

# The Good Sal Tree

## Bhadda-Sāla Jātaka, No. 465

translation by Margo McLoughlin

Long ago, on the banks of the Ganges, in the holy city of Benares, there was a king named Brahmadata. He was a good king and he ruled his kingdom well. He ruled it so well, in fact, that he had nothing much to do. There were no wars and trade prospered. Generosity and kindness flourished, all from the example of the king.

Now there were many other small kingdoms in the land of the Rose Apple (Jambudīpe)—the great land we now call India—and most were plagued with problems of one sort or another. In some there was intrigue in the court; in others, unending battles at the border, or unrest and dissatisfaction among the people. The rulers of these kingdoms heard of Brahmadata and his prosperous, peaceful realm and they invited him to visit. He went. He advised them on matters of kingship. He inquired after their policies and systems of governance, and he took note of their establishments.

He was a modest man, indeed, but he couldn't help reflecting that his own little kingdom on the banks of the Ganges was the most agreeable of realms, and he, himself, the best of kings. And the best of kings ought really to have the best of palaces.

One day he said to himself, "Every single king I have visited lives in a palace supported on many pillars. A palace of many pillars is not so unusual. What if I were to have built a palace supported on one pillar alone? Then it would be clear to all that I, Brahmadata, am the foremost king of all the kings."

He summoned the royal architects and builders. He said, "Make me a palace supported by one single pillar." They nodded and replied, "Very well, your majesty."

The royal architects set to work on the design of the king's new palace. The builders entered a forest where a great many sturdy trees could be found, each one worthy of a single-pillared palace. The builders thought to themselves, "These are certainly the right kind of trees, but the road is uneven and rough. It would be impossible to bring one down and get it out." They went and reported this to the king.

The king said, "By whatever means you can find, bring one down gently, and bring it out." But the builders repeated, "It isn't possible, by any means."

The king was determined to have his single-pillared palace. He thought of the many lordly trees that stood in his royal park. He said to the builders, "If that is the case, you may remove a single tree from my pleasure grove."

The builders went to the king's pleasure grove, and there they found a magnificent Sal tree, a royal Sal tree. It was straight and tall, with great spreading branches and a tremendous girth. The villagers paid great honor to this tree, as did the royal family. The builders returned to the king and told him what they had found. The king was delighted. "You've found the tree for my palace! Go and cut it down."

The builders replied, "Very well, your majesty." They returned to the park, bearing fragrant wreaths. These they hung upon the tree, along with a five-spray garland. They encircled the tree with string and fastened ornaments to the branches. They lit a lamp of scented oil and made an offering of food. Then they announced, "At this place, in seven days, we will come and cut down this tree. Let the tree-spirits who dwell in this tree find another abode. And let there be no ill-will toward us."

The tree-spirit who lived in that tree heard these words and thought, "These men will certainly cut down this tree. They will destroy my home, and, in doing so, they will take my life. And what is worse, this tree in which I make my home is surrounded by my tree-spirit relatives, all of them dwelling in young Sal trees. Many of their homes will be destroyed when my great home comes crashing down. My destruction affects not only me, but also my kindred. I must do what I can to offer them the gift of life."

In the middle of the night the tree-spirit adorned himself with celestial ornaments and made his way to the king's dwelling. He entered the royal bedchamber, made a single sound and stood weeping behind the bed of the king. The king awoke and saw him there. He began to tremble, terrified at the sight of this being beside his bed.

He said:

*Who are you, standing in the night,  
Adorned like a god, shining, bright?  
Tell me why your tears are falling?  
And from where does your sorrow come?*



The Spirit-King answered:

*In this great land of yours, O King,  
they know me as the Good Sal Tree:  
For sixty-thousand years I've stood,  
while great and small have honored me.  
Homes and towns have been built, Great King,  
And many palaces besides,  
And yet no harm was done to me.  
So, just as they have worshipped me,  
Show your respect to this Sal tree.*

And to these words the king replied:

*I do not see another tree  
whose body is so straight and strong,  
your form is perfect, all agree:  
In height and width, you'll be for me  
the pillar of my palace home,  
your home as well, my Good Sal Tree.*

The Spirit-King answered:

*If I must leave my home, this tree  
which is my body, then I ask  
that I be cut not all at once,  
but branch by branch, in pieces small  
enough to fall among my kin:  
the top, the middle and the root.  
And in this way no harm will come  
to those who grow close to my home.*

And so the king responded:

*Just as one might cut off hands, feet,  
ears, nose, and from behind, the head,  
leaving a human being dead –  
That is a painful way to die.  
Broken like this, your ease cut off,  
Why, for what reason, Good Sal Tree,  
Do you wish to end in pieces?*

The Good Sal Tree spoke two verses in response:

*Listen to me, Great King, and hear  
a truth which is the ground of life,  
the truth that guides me in my wish  
to see my limbs fall one by one:  
Safe and protected by my side,  
my deva kindred live in peace.  
But if my ancient home should fall  
much harm would come to one and all.*

King Brahmadatta was pleased by what he heard. He thought to himself: “This tree-spirit is great in compassion. He does not wish the homes of his fellow tree-spirits to be destroyed as a result of the destruction of his own home. His actions benefit his kindred. I will give him freedom from all fear.” And so he spoke a final verse:

*Lord of the Forest, Good Sal Tree,  
how noble are your thoughts, I see  
you wish the welfare of your kin.  
I give you safety, and freedom.*

When the Spirit-King had instructed the king in kindness and goodness, he returned to his Sal tree home. The king abandoned his plan to build a palace supported by one single pillar. He followed the tree spirit's instructions, and did much good throughout his life.

### Commentary

The story wraps up quickly, with the king relinquishing his ambition to have a single-pillared palace. Why this sudden change of heart? The king is struck by the difference between his own thoughts, fixated as he is by his desire to outshine all other kings with his architecturally unique palace, and those of the Spirit-King, whose thoughts extend beyond his own fate to the fate of others. Even though his own home (and life) are in danger of being destroyed, it is the effect on those around him that most concerns him. *Bhadda-Sāla Jātaka* is a good story for our times, since our ability to recognize the relationship between our thoughts and the choices that follow from them will determine the future of the planet.

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