or the kingdom was able to answer the questioner agree on any answer.

The exasperated king then made a great act of truth. He declared, "If anyone can answer this question, or show me what it means, I will let him marry my eldest daughter, the princess, and take over half my kingdom in due course. If any woman can give me the answer, she will marry my first son, the prince, and become queen, and take over the other half!"

Such a desperate, yet sincere, act did not go unnoticed. Indeed, it is said that the king of the gods Sakra's usually cool royal seat simply heated up, as if someone was challenging his divine position. That is, if he were to do nothing about the matter. So Sakra and his queen, Sujā, disguised themselves as master dress-makers, and went to Brahmadata's palace.

Sakra announced himself as the leading fashion-designer of the time, and also part-time adviser to royalty and those in high places who had difficult questions of national and universal significance. In fact, this was the very reason he had come.

"You will know the answer from the question, O king! But you must follow all our directions without any question, just the way your subjects obey you without question." King Brahmadata, of course, agreed.

Sakra and Sujā then asked the king to bring them to his private chambers. Sakra then conjured up a fine set of robes made of gossamer, so fine that the human eye could almost not see them, except for a slight shimmer that it gave off. They were however gently soft to the touch and comfortable to wear, like a wisp of cool dry air on our skin on a hot humid day. The king was at once impressed.

The old king was told to take off all his royal robes and don the gossamer dress. Since the king believed Sakra and Sujā, he could see only the shimmering robes, but not his nakedness. He was simply impressed, and forgot about the all-important question!

¹ This is the first of a series of modern teaching tales, known as "the Singapore Fables," meant to entertain and educate the reader in the spirit of the Buddha Dharma.

“Such fine robes must be shown to the people!” decreed the king. “Surely this would entertain them!” He was very right. For, it was a land where his subjects had everything they ever wanted, and given even more. So they had nothing to do, and this could be really boring. Something different, such as a public procession of the king in his gossamer robes would surely make the people rejoice.

So the king declared a special “public festival,” since every other day was a holiday. It was a day that all the people of Simhapura had to assemble along the boulevard that ran through his sprawling orchard teeming with his favourite fruits: durians, rambutans, chiku, mangoes, kwini and more.

As the people waited, they were allowed to feast on whatever fruits they desired. There were numerous palace attendants to serve them, and musicians and entertainers to delight the people as they waited for the king to appear.

Finally, with the clarion of the heralds, the king emerged from the magnificent main portal of the palace, followed by his royal court. They held a bright red canopy above him so that he was clearly seen from afar. Others held heraldic banners and various royal emblems. A long band of smartly uniformed musicians played a slow march, not to hurry the king on this special occasion.

The radiant king in his magnificent gossamer robes could not have felt more proud as his subjects all along the orchard boulevard smiled, waved approvingly and kept shouting, “Long live the king!” “Wise and mighty king!” and so on.

In time, Brahmadata realized that it was quite a long orchard boulevard, and was beginning to feel a little tired. Normally, he would be effortlessly carried on an ornate litter borne by a dozen strong men. But today, he wanted to show off his magnificent gossamer robes, and so it was proper to walk all the way. Sakra and Sujā, of course, followed close behind the king. They showed no sweat at all, nor cast any shadow. For, they were gods, but no one noticed.

It was around this time that the king reached where the young precocious Siddhartha was waiting eagerly to see the king. (He was the boy who had earlier asked the king the troubling question, in the first place.) Young boys (and girls), as we know, do not hesitate to see the truth and tell the truth, if adults do not coach or threaten them otherwise. Siddhartha was certainly the most precocious child in all the land. And here he was looking at the king in his gossamer robes, right in the open before all the people of Simhapura.

Siddhartha was so excited that he broke away from the crowd and went right before king Brahmadata. The whole procession stopped. The kind old king at once recalled meeting the boy Siddhattha, and also because he was the most precocious in the land.

“What do you think of my robes, my boy?” asked the king royally and proudly.

“Hmm...” replied the boy, stifling back a snicker, but was unable to hide a wide toothy smile. “Your majesty, you look totally naked. You seem not to be wearing anything at all!”

Then Sakra leapt high into the air, and clapped his hands. “There you are, O king! You have your answer!”

By then, a few thoughtful royal attendants had already covered the king decently up with some proper royal robes that Sakra had secretly ordered to be brought along. Sakra then quietly told the king that the boy had told the truth, and he was wise and courageous to do so. He could see through even divine charade, what more worldly deception.

Sakra explained: “O king, you see yourself as you wanted to see yourself. Your people see you as you wanted them to see you. But this boy sees true reality, just as you really are.

Those who could see through the gossamer robes dared not say anything to displease you. Only this boy saw the truth. Even greater than that, he had the courage to say it to you. Truly, he has answered the question, which he had himself put before you, by the way!"

Brahmadatta and, of course, his subjects, too, learned a great thing that day: that there was something greater than all the wealth and power that the king ever had. This was moral courage, wise and truthful: it was the wisdom of those who dared to know, who dared to speak. The king declared that day a special day of national activity (since every other day was a holiday), an annual event, to celebrate wisdom, which was indeed greater than all the world's wealth and power.

As for the boy Siddhartha, the king had him marry his eldest daughter. In due course, he became a wise and kind king, whose wisdom and courage are remembered and emulated to this day whenever we dared to know, and dared to speak what we know so that others may be free and happy, like the people of Simhadvipa.

Singapore Fables
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