ASIA'S MOST SACRED TREE

By William Warren

The Bo tree became an object of veneration for early Buddhists because the Buddha had expressed his gratitude to it for providing him with shade during his quest for Enlightenment. As a result, every Theravada Buddhist temple in Asia has a tree growing in its compound. Buddhist devotees traditionally circumbulate it as a mark of respect. This has led non-Buddhist missionaries to ridicule the practice and say that Buddhists pray to trees. This article by William Warren proves that this is not so. Ed.

Not long after I came to live in Thailand, when I was still a novice in the mysteries of tropical gardening, an unknown tree suddenly appeared in a flowerbed near my house. It had attractive, heart-shaped leaves with a prominent vein running down the centre and stout, vigorous roots that had already started to creep out in all directions; left to its own devices, it would soon dominate the bed of low plants and perhaps even threaten the foundations of the house.

Now this was not that unusual, as I knew even then. Unwanted plants are apt to spring up overnight in the hot, humid climate, and constant vigilance is required unless one wants to inhabit a jungle. What was unusual, however, was the attitude of my gardener towards the newcomer; normally the most enthusiastic hacker-down, he stubbornly refused to lift his machete against this particular tree.

A Thai friend who happened to visit during our argument supplied the explanation. 'That's a Bo tree', she said. 'No good Buddhist will ever cut one down. You can do it, as a foreigner, but it will bring him all sorts of bad luck'.

This was not strictly true, I discovered later. There are circumstances in which a Bo tree can be cut down, providing certain solemn ceremonies are observed. But, as I also discovered, there is no doubt that of all the countless trees indigenous to tropical Asia none is more surrounded by legend, superstition and religious reverence. Nor does any other tree have such an important place in history.

A gardening manual I sometimes consult for advice on plant names and habits contains this rather brutal comment on the Bo tree: '(It) is practically of no

economic, and little ornamental, value'. The remark clearly identifies the author as a non-Buddhist, for no adherent of that widespread religion would dream of considering the Bo tree in such mundane terms. Nor, for that matter, would several hundred million Hindus or vast numbers of tribal people, who also believe that *Ficus religiosa* – also known variously as the Bodhi-tree, the banyan, the pipal (or peepul), the bo-gaha or the God tree – possesses sacred qualities of a very high order.

But it was Buddhism that raised the Bo tree into a special class of its own, as a living symbol of the faith that spread to almost every part of Asia. Various legends have arisen concerning the role it played in the birth of the religion, but all agree on one essential point – that, beneath the spreading branches of such a tree, in 596 BC, an Indian prince named Siddharta achieved the enlightenment *(bodhi)* that brought him Buddhahood.

A son of King Suddhodana of the noble Gautama family, Prince Siddharta was also expected to rise to the highest rank. At the age of 29, however, he renounced the material comforts of his life and embarked on a search for spiritual enlightenment, trying all various methods that were common at the time. None brought fulfillment until, finally, at the age of 35, Siddharta arrived at a place called Uruvela (now known as Buddhagaya) on the banks of river. Here a great Bo tree grew, and in its protective shade Prince Siddharta found what he sought.

A rich fabric of myth has grown around the tree, and also around the events that transpired under it. One story claims the future Buddha, his wife, his charioteer, his favourite horse, his most earnest disciple and the Bo tree itself all began life on the same day. Some versions assert that Siddharta meditated under the tree for seven years before the miracle of enlightenment occurred, others that the process took seven days or a single night. All insist that it was an arduous test of Siddharta's mental and physical endurance.

The ordeal later became one of the major subjects of Buddhist art, depicted in temple murals and other paintings throughout Asia. At the centre of most of these we see the prince, dressed in his monastic robes and sitting serenely beneath the heart-shaped leaves of the Bo tree, while all about him rage the wicked forces of Mara, king of the underworld.

Mara, we read in one account, 'raised a violent storm and rain, and the army assaulted Siddharta with javelins, swords, arrows, rocks, hillocks and burning charcoal'. When this barrage had no effect, Mara then sent his beautiful daughters to seduce the prince from his labours. But this, too, failed: Siddharta

preached them a sermon and they left, singing his blessings. Finally Mara admitted defeat, and the Buddha was born.

The Bo tree under which these momentous events took place allegedly lived for 272 years, the object of increasing reverence as Buddhism spread throughout India. It might have survived longer if not for the jealousy of a queen during the reign of Emperor Asoke the Great, the leader whose conversion was partly responsible for the rapid rise of the new faith.

According to the story, Asoke was so devoted to the tree that he spent many hours praying beneath it – too many, in the opinion of the queen, who felt he was neglecting both her and his kingdom. She therefore decided to destroy her 'rival' by repeatedly pouring a mixture of poison and boiling water around its roots.

Slowly the sacred tree began to die, but when Asoke saw this, far from returning to affairs of state, he was all but incapacitated by remorse, for he felt that he was being punished for past misdeeds. He suffered so much that the queen became alarmed and finally confessed her crime, although the Bo tree was apparently dead.

The emperor was determined to restore the tree, however, and the following morning he and some followers carried the milk of 100 cows to the tree, and he watered its remains with this. Moreover, he promised to remain at the site, praying, until a new tree appeared – even if it took the rest of his life. His piety was rewarded when a number of new shoots appeared, and the strongest was selected to become the second sacred Bo tree.

But this tree, too, was doomed to destruction by human hands. The Hindus, rising as a spiritual and political power in India, inevitably came into conflict with the Buddhists. They, too, revered *Ficus religiosa* (an old Hindu saying advises that 'it is better to die a leper than to pluck the leaf of a pipal'), but they also recognized it as the most visible symbol of the religion they wanted to defeat. For centuries, in fact the Bo tree was almost the only symbol of Buddhism, as the Buddha was not represented by images until several hundred years after the founding of the faith. Accordingly, in about AD 600, the second Bo tree was destroyed by a Hindu king named Sasanka, who ordered not only that the tree be chopped down but also that its roots be dug up and burned.

History then again repeated itself. The Hindu armies were defeated by a Buddhist king, who promptly set about restoring the tree. As Asoke had done, he watered the site with fresh milk, this time from 1000 cows, and vowed to remain praying at the site until a fresh growth appeared. Miraculously it did,

producing a third Bo tree that lived for more than 1000 years until it was blown down in a storm towards the end of the nineteenth century.

By this time the British ruled India, and it was a Briton noted for his interest in Indian history, Major-General Arthur Cunningham, who was responsible for the continuing history of the Bo tree. Finding shoots from the old tree, he received permission to encourage one to grow and to transplant this to a place nearby where the Buddha supposedly went to stand after his enlightenment. The fourth Bo tree is now about 26 metres tall, with a trunk so large that the arms of three people are required to encircle it. Botanists visit every week to ascertain its health, and Buddhists from all over the world arrive daily to pay homage at the holy spot.

A direct descendant of the original Bo tree still survives in the ancient city of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, which became the centre of Buddhism after the faith declined in its native land. Reportedly the oldest tree in the world (almost every year of its existence is a matter of written record), it was introduced from Buddhagaya as a seedling in 288 BC.

The bearer of the seedling was Princess Sanghamitta, a daughter of Emperor Asoke, and the event is celebrated by countless Sinhalese legends and paintings. We are told that when Sanghamitta embarked by ship with the seedling., 'in the great ocean, through the circumference of a league, the waves were stilled… and various melodies rang in the air'.

Also accompanied by miraculous events was the planting of the tree just outside Anuradhapura. Representatives came from all over Sri Lanka, and the tree was borne to Mahamega Garden in a grand procession. As it was planted, 'the earth quaked and the roots growing over the rim of the golden vase struck down into the earth, enclosing the vase…. People came to worship it with perfume and flowers, and a tremendous cloud drenched the tree with rain. After seven days the cloud and mist dispersed, revealing the tree resplendent in a halo of six colours.'

This Bo tree soon became – and has remained – one of the two most important Buddhist relics in Sri Lanka (the other being the Buddha's Tooth enshrined at Kandy). When I visited the tree recently, it was still growing, its frail branches supported by crutch-like poles donated by faithful pilgrims.

Even if the famous Anuradhapura tree should die, it will survive through innumerable offsprings. Seedlings from it have been distributed to various temples in other parts of Sri Lanka and they, in turn, have produced countless others. According to an old Sinhalese law, the destruction of a Bo tree is

punishable by death, and even today it is forbidden to cut off branches unless they are diseased or they interfere with an important temple building. Pilgrims from overseas who wish to take saplings to their homeland must seek special permission from the government.

As Buddhism spread to other Asian countries, so spread reverence for the Bo tree. The faith was introduced to China during the reign of the Emperor Ming Ti (AD 58-76) of the Eastern Han dynasty, after which a number of Chinese monks and scholars made the perilous journey to India and Sri Lanka to visit the holy places and to find Buddhist teachers willing to accompany them back to China.

One of the earliest, Fa Hsien, was a Buddhist monk who travelled for fourteen years at the start of the fifth century AD and visited both countries: in Sri Lanka, he paid homage to the great Bo tree at Anuradhapura, then already a venerable specimen. In the seventh century another monk, named Hsuan Tsang (described by one authority as 'undoubtedly the greatest known traveller that the world had so far seen'), paid his respects to the tree at Buddhagaya.

The first representation of the Buddha as a human figure – the forerunner of the millions of images that have since been produced throughout Asia – appeared during the first century AD. Previously, the religion was suggested by various symbols, of which the most prominent were the Wheel of Doctrine, a pair of crouching deer (representing the Buddha's first sermon in the Deer Park at Benares) and the Bo tree (representing his enlightenment). Often only the distinctive, heart-shaped leaf was sufficient to suggest its presence, and this found its way into the religious art of many cultures.

It appeared, for example, as a decorative motif in Chinese porcelain of the early Ming period. It also inspired the shape of the clapper found in the little gold and silver bells that adorn temples in Thailand and Burma. The *soma*, or boundary stones, that mark the holiest part of the compound in a Thai temple are also designed as stylized Bo tree leaves.

The tree itself appears in countless works of art: in Chinese cave paintings at Tun Huang, Yun Kang and Lung Men, in the temple murals of Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka, in small clay votive tablets used as offerings – in almost every creation, in fact, in which the life of the Buddha is depicted.

In Bangkok, perhaps the most venerated Bo tree is that at Wat Benchamabopit, known popularly as the Marble Temple. This is not a particularly old temple – it was built only about eighty years ago towards the end of the reign of King Chulalongkorn – nor is it really typical of Thai religious architecture, for the

king, determined to modernise his country in almost every way, incorporated a number of striking departures from tradition.

Convention was observed in one important respect, however: the temple must have a Bo tree, and given its high royal status the tree must be a special one. The selected tree came all the way from Buddhagaya itself, and was a sapling of the sacred Bo tree growing on the site of the Buddha's enlightenment.

Wat Benchamabopt is one of my favourite places in Bangkok, and whenever I visit I always pause to pay my respects to the great tree. It is quite large now, its roots creeping over the raised platform on which it was planted and its thick, protective branches spreading in all directions. A number of Buddhist images have been placed around its base as offerings, with bunches of flowers and sweet-smelling jasmine wreaths. There are also a number of little spirit houses – one containing an image of King Chulalongkorn – reminders of an older, pre-Buddhist belief that such trees were the natural abode of assorted spirits capable of granting all kinds of wishes, from the birth of a child to a winning lottery number.

As I stand there, isolated by the serenity of the place from the clamour of the city outside, it is not hard to understand such beliefs. These spacious branches, with their long, heart-shaped leaves that quiver strangely in the slightest breeze, *do* seem to invite repose and meditation. One can see how the Hindu saying 'I am going to the peepul tree' also means 'I am going to say my prayers'. At the same time there is a primitive power, a sense of mystery in the twisted roots that explains how the tree can also inspire a sense of reverent awe in people to whom spirits of nature are an accepted part of daily existence.

No one, I think, could fail to sense that this is no ordinary tree, nor to understand the role it has played in the religious life of Asia.

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