

# 1.5 Seeing the Buddha 1

## Aniconic Representations of the Buddha

By Piya Tan ©2003

Main source: Piyasilo, *The Image of the Buddha*, 1988a.

### 1. Early representations of the Buddha

The Commentaries say that the Bodhi tree sprang up on the same day as the Bodhisattva was born (DA 2:425; J 1:54, 6:489; BA 131, 276, 298). After his Enlightenment, he spent a whole week in front of it, standing with unblinking eyes, gazing at it in gratitude. A shrine was later erected on the spot, north of the Bodhi tree, where he stood, and was called **the Shrine of the Unblinking Eye** (P. *animisalocana cetiya*) (J 1:77). The spot was made into a shrine even in the Buddha's lifetime, the only shrine that could be so used.

While the Buddha was yet alive, he allowed the planting of a Bodhi tree in front of the gateway of Jetavana in Sāvattḥī, so that people could make their offerings in the name of the Buddha when he was away. For this purpose, Moggallāna took a fruit from the tree at Gayā as it dropped from its stalk before it reached the ground. It was planted in a golden jar by Anāthapiṇḍaka with great pomp and ceremony. A sapling, it is said, immediately sprouted forth, fifty cubits<sup>1</sup> high, and in order to consecrate it, the Buddha spent a night meditating under it. Since this tree was planted under the direction of Ānanda, it came to be called **the Ānanda Bodhi** (J 4:228 ff).

### 2. Why Buddhists love trees

Historically, Buddhists do not worship trees, but have a great love for trees and nature from the fact that the Buddha was enlightened under the Bodhi tree and spent a week meditatively gazing at it and living most of his life outdoors. Moreover, the Bodhi tree is the only object that the Buddha actually allowed to represent him so that offering could be made in his absence.

While the Buddha lived, devotees would bring offerings and place them before his Fragrant Chamber (*gandha, kuṭi*) when he was away. The Introduction to **the Kalinga, bodhi Jātaka** (J 4:228) records that Ānanda questioned the Buddha regarding what, like the Fragrant Cell, could constitute a “basis worthy of worship” (*pūjāniyaṭṭhāna*) during his absence. In his reply, the Buddha spoke of **three kinds of shrines** (*cetiya*):

- (1) **the bodily shrine** or analogous forms (*sarīrika cetiya*)—including relics, hair, and footprint;
- (2) **shrine by use** or chrematomorphic forms (*paribhogika cetiya*), e.g. a robe, an almsbowl, a Dharma-seat and the Bodhi tree; and
- (3) **memorial shrine** or memorial forms (*uddesika cetiya*), i.e. shrine by dedication or association, e.g. the *dhamma, cakka* (Skt *dharmā, cakra*), the trident (Skt *triśūla* or *nandī, pada*), the stupa, and the Buddha image. (J 4:228)

The three kinds of shrines are similarly mentioned in **the Commentary to the Nidhi, kaṇḍa Sutta** as follows:

- (1) **the shrine by use** (*paribhogika cetiya*), namely, the Bodhi tree;
- (2) **the memorial shrine** (*uddesika cetiya*), namely, the Buddha image (*Buddha paṭimā*); and
- (3) **the relic shrine** (*sa, dhātuka cetiya*), namely, the stupa with a relic chamber (*dhātu, gabbha thūpa*). (KhpA 222)

The Vinaya Subcommentary (*tīkā*), **Sārattha, dīpanī**, speaks of a slightly different set of Shrines: the shrine by use, the relic shrine, and the Dharma shrine (*dhamma cetiya*). By the lastnamed is meant “that which is made into a book written with such doctrines as the Law of Interdependent Arising and so on, and

<sup>1</sup> Cubit (*hattha*, lit. “hand, arm”) (J 1:34, 233), an arm's length (V 4:221, 230) or the length measured from the tip of the middle finger to the elbow (about 17-22 inches or 4.3-5.5 cm).

then set aside [or installed in a shrine]” (*paṭicca, samuppada’ādi-likhita-pothakam nidahitvā katam pana dhamma, cetiyam nāma*) (VT 1:264, Siamese ed).

The Commentator probably drew his inspiration here from the Dhamma, cetiya Sutta (M 89) that speaks of the Dharma as a “shrine” (*cetiya*). But its Commentary explains the term as meaning “words of respect for the Dharma” where in showing respect to one of the Three Jewels, one does so to all three (MA 3:355). The Dharma shrine or *dhamma, cetiya*, therefore, constitutes a fourth type of shrine.

Another reason for the Buddha’s rejection of the use of memorial shrines (*uddesika cetiya*)—including anthropomorphic images—to represent him is simply because when the Buddha finally passed away, he entered into “Nirvana without remainder”, thus abandoning his physical body. As such, before the Common Era, Buddhist art always represented the Buddha only **aniconically**, that is, in symbolic form (by way of a pair of footprints, a Dharma wheel, royal parasol, a Bodhi tree, etc.) carved in reliefs that adorned Buddhist stupas and architecture at places like Bharhut (2<sup>nd</sup> cent. BCE) and Sāñcī (1<sup>st</sup> cent. BCE) in central India.

### 3. The Bodhi Tree

The Buddha rejected the use of relics (*sarīrika cetiya*) in his own lifetime and dismissed the memorial forms (*uddesika cetiya*) as “groundless and fanciful”, in the sense of being arbitrary. He allowed only the use of **the Bodhi tree** to represent him while he lived. A similar prohibition is alluded to in chapter 48 of the Sarvāstivāda Vinaya (see A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1935:63 n4).

The Bodhi tree is a “shrine by use” (*paribhogika cetiya*), since it sheltered the Buddha in his quest for enlightenment. As such, for Buddhists, the Bodhi tree represents the Bodhisattva’s unrelenting effort towards self-perfection and the Buddha’s enlightened wisdom. By extension, **Buddhists venerate all trees**. After all, every Buddha has his own Bodhi tree (BA 297). In this sense, trees are sacred to Buddhists even before the green movement arose in recent times.

An often used epithet of the Buddha is that of *ādicca, bandhu*, “kinsman of the sun” (D 3:197; Sn 1128; Tha 26, 158, 417). In the Saṃyutta, the Buddha speaks of the sun as *pajam mama* (my child) (S 1:51; S:B 388 nn158-159), which Buddhaghosa explains as meaning “disciple and spiritual son” (SA 1:86). The Vimāna, vatthu Commentary says that the sun (*ādicca*) belonged to the Gautama clan (*gotama, gotta*), as did the Buddha; hence his epithet (VvA 116).

In our universe, **the sun** is the ultimate source of all life, since without it life as we know it would cease to exist. In terms of **the food chain**, we ultimately get our energy from the sun, that is, through plants acting as solar transformers, converting and storing solar energy in forms digestible to us. Trees are our halfway houses of life, standing between the raw nuclear power of the sun and the fragile terrestrial life. The Bodhi tree, as such, reminds us how interconnected our life is with everything else around us.

Cut down the forest, but not the tree	<i>vanam chindatha, mā rukkham</i>
From the forest arises fear	<i>vanato jāyati bhayaṃ</i>
Having cut down forest and growths	<i>chetvā vanañ ca vanathañ ca</i>
O monks, you are forest-free!	<i>nibbaṇā hotha bhikkhavo</i>

(Dh 283)

In this sense, Buddhists worship trees.

#### (a) The oldest historical tree

The Bodhi tree that presently stands in Buddha-gayā is not the original Bodhi tree. Between the time of Asoka and the present day, there must have been a number of generations of Bodhi trees. In 1876, when the remnants of the old tree collapsed, young shoots were discovered at its base and they grew into the present Bodhi tree.

During the time of Asoka (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE), at the request of the Sinhalese king Devampiya Tissa, a southern branch of the Bodhi tree at Buddha-gayā was taken to Sri Lanka where it was planted in Anuradhapura. The veneration that the Sinhalese Buddhists gave to the Bodhi tree evolved into **the Bodhi**

**Pūja** still performed today.<sup>2</sup> According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica,<sup>3</sup> the Bodhis tree is **the oldest historical tree on record**.

An article entitled “The Eye of Enlightenment” (1975)<sup>4</sup> speaks of a curious fact about a chemical called **serotonin** found in the pineal gland and which seems to be the key to rational thought. The *Ficus religiosa*, i.e. the Bodhi tree, is rich in serotonin. In other words, the tree under which the Buddha attained Enlightenment may have been a “tree of knowledge” in the literal sense!

**(b) Botanical facts about the Bodhi tree**

The Bodhi tree or *Ficus religiosa* (the holy fig tree) belongs to the Moraceae family. It is a glabrous (smooth-barked) tree usually epiphytic. The colour of its bark is grey and nearly half an inch [12.7 mm] thick. Its wood is grayish-white and moderately hard, having narrow band of soft tissue which alternate with broader bands of finer substance. The tree, which grows to a height of about 30 m, produces dark purple berries in axillary pairs.

Its leaf is coriaceous (leather-like) and has a long petiole. Its upper side is shiny and the lower side is minutely tuberculated when it is dry. Its shape is ovate-rotund and narrows upwards (in short, heart-shaped) with the apex producing a linear lanceolate tail. The edges of the leaf are entire and undulate.

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<sup>2</sup> See for example Ency Brit 15<sup>th</sup> ed: Bodhipuja.

<sup>3</sup> Ency Brit 15<sup>th</sup> ed 1983; Macro: Bo tree.

<sup>4</sup> *Strange Stories, Amazing Facts*, London: Readers’ Digest, 1974:44 f.

## The Three Shrines (*cetiya*)

Kalinga, bodhi Jataka (J 4:228)

1. **Analogous (bodily) forms** (*sarīrika cetiya*)  
—relics, hair, footprint.
2. **Chrematographic forms** (*paribhogika cetiya*)  
—robe, almsbowl, Dharma-seat, Bodhi tree.
3. **Memorial forms** (*uddesika cetiya*)  
—dharma, cakra, trident, stupa, image.



"Aniconic" = symbolic.

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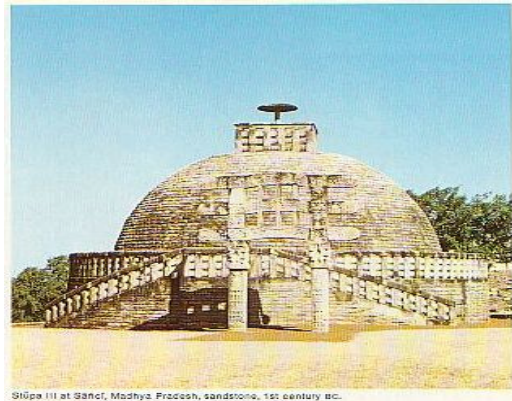
*Footprint of Buddha, Pakistan  
Gandhara or Swat Period  
2nd - 3rd centuries CE.  
Photo courtesy: miho.or.jp/english/*

This Buddha footprint (from the Archaeological Museum, Swat, Pakistan) is thought to be the one mentioned in the travel records of the Chinese monks Faxien and Xuanzang, who made their pilgrimages in the 5th and 7th centuries respectively. Such footprints typically show the Swastika symbol on each toe.



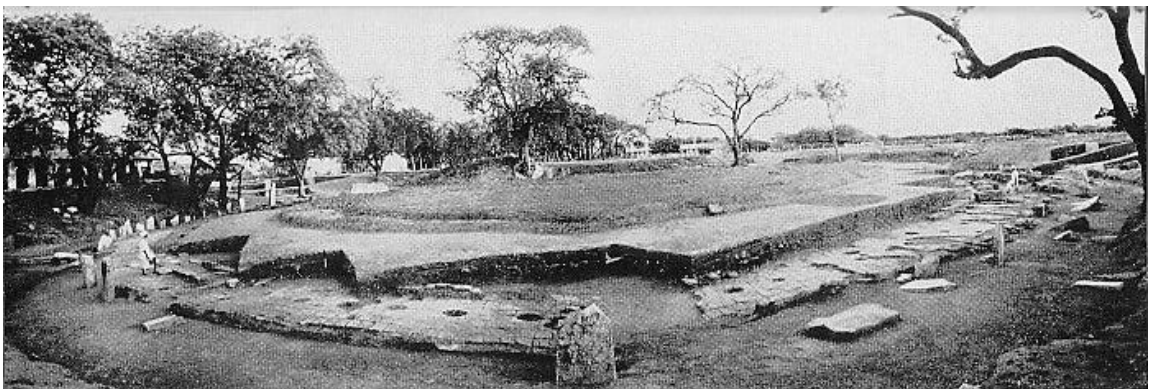
# Stupas

- *Stūpa* = a memorial mound or shrine.
- Amarāvātī (begun 200 BCE):
  - about 50 m  $\Phi$ , 30 m high.
  - discovered in 1797.
- Śātavāhana king Pulumāyi (2<sup>nd</sup> cent.)
- Nāgārjunakonda (s. India)



Stūpa III at Sanchi, Madhya Pradesh, sandstone, 1st century BC.

## Amaravati stupa (foundations)



7. The great Amarāvati Stūpa (of which only the foundations remain). (Photo: Department of Archaeology, N.E. Project, Guntur)



How the Amaravati Stupa originally looked like.

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