

# Simsapā Sutta

## The Simsapā Discourse

[All we need to know to be free]  
(Saṃyutta Nikāya 56.31/5:437 f)  
Translated by Piya Tan ©2007

### Introduction

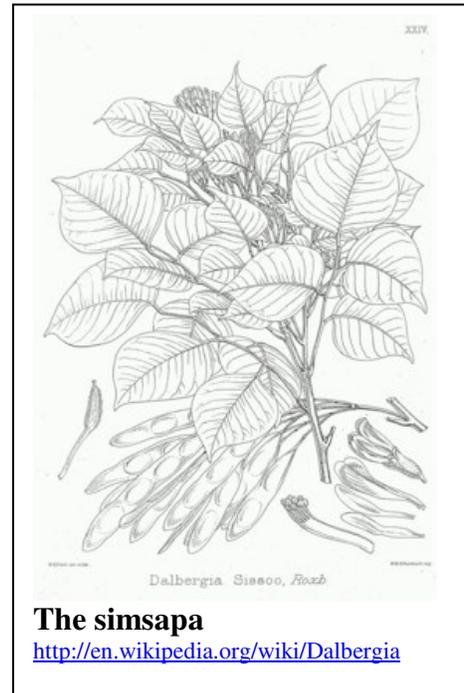
The Simsapa Discourse records that once the Buddha holds up a small handful of simsapa leaf [see picture] and declares that what he has taught can be compared to the handful of leaves, but what he know and had not taught is like all the leaves of the simsapa forest. “This means that he claimed to know much more than he taught but he did not claim omniscience” (Jayatilleke 1963:469).<sup>1</sup>

In the **Kaṇṇaka-t,thala Sutta** (M 90), for example, the Buddha declares that it is possible for one to know all and see all, but not everything simultaneously.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the **Devadaha Sutta** (M 101) discusses the problem of omniscience and experience.<sup>3</sup> In the **Pāsādika Sutta** (D 29), the Buddha says that he has unlimited knowledge of the past, but he can only know, for example, that this is his last birth and that he would not be reborn: the reason is that the future has not yet come.<sup>4</sup> All this is not the Buddha’s limitation, but simply that of the limits of knowledge.

The Buddha’s not answering these ten questions does not mean that he lacks the knowledge of the answers. On the contrary, the Buddha’s knowledge is vast. In the **Simsapā Sutta** (S 56.31), the Buddha declares that the things he knows through self-knowledge is as vast as the leaves in the *simsapā* forest,<sup>5</sup> but he has not taught these things “because they are not connected to the goal, not connected to the fundamentals of the holy life, and do not lead to revulsion, to letting go, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nirvana.” (S 56.31/5:437 f)

The *simsapa* (Skt *śimśapā*; Pkt *sīsava*, *sīsama*; Nepal, *sisau*) has the scientific name of *Dalbergia sissoo*, and is commonly called the Indian rosewood or asoka tree. Besides the simsapa forest outside Kosambī, another lies north of Setavyā, where the elder Kumāra Kassapa once stayed (see the **Pāyāsi Sutta**).<sup>6</sup> Another simsapa forest is near Ālavī.<sup>7</sup>

Here, and in the following **Khadira Sutta** (S 56.32),<sup>8</sup> another “tree sutta,” the Buddha stresses that we need merely to realize the four noble truths to be spiritual liberated.



**The simsapa**

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalbergia>

<sup>1</sup> See also 474.

<sup>2</sup> M 90.5-8/2:126-128 = SD 10.8 Intro (2).

<sup>3</sup> M 101/2:214-228 = SD 18.4.

<sup>4</sup> D 29.27/3:134.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://hort.ufl.edu/trees/DALSISA.pdf>; or <http://iu.ff.cuni.cz/pandanus/database/details.php?plantno=-800071&enc=utf&sort=ka&display=50&reswind=this&lat=&skt=on&pkt=&tam=&start=100>.

<sup>6</sup> D 23.2/2:316.

<sup>7</sup> A 1:136; cf DhA 1:71; VvA 297.

<sup>8</sup> S 56.32/5:438 f = SD 21.8.

## The Simsapā Discourse

(S 56.31/5:437 f)

1 At one time, the Blessed One was staying in a simsapa<sup>9</sup> forest near Kosambī.

### What has not been taught

2 Then the Blessed One, having gathered a few simsapa leaves in his hand, addressed the monks:  
“What do you think, bhikshus, which is more: these few simsapa leaves gathered in my hand, or those on the simsapa trees above?” [438]

“Bhante, few are the simsapa leaves that the Blessed One has gathered in his hand, but there are very much more on the simsapa trees above.”

3 “Even so, bhikshus, much more is the direct knowledge that I have known, but that has not been taught. Few is that which has been taught.

4 And why, bhikshus, have I not taught [pointed them]<sup>10</sup> out?

Because, bhikshus, they are not connected to the goal, not connected to the fundamentals of the holy life, and do not lead to revulsion, to letting go, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nirvana.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, I have not taught them.

### What has been taught

5 And what, bhikshus, have I taught?

I have taught, ‘This is the suffering.’  
I have taught, ‘This is the arising of suffering.’  
I have taught, ‘This is the ending of suffering.’  
I have taught, ‘This is the path to the ending of suffering.’

6 And why, bhikshus, have they been taught by me?

Because, bhikshus, they are connected to the goal, connected to the fundamentals of the holy life, and lead to revulsion, to letting go, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to awakening, to nirvana.

Therefore, I have taught them.

7 Therefore, bhikshus,

Devoted effort should be made to understand, <sup>12</sup>	‘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 —

<sup>9</sup> *Simsapā*; Skt *śimsapā*; Pkt *sīsava*, *sīsama*: see Intro.

<sup>10</sup> *Anakkhātāṃ*, opp *akkhātāṃ*.

<sup>11</sup> On this formula, see *Nibbidā* = SD 20.1.

<sup>12</sup> *Yogo karaṇīyo*.