Leaves of the Bodhi Tree from East to West: The Symbol of the Sacred Fig Tree in Ancient India, Southeast Asia and Contemporary Contexts

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ABSTRACT

LEAVES OF THE BODHI FROM EAST TO WEST:
THE SYMBOL OF THE SACRED FIG TREE IN ANCIENT INDIA, SOUTHEAST ASIA
AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS

Amanda J. Spradling, M.A.
School of Art and Design
Northern Illinois University, 2019
Catherine Raymond, Director

This thesis examines the depiction of the Bodhi Tree, a common Buddhist symbol. Bodhi tree simply means tree of enlightenment and Buddha Shakyamuni reached enlightenment while in meditation beneath the particular tree species of *ficus religiosa*, or sacred fig. Though the sacred fig tree, as a native tree to India, has historically held significance, today it is principally known for its association with the Buddha, particularly his single most important life event, his enlightenment.

Tree worship and its universal practice is well understood and many studies of the Bodhi Tree explore its associated pilgrimage site, Bodh Gaya, and monument, the Mahabodhi Temple, as well as its genealogy and role in the marking of sacred space. However, despite the fact that the symbol of the Bodhi Tree is ubiquitous, its visual depiction is not the focus of any previous study. The sacred fig tree has been a part of India’s material and visual culture since before the advent of Buddhism, and has even spread to contemporary culture, such as its appearance in several American business logos and current use in the branding of traditional and natural products in Thailand.

This study surveys the depiction of the sacred fig tree from its beginnings in India, through its application in Indian and Southeast Asian Buddhist art and finally its contemporary
uses in the East and West, Thailand and the United States, respectively. In studying the appearance, use and meaning of this symbol from ancient to contemporary times and Buddhist to non-Buddhists contexts, this thesis adds to the history and myth of one of the world’s many sacred trees, beyond its association with the Buddha’s enlightenment.
LEAVES OF THE BODHI TREE FROM EAST TO WEST:
THE SYMBOL OF THE SACRED FIG TREE IN ANCIENT INDIA, SOUTHEAST ASIA
AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS

BY
AMANDA J. SPRADLING
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A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS

SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN

Thesis Director:
Catherine Raymond
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Now at the end of an arduous road, the overwhelming feeling out of many is that of gratitude. My path first began as an undergraduate art history student at the University of California, Los Angeles. I took an introductory course on South and Southeast Asian art with Dr. Robert L. Brown who, unbeknownst to me at the time, is a giant in the field. I subsequently enrolled in his seminar, and he proceeded to help me in applying to graduate school as well as some of my first jobs and internships. When I asked him for advice regarding my post-undergraduate plans back in 2011, this is what he offered:

I guess I would only say that nothing, no decision, no direction, is forever. You are very young, and have your life ahead of you. Any decision you make is a good decision. Make the choice out of what you want, not out of worry. Life is indeed an adventure. Work as hard as you can, always do as well as you can, but try to enjoy every minute. I guess that sounds, corny...which it is because, of course as all corny advice is, it is true.

Dr. Brown has continued to be a warm, understanding and intelligent mentor extending his help on countless occasions throughout my undergraduate and graduate education. His impact on my studies and related experiences cannot be measured, for it is indeed—giant!

I would also like to thank the rest of the amazing faculty I had the chance to encounter while at UCLA, including Dr. Charlene Villaseñor-Black (Ibero-American Art), Dr. Meredith Cohen (Medieval Art and Architecture), Dr. Saloni Mathur (Modern and Contemporary South Asian Art) and Dr. George Baker (Modern and Contemporary Art), for a strong foundation and diverse training in the field of art history.
At Northern Illinois University, I would first like to thank my thesis committee for their patience, guidance and much needed encouragement throughout this process. Thank you to Dr. Catherine Raymond, my thesis advisor, mentor and reason for voyaging to DeKalb, Illinois. A world traveler, curator and specialist of Burmese art who has never lost her quintessential French-ness, I am lucky to have a mentor with such experience, interest, passion and knowledge that was only ever shared with the utmost kindness.

To Dr. Rebecca Houze, thank you for our candid conversations as well as the inspiration, excitement and freedom to explore this project. A new methodology and closer look at more contemporary imagery provided a reinvigorated way with which to approach Buddhist art history. To Dr. Sinclair Bell, Classics had always been an early interest of mine as a young art history student. Taking part in your courses and witnessing your theoretical approach to ancient material and the field of archaeology offered a brand new perspective. Your words were encouraging and your standards high, lending both the support and push that I needed.

I would also like to thank the entire art history faculty at NIU. It was a pleasure to work with and learn from Dr. Sarah Evans (Contemporary Art), Dr. Barbara Jaffee (Modern and American Art), Dr. Helen Nagata (East Asian Art), Dr. Mary Quinlan (Renaissance Art) and Dr. Ann Van Dijk (Medieval Art), who each had their own incredible academic training, specialized field of interest and unique perspective to share.

Outside of art history, I was fortunate to find a second home at the Center for Southeast Asian Studies at NIU. Without a work-study opportunity, two years of funding through the Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowship and a space to connect with like-minded students as well as interdisciplinary faculty, my experience at NIU would not have been possible or nearly as well rounded. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Eric Jones (History, NIU) and
Colleen Gray for all of the laughs and advice, as well as Dr. Andrea Molnar (Anthropology, NIU) and Dr. Tharaphi Than (World Languages and Cultures, NIU) for the opportunity to take challenging Southeast Asian Studies coursework in the field of anthropology.

For my language training, I would like to thank Dr. Kanjana Thepboriruk (World Languages and Cultures, NIU), Dr. Than and my FLTAs, Aj. Kulthida, Aj. Duangkamon and Sayama Khin, for all of their help and patience in acquiring Thai and Burmese language, as well as their general encouragement throughout my graduate studies.

Further, as importantly as faculty, I would like to thank the many students at NIU who shared this experience with me. To my art history cohort, Carmin Berchiolly, Markie Striegel, Sarah Sabo, Allison Sutton and Alexandra Heller, no one better understood this journey and we did it together. To bright friends in other fields, Kassandra Chhay (Anthropology, NIU) and Thomas Brown (History, NIU), thank you for the extended community and sense of support.

Last but not least, this eternal homebody is most grateful for friends and family. To my Mom, my Dad, my twin sister Carole, and my older sister Sara, thank you for giving me the courage to finish what I started and an important reason to keep going. To my Uncle Robert and Auntie Carla, thank you for your support and love. It has been one of the few constants in my life since childhood.

To old friends, best friends and chosen family in Elizabeth Francis, Melanie Daily, Priscilla Tran, Ann Dang, Daniel Soto, Dominique Labaki, Erika Enomo, Erika Hausmaninger and Michelle Duong, I am lucky to have you. Your phone calls, visits, and snail mail all made this difficult task a bearable one. And to newer but no less greater friends that made Illinois yet another place to call home, love and thanks to Carmin, Markie and Jack.
DEDICATION

In loving memory of my grandmother, Alejandra A. Arenas, and my aunt, Carol Jean Mendoza
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Depictions of the Bodhi Tree, the tree the Bodhisattva sat beneath during the moment of his enlightenment, have been a part of Buddhist visual culture since its earliest permanent structures from circa the second to first centuries BCE. Further, the depiction of the same species of tree as the Bodhi Tree, the sacred fig, predates the advent of Buddhism in India, beginning with the Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1900 BCE), which demonstrates the long held significance of this particular tree species in Indian culture. Bodhi tree, a term derived from Sanskrit, simply means tree of enlightenment, similar to the idea of a tree of knowledge or tree of life that is perhaps better known in Western culture. And beyond the Buddha of our current era, Buddha Shakyamuni, many buddhas preceded him in previous eras. Each of these buddhas, or enlightened ones, achieved enlightenment while meditating under a particular species of tree,

1. Before his enlightenment, the Buddha is referred to as the Bodhisattva. A bodhisattva is one who is on the brink of enlightenment, but has yet to attain it. In other words, a buddha-to-be.

2. Sanskrit is an ancient Indo-European language of India and was used to write Hindu and Buddhist texts in India. Buddhist terms derive from both Sanskrit and Pali, another ancient Indo-European language that was used to write down the Theravada Buddhist canon in Sri Lanka. Theravada and Mahayana are the two principal sects of Buddhism, though there are many others. In general, Theravada Buddhism took hold in mainland Southeast Asia and Mahayana Buddhism became popular in East Asia. Theravada Buddhism focuses on the life of the Buddha as a model to attain enlightenment for the individual. Mahayana, meaning greater vehicle, refers to the communal or group effort that can be made for individuals to attain enlightenment. This school believes in a greater pantheon of figures outside of the Buddha that can help one attain enlightenment, such as bodhisattvas or buddhas to be who postpone their enlightenment in order to stay and help others on their path. Further, one’s merit can be passed to others in order to help them attain enlightenment. In a crude comparison, Theravada Buddhism can be interpreted as the more conservative model in relation to Mahayana Buddhism, because it emphasizes the path of the individual and would require a monastic life in order to reach enlightenment. Places principally influenced by Sri Lanka and the Theravada Buddhist school will likely use Buddhist vocabulary derived from Pali. I will use Sanskrit terms in this paper. Sanskrit terms not apart of everyday language will be italicized but without diacritical marks. Sanskrit terms I feel are apart of common language will not be italicized.

3. The Buddha, capitalized, refers to the Buddha of our current era, Buddha Shakyamuni. A buddha, or enlightened one, generally refers to an enlightened being.
just as Buddha Shakyamuni did. In this way, every buddha is associated with a bodhi tree or
tree of enlightenment, though the species of that tree varies. The Bodhi Tree, as a proper noun,
refersto the Bodhi Tree of Buddha Shakyamuni, the buddha of the current era.

The Bodhi Tree is referred to by many names, including Bo Tree by Buddhists, pipal tree
in Hindi, Asvattha in Sanskrit, and ficus religiosa for its scientific name. As the site of the
Buddha’s enlightenment, which can be thought of as his most significant life event, the Bodhi
Tree is strongly associated with the Buddha. Further, depiction of the Bodhi Tree is most often
found in depictions of his enlightenment. When relevant to the particular time period, I will
focus specifically on images of the Buddha’s enlightenment that include the Bodhi Tree,\(^4\) in
addition to other iterations of the symbol. This will include its depiction in Indian culture before
the advent of Buddhism, in early Buddhist art, and later in contemporary contexts where the tree
is simply represented by a single one of its iconic heart-shaped leaves. In depictions of the tree
that are associated with Buddhism, I will refer to it as the Bodhi Tree. When discussing images
before the advent of Buddhism or the species in general, I will refer to it as the sacred fig tree.

Rather impressively, representations of the sacred fig tree are nearly always naturalistic.
The sacred fig tree’s iconic heart-shaped leaves principally represent this naturalistic depiction,
though the leave’s long pointed end, prominent mid rib down the center of the leaf, and several
veins that lead from that midrib also add to the naturalism of its depiction (Figure 1). Thus, even
small-scale images of the sacred fig tree are readily recognizable to those familiar with the tree
and clearly communicate to Buddhist worshippers this is the Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha
reached enlightenment.

\(^4\) Please note that the presence of the Bodhi Tree is not the only visual marker of the moment of the
Buddha’s enlightenment in Buddhist art. The Buddha’s hand in bhumisparsamudra, the right hand in earth-touching
gesture, or presence of the Mahabodhi Temple are other common visual signals that can reference the significant life
event of the Buddha.
While the symbol of the Bodhi Tree is ubiquitous, found in the ancient art of India, across Buddhist Asia and even utilized in American business logos with various Asian associations, its depiction across time and place has never served as a particular focus of study. Instead, previous scholarship has tended to focus on folklore related to the Bodhi Tree, as well as its genealogy and role in the marking of sacred space.\(^5\) I aim to add to the history and myth of the Bodhi Tree by specifically analyzing its visual representation and underlying meaning from ancient to contemporary times.

Considering our contemporary context, one can readily think of Buddhist, or other Eastern, symbols that fill spaces we frequent daily. These everyday spaces include yoga studios, coffee shops and stores selling home décor, books and gifts. I can personally recall busts of the Buddha decorating Los Angeles restaurants, cakra wheels and the Sanskrit symbol for OM on banners in yoga studios, and Tibetan prayer flags hung everywhere from concert venues to college dorms. I started to wonder if the Bodhi Tree symbol I recognized from Buddhist art was also found as a part of these commercial establishments, joining the broad visual vocabulary of Eastern imagery borrowed by American businesses. If so, how is it depicted and what does it mean in this non-Buddhist and contemporary context?

It is this research question I aim to explore in my thesis. In Chapter 1, I will survey the scholarship on tree worship and symbolism in the context of its long history in India, as well as its universal importance around the world, in order to place the symbol of the Bodhi Tree within the larger framework of tree symbolism and the significance of trees to humankind. In Chapter 2, I will look at the Bodhi Tree’s earliest depictions in India. This includes the sacred fig tree’s

representation in pre-Buddhist culture, the earliest schools of Buddhist art, and finally its popularization during the Pala period, circa 750-1200 CE, of northeastern India and subsequent influence in Southeast Asia, in order to understand how it was depicted and what it signified in its original context of ancient South and Southeast Asian art. Finally, in Chapter 3, I will look at a few examples of the ways in which the Bodhi Tree symbol is used today. Utilizing French theorist and critic Roland Barthes’s (1915-1980) concept of myth and semiotic analysis of symbols, I will compare its use in Southeast Asia, particularly Thailand, a historically Buddhist country that continues to be a predominantly Buddhist nation today, versus the United States, in order to understand how this symbol has crossed over into the present day in both Buddhist and non-Buddhist cultural contexts.

Research regarding the Bodhi Tree requires knowledge of surrounding topics such as Indianization, Bodh Gaya, pilgrimage, sacred space, the Pala period of Indian art history, and votive tablets. Votive tablets were especially popular at Bodh Gaya and other sites in northeastern India during the Pala period (750-1200 CE). These objects are significant in looking at ancient depictions of the Bodhi Tree because they are a part of the material culture that facilitated the spread of the particular image type of the Buddha seated beneath the Bodhi Tree. Their relatively small size and inexpensive material, typically made from clay, chalk or even dirt, meant that these objects were fairly easily disseminated. Further, votive tablets were most often stamped out from a mold that was made either of clay or metal, though they could also be molded by hand. Therefore, not only did the tablets themselves travel, but their molds as well. Thus, we find the same designs between South and Southeast Asia, having been stamped out from the same mold in both locations.

The act of stamping the tablet out from a mold was a way for Buddhists to earn merit. Earning merit is a key tenet of Buddhism. Buddhists, as well as Hindus, believe in the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth called *samsara*. During any lifetime, as there are many, each person has a duty or station in life that he or she should serve. Each hopes to be born into better and better next lives, until ultimately reaching enlightenment and breaking the cycle of *samsara*, which is called nirvana. Nirvana is considered as a release from the painful cycle of *samsara* and means that one is no longer reborn.

One can be born into a better next life by earning merit, which is attained by performing good karma, or good deeds. Visiting a significant site related to the Buddha’s life, such as Bodh Gaya, making a votive tablet to remember the Buddha, or taking that tablet home or depositing it at another Buddhist monument along the way, are all examples of good deeds that earn good merit.

Pala style votive tablets had a notable influence on those of Southeast Asia, namely in Pagan, Burma, during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries CE, and in Northern Thailand at the Mon-Dvaravati kingdom of Haripunchai, during the tenth to eleventh centuries CE, though it is important to note that Southeast Asia had its own preexisting tradition of votive tablet making as well. But before studying the transmission of the symbol of the Bodhi Tree, it is first necessary to review the broader discussion of the spread of Buddhism from India to Southeast Asia.

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7. Chirapravati, 6. Mon is an ethnicity that dominated the area that is now Thailand before Thai kingdoms were established. Dvaravati refers to a Buddhist culture/kingdom/art period located in the Central Plain of what is today Thailand, which also spread to parts of Northern and Northeastern Thailand.
Indianization: Merchants, Brahmins and Kingship

French scholar George Coedès coined the term ‘Indianization,’ or the dissemination of Indian culture in Southeast Asia, in his seminal work, *Indianized States of Southeast Asia* (1964). Subsequent works about Indianization tended to agree with most of Coedès’ main claims, departing only to focus on certain methods of Indianization. In fact, Coedès is quite modest in his argument. He first notes that because historical evidence of Indianization comes from Southeast Asia, his study can only discuss the *result* of Indianization from the Southeast Asian perspective, and not its *process* from the Indian perspective. He also acknowledges that Indianization does not suggest the first contact between India and Southeast Asia, for the two regions had interacted since prehistoric times. Coedès’ use of the term Indianization refers to a particular time period, the beginning of Indianized kingdoms in Southeast Asia around the first century CE.

Coedès’ proposed history of Indianization is thorough, including explanations of how it happened, its earliest evidence, its causes and travel routes. He concludes that the impetus of Indianization could have been several, including wars in India that displaced masses of people and improvements in naval navigation and technology. However, states that commercial aims appear to be the most significant motivation. The importance of trade goods can be read in the Sanskritic place names given to places in Southeast Asia, which refer to the types of products

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9. Ibid. 32.
10. Ibid., 14.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 21.
13. Sanskrit is an Indo-European language and ancient language of India, used to write many of the texts related to Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism.
Indians desired from Southeast Asia. Further, India’s supply of gold had been cut off from the West by Roman emperor Vespasian in the first century CE, creating a high demand for gold in India that thus needed to be met elsewhere.

Coedès also hypothesizes that Indianization was possible through multiple waves of immigration. He supposes the first wave had been merchants who established Indian communities in Southeast Asia, possibly marrying higher than their caste in India, due to the fact that the social organization of Buddhism and Southeast Asia was not the same as the caste system in India. The second wave consisted of Brahmins who, educated in Sanskrit and religious rites, helped legitimize the rule Southeast Asian kings in their conversions to Buddhism and Hinduism. Through the establishment of Indian communities and the power of Brahmins, Indianization, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Hindu-Buddhist art and concepts of kingship, was able to spread to Southeast Asia.

In his book, *The Indianization of China and Southeast Asia* (1967), H.G. Quaritch Wales agrees with Coedès’ hypothesis of waves of migration, but emphasizes the role of the *sastras*, or sacred texts, and Buddhist missionaries, in addition to Coedès’s theory of merchants and Brahmins. To support his argument, Wales references the work of F.D.K. Bosch, who maintains that the one thousand monks Chinese pilgrim I-Ching recorded seeing in Indonesia in the seventh century CE were most likely Indonesian. Based on I-Ching’s account, Bosch infers that native Indonesians traveled to India, studied Sanskrit and the *dharma*, the Buddhist teachings or law, at Nalanda, a significant Buddhist monastery, and returned home with the

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15. Ibid.
sufficient knowledge to spread Buddhism. Wales agrees with Bosch and adds that a similar process likely happened in China.

Wales also draws an interesting distinction between the art of western and eastern mainland Southeast Asia. In his reading of Indianization, Wales argues for evolution after Indian contact. In other words, he believes local cultures continued to develop after Indian influence, as opposed to a total loss of “local genius” replaced by Indian culture. He applies this idea of continued evolution to the art of the Burmese, Mon, Cham and Khmer. Wales argues that Burmese and Mon-Dvaravati art lacked the originality and strong local artistry necessary to create a living art practice, while the Cham and Khmer were able to achieve such a practice due to a mixture of their own local traditions with Indian influence, which then continued to develop together. Wales argues that the Burmese and Mon instead “rearranged” a few Indian art styles and innovation stopped there. Art historians such as Chirapravati Pattaratorn and Robert L. Brown would disagree with Wales. Their work discusses the local elements that were incorporated into adapted Indian styles during the Mon-Dvaravati period, which will be discussed later in this paper.

I.W. Mabbett’s concise historiography of the Indianization of Southeast Asia comes to a similar conclusion to Coedès, stating that any historical evidence of Indianization only attests to

17. Ibid., 2
18. Ibid., 22.
19. Ibid., 23.
20. Wales only refers to Burma and not a specific kingdom or art period. I would infer he is referring to the Pyu, an ancient culture in Burma during the first millennium CE, due to the time period suggested by the mention of Dvaravati, an ancient Buddhist kingdom located in what is today Thailand; Cham, an ancient civilization located in what is today southern Vietnam; and Khmer, an ancient civilization of what is today Cambodia. See Figure 2 for a map of modern day Southeast Asia with which to locate their associated ancient civilizations.
its result and not its process. He essentially claims that none of the previous theories have any real historical evidence. Therefore, these theories endure as mere suppositions because there is no evidence of the types of Indians that came to Southeast Asia, including their caste, knowledge of Sanskrit, numbers, or whether locals learned Sanskrit indirectly through books or were taught more directly by Indian immigrants. Due to the obscurity of Indian presence in Southeast Asia, Mabbett can only safely conclude that Indian culture is not monolithic. Sanskrit and other elements of Indian culture were not uniformly expressed across the vast land and communities of India. Likewise, a monolithic transplant of Indian culture could not have occurred in Southeast Asia, which is as equally differentiated as India in terms of geography, culture, ethnicity, and language.

Mabbett also stresses the difference between social and political influence, echoing Coedès' conclusion that Indianization was not a true political colonization. Indianization was more a social phenomenon because Southeast Asia had no political allegiance to India.

Nature of Buddhist Practice: Pilgrimage and Sacred Space

The subjects of Buddhist transmission and my focus on depictions of the Bodhi Tree and its iconic leaves merge under the topics of pilgrimage, sacred space and, specifically, the site of Bodh Gaya. As mentioned at the start of this paper, votive tablets were especially popular during the Pala period in India, circa 750-1200 CE, at sites such as Bodh Gaya and Nalanda. Pala votive tablets from Bodh Gaya often feature the Buddha seated with his right hand in

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23. Ibid., 155-56.
24. Ibid., 160.
25. Ibid., 161.
27. Nalanda was a large Buddhist monastery where followers from all over went to study the Buddhist teachings and literature, active from circa the fifth to thirteenth centuries CE.
bhumisparsamudra, or earth-touching gesture, which serves to commemorate the moment and site of the Buddha’s enlightenment (Figure 3). These votive tablets went on to influence tablets in Burma and Thailand, and those that feature the Bodhi Tree provide ancient examples of depictions of the Bodhi Tree (Figure 4). The Buddhist pilgrims, monks and missionaries who would have carried these tablets along with them on their journeys, and thus helped to spread the Buddhist teachings, are mentioned in works on Indianization, though they are not usually given the same attention as the influence of merchants, commercial trade, Brahmins and large migrations of Indians to Southeast Asia as previously discussed.

However, pilgrimage and its relationship to sacred space appear to be given more prominence in recent scholarship. Asia Society’s 2010 exhibition Pilgrimage and Buddhist Art was the first major exhibition on the connection between Buddhist pilgrimage and Asian art. Select essays from the catalog illustrate the significance of pilgrimage to Buddhist followers. In his essay, “The Geography of Buddhist Pilgrimage in Asia,” Robert H. Stoddard discusses the importance of movement and space in Buddhist worship and the particular sanctity of pilgrimage sites. Pilgrimage requires movement of the body, similar to other important Buddhist rituals including circumambulation of a stupa, or reliquary mound, procession during a religious ceremony, or bowing three times when worshipping a Buddha image.


30. Circumambulation refers to the practice of walking in a clockwise direction with one’s right side closest to the monument or object of worship. This is the way that stupas, or reliquary mounds, are worshipped in Buddhist practice.
In fact, longer and more difficult journeys earn more merit than pilgrimage to local monuments, further illustrating the importance of physicality in worship and merit making.\(^{31}\) Stoddard also emphasizes that pilgrimage sites are markedly different from the mundane world. Sites of pilgrimage often map onto noticeable topographic locations such as mountains, natural springs and caves that might facilitate close interaction with the divine.\(^{32}\) Pilgrimage sites are also typically associated with the Buddha’s major life events or performed miracles. As places the Buddha visited or spent significant time, sites of the Buddha’s life events and miracles further aid in connection with the divine.\(^{33}\)

In her introduction to “The Journey” section of the image catalog, Adriana Proser echoes the significance of the interaction offered by pilgrimage sites in particular.\(^{34}\) She notes that a pilgrim may not even see the principal worship image at any given pilgrimage site, though one might assume that is the purpose of visiting. Icons are often placed far back inside a dark chamber, or deposited within another icon or special cabinet, and thus are largely hidden. Proser argues it is instead about “meeting” the sacred by visiting the site, rather than about viewing a particular worship object.\(^{35}\) The mere presence of sacred objects adds to the sanctity of the site and they do not necessarily need to be seen.\(^{36}\)

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31. Stoddard, 2.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
35. The importance of seeing the divine is an old concept important in Hindu worship, called *darsan*. See Diana L. Eck, *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2007).
In her article, “Rites of Reverence, Ways of Worship: The Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya as a Material Object and Focus of Devotion” (2015), Albertina Nugteren also writes about pilgrimage and sacred space, but specifically about Bodh Gaya and the Bodhi Tree. At Bodh Gaya, the temple plan serves as a map that visitors can use to follow the actual steps of the Buddha. Visitors start at the Buddha’s place of enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree then walk to the other trees he meditated beneath after his enlightenment.

Nugteren also notes the importance of the Bodhi Tree’s genealogy at Bodh Gaya. While the Bodhi Tree had been destroyed and replaced several times throughout history, the modern day tree is believed to be a direct descendant of the tree from the Buddha’s lifetime. Legend tells that King Asoka (304-232 BCE) sent his daughter to Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka, with a cutting from the original tree, circa third century BCE. This cutting was subsequently planted and grew to be the Bodhi Tree at Anuradhapura, which is thus considered the second most significant Bodhi Tree in Buddhism given its genealogical connection to the original tree in Bodh Gaya. Further, cuttings from the Anuradhapura Bodhi Tree have been given as gifts to Buddhist centers in California, Hawaii and India, and have been used to regenerate the tree at Bodh Gaya when it has been harmed or destroyed.

Proser says that these related bodhi trees contribute to the Pan-Buddhist “imaginaire,” though only the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya has the significance of place and proximity to the divine, as related to the Buddha’s enlightenment. Therefore, other trees of the same species, sacred fig, do not have the same importance as the one understood as the Bodhi Tree at Bodh

38. Ibid., 204.
39. Ibid., 203. David L. Haberman also says that in the Buddhist mind, the sacred fig tree at Bodh Gaya is the most important because it where the Buddha reached enlightenment. See David L. Haberman, *People Trees: Worship of Trees in Northern India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 98.
Gaya. She also refers to the Bodhi leaves and cuttings taken from Anuradhapura as Buddhist “ambassadors,” helping to spread the Buddhist teachings around the world.  

In this brief survey of recent scholarship, it is clear that pilgrimage, and specifically the Bodhi Tree, is integral to the spread of Buddhism. The importance placed on pilgrimage in Buddhism motivated many Chinese and Southeast Asian Buddhists to travel to distant sites. These pilgrims were able to interact with Buddhist worshippers from all over, deposit objects and texts at Buddhist sites along their route, and return home with these objects, where they were then worshipped and shared.

Spread of Buddhism via Material Culture

As aforementioned, due to the lack of historical evidence from early Southeast Asia, the plethora of material culture extant from India and Southeast Asia provides the most substantial source of information from this period. Comparisons between Indian and Southeast Asian art reveal interaction and influence between the two regions. Recent scholarship clearly recognizes the legacy of Indian art, while also emphasizing local elements and artistic innovation within Southeast Asia. Such research updates the opinions reflected in Coedès’ *Indianized States* (1964) and Wales’ *Indianization of China and Southeast Asia* (1967).

South and Southeast Asian art historian Robert L. Brown has written many works on the subject of Indian influence in Southeast Asian art, including his PhD dissertation published as *The Dvaravati Wheels of the Law and the Indianization of Southeast Asia* (1996). Utilizing

40. Ibid., 204.
careful formal analysis, Brown discovers unique characteristics of Mon-Dvaravati art beyond the Indian influence that is typically read in Southeast Asian artwork.42

In *Dvaravati Wheels*, a study of Dvaravati dharmacakra, or wheels of the Buddhist law or teachings,43 Brown sets out to find the relationship between Indian dharmacakra and their Dvaravati iteration. He concludes that the Dvaravati sculptures, though similar in form to Indian works, are better understood in their greater Southeast Asian context, for their decorative motifs particularly relate to Khmer art.44 This is a significant finding because in comparing Indian and Southeast Asian art, there are generally two schools of thought: Indianization and localization. Brown’s book takes a middle path stance that recognizes both Indianization and localization, and thus neither at once.45 Ascribing to either theory negates the other. Instead, Brown promotes a continuous localizing of what began as Indian art forms, such as the dharmacakra, which stands in contrast to the idea that a single event, time or style divides Southeast Asian art into a strict dichotomy of pre- and post-Indian influence.46 Brown’s argument relates to Wales’ aforementioned idea of continued evolution, though Wales made judgments regarding the relative innovation of particular Southeast Asian groups, as aforementioned.

In another work on Dvaravati, Brown again argues for the artistic innovation of Southeast Asian art. In his chapter on Dvaravati state art, in *Lost Kingdoms: Hindu-Buddhist Sculpture of*

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42. Mon-Dvaravati refers to a Buddhist kingdom that flourished around the sixth to eleventh centuries CE in the central plain area of what is today Thailand. Mon refers to the ethnicity of the population, an ethnic group that still lives near the border between Burma and Thailand today, and Dvaravati is possibly a place name or king’s name, as found inscribed on coins from the period, that is now used to refer to this time period, civilization and its artwork.

43. Dharmacakra translates as wheel of dharma (Buddhist teachings or law). In Buddhist art, a wheel is used to symbolize the Buddhist teachings based on a saying from the Buddha’s first sermon that he “set the wheel in motion,” which envisions the Buddhist teachings as wheel that rolls, and thus spreads, all over the world.

44. Ibid., XXVIII.

45. Ibid., XXVI.

46. Ibid.
Brown describes three sculptural types that together make up a specific visual program exclusively found in the Dvaravati period. This sculptural program includes a dharmacakra (Figure 5) erected onto a tall stone pillar, called a dharmacakrastambha (Figure 6); a decorative stele, which was carved with a particular type of Buddha image only found in Dvaravati (Figure 9), that was placed at the center of the dharmacakra; and finally, a pair of monolithic deer sculptures positioned at the foot of the dharmacakrastambha (Figures 7).

Altogether, these works emphasize the Buddha’s teaching, which was a particularly important theme to the specific Theravada Buddhist school active during the Dvaravati period. The dharmacakra, or wheel of the law, represents the Buddha’s teaching. As the wheel rolls, the dharma, or teaching, spreads. The Buddha image on the decorative stele displays double vitarkamudra, a gesture of teaching where the tip of the forefinger touches the tip of the thumb, which refers to vitarkamudra held in both hands. Vitarkamudra is typically displayed in one hand, and thus the repetition of the mudra in both hands further emphasizes the theme of teaching (See Figure 8). Further, the Buddha displaying double vitarkamudra was an innovation of the Dvaravati period that is not found in other periods of Buddhist art history. Finally, the pair of deer sculptures reference Deer Park in Sarnath, India, where the Buddha gave his first sermon. The combination of these teaching-themed elements is unique to Dvaravati and serves as a clear example of the continued evolution of Southeast Asian art alongside its Indian influence.

Thai art historian Chirapravati Pattaratorn also discusses the mix of Indian and local influences in her study of Thai votive tablets, Votive Tablets in Thailand: Origin, Styles and

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48. The particular sect is Mūlasarvāstivādanikāya, as reported by Chinese pilgrim I-Ching. See Chirapravati, 17.
Uses (1997). She states that a large amount of Buddhist material from India has been found throughout Thailand, concentrated to the Peninsula and Central Plain in particular (Figure 9), and that merchants and monks from India, China and Southeast Asia likely brought the material from India to Southeast Asia.

Given Pattaratorn’s focus on the single country of Thailand, her study of Mon tablets is thorough. She discusses them according to the country’s four major regions (Figure 10), which she refers to as the Central Plain, North-Eastern Plateau, Northern Region and Peninsula. In her book on Pala period artwork, Indian art historian Susan L. Huntington specifically denies influence of Pala period tablets in Dvaravati but acknowledges its influence in Pagan. Pattaratorn agrees with Huntington that Pala tablets had the largest impact on Pagan period tablets, but also states that they had an impact on the area that is now Thailand, specifically the late Mon tablets of Hariphunchai, a kingdom of the Northern Region.

While earlier Mon tablets from the Central Plain show local influence, including a new shape of tablet that is square at the base and rounded at the top, and northeastern tablets show influence from the Khmer, such as the Buddha seated under a naga, Pattaratorn says that Pala and Pagan tablets influenced a specific period of the Northern Region, the late period of Hariphunchai. This is evident in a change from the Buddha seated with his hands in dhyanamudra, or meditation gesture with palms facing up and stacked one on top of the other, popular in earlier Mon tablets from the Central Plain, to the Buddha seated with his right hand in bhumisparsamudra, or earth-touching gesture, which is typical of Pala period tablets (Figure 3).

49. See footnote 5.
50. Chirapravati, 7. Chirapravati’s thoughts on the transmission of Buddhist material from India to Southeast Asia synthesizes the major conclusions of Indianization and pilgrimage as discussed in this paper.
51. Chirapravati, 6. After the invasion of the Khmer to central Thailand in the ninth century, the Mons from the central plain were pushed to the Northern Region and Northeastern Plateau. See Chirapravati, 24.
52. A naga is an earth and water deity in Southeast Asia that can be likened to a snake or serpent.
However, these late Dvaravati tablets from Hariphunchai differ from Pala tablets in that they typically show the Buddha seated beneath the Bodhi Tree, as opposed to the Mahabodhi temple (Figure 4).

Pattaratorn’s close study of Mon tablets illustrates the many ways in which Dvaravati artwork reflects both Indian and local influences. Mon tablets show connections to Pala (India), Pagan (Burma) and Khmer (Cambodia) period artwork, as well as changes in shape and iconography that were particular to Dvaravati. Thus, Mon tablets further support the idea of a continued local ‘evolution’ of Southeast Asian art in addition to Indian influence. Further, the role of material culture in the spread of Buddhism is apparent in looking at these votive tablets, which help to illustrate the history of Buddhism where textual evidence is absent.

In this study, I will trace the depiction and meaning of the symbol of the Bodhi Tree, a symbol that first became popular in the Buddhist art of India and subsequently spread to Southeast Asia. However, it is significant to also note that the sacred fig tree held significance long before the advent of Buddhism, as a native species to both the South Asian subcontinent and Southeast Asia, and is thus found in India’s prehistoric culture. In looking at the symbol in ancient Buddhist art and the contemporary context of business logos, I aim to bring this discussion into the present day and my own American context, possibly discovering some reasons as to why the symbol of the Bodhi Tree, among numerous other Buddhist symbols, has remained popular for over 2,000 years, crossing vast territory and cultural boundaries.
CHAPTER 2

TREE WORSHIP, SYMBOLISM AND MYTH IN INDIA AND BEYOND

Tree Worship in India

The literature on tree worship, symbolism and mythology in India is extensive, and the importance of trees in Indian culture is apparent through a survey of the scholarship. Scholars seem to agree that tree worship or veneration\(^1\) has persisted since the proto-historic period of India, during the Indus Valley Civilization (3300-1300 BCE).\(^2\) This is evident in the material culture, specifically seals that depict the sacred fig tree in proximity to deity or fertility cult-type figures, from the ancient cities of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa (Figures 12 and 13). From these ancient beginnings, tree worship or veneration continues throughout Indian history up until the present day, at times represented in the material culture, such as in Buddhist art, but also described or referenced in every period of Indian literature, including the Vedas, Upanishads, and Puranas.\(^3\)

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1. I say veneration in place of worship, as the act of worship is not necessarily evident in the visual evidence or material culture. However, the consistent mention of tree veneration and depiction of trees beside deity-type figures illustrates in the least great respect for trees in Indian culture.

2. The Indus Valley Civilization once spanned the modern-day countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan and northwestern India surrounding the Indus River Valley. Importantly, the culture served as a precursor to Hindu culture in India.

3. For Haberman’s historical and textural overview of thoughts regarding the sacred fig tree, see David L. Haberman, “King of Trees,” in *People Trees: Worship of Trees in Northern India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 59-105. See also Bansai Lal Malla, *Trees in Indian Art, Mythology and Folklore* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2000), 115. Malla also summarizes Indian thoughts regarding trees between the Vedic and post Vedic literature. He states Vedic literature illustrates great love and respect for nature, generally dividing the natural world between plants and trees, with three principal goddesses for shrubs, plants and trees. He then describes post Vedic literature, including Jain and Buddhist literature, as focusing on a love of nature but also the unity of life, living and nonliving, as well as the idea of forests as the home of the gods.
In his book, *People Trees: Worship of Trees in Northern India* (2013), David L. Haberman gives an effective overview of how the sacred fig tree was conceptualized in each body of Indian literature. As the title indicates, Haberman’s book focuses on tree worship in northern India, specifically the sacred city of Varanasi. His research is based on fieldwork conducted on many trips between 2006 and 2012, during which he interviewed local people surrounding various tree shrines. Interviews were conducted in both Hindi and English. Based on the findings of these interviews, Haberman chose to focus his study on the sacred fig tree, referred to as the pipal tree in India, in addition to the neem and banyan trees. Together, the three tree species received the most attention during his research and were thus determined the three most sacred trees in contemporary India.

Through the framework of cultural evolutionist anthropological study, Haberman aims to understand the differences between tree worship in India and the West. Cultural evolutionist scholarship is useful to Haberman in that it provides extensive ethnographic information regarding the nature of tree worship during the nineteenth century, when noted cultural evolutionist anthropologists, such as Edward B. Tylor, Robertson Smith and James G. Frazer, were conducting their fieldwork. Beyond ethnographic information, works by Tylor, Smith and Frazer

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2. The language of the interviews is significant to note because Haberman is able to understand and interpret how people describe tree worship in their native language.
3. Why has tree worship declined and been erased from both academic study and practice in the West? Haberman’s aim is a return to the study of animism and anthropomorphism without the cultural hierarchy put in place by nineteenth century anthropology and colonization. He concludes that the difference between the relative openness to tree worship between India and the West comes down to worldview. India’s history primed the country for a belief in the animation of trees, through the general understanding that all things are united. With the advent of Christianity in the West, humans were privileged as the only things or beings with a soul, as opposed to everything having a soul as with animistic view, which created a divide between humans and all things, whether also living or nonliving. Christians put concerted effort into eradicating tree worship along with paganism and the study of interest in tree worship has since been cause for embarrassment on the levels of both academia, in the study of religion, and mundane, individual practice. For Haberman’s discussion regarding human experience, the human interpretation of nature and the historically and culturally rooted relationship between humans and nature, see Haberman, “Root Issues,” in *People Trees*, 7-30.
Frazer lend a nineteenth century point of view, which can generally be characterized as colonialist. In line with the time that these books were written, their scholarship aids in creating a dichotomy between east and west, primitive and civilized. Haberman hopes to use the ethnographic information and theory of animism from these nineteenth century studies, but with a more contemporary point of view that does not pit east against west or the ‘primitive’ against the ‘civilized.’

Through the description of meaning or practice surrounding the sacred fig tree at a given time, Haberman discusses how each body of Indian literature reveals man’s relation to nature during the corresponding historical period. He states that the Vedic period, circa 1500 to 600 BCE, was a time of animistic belief in India. Animism is a term that Tylor re-popularized during the nineteenth century in the second volume of his 1871 publication, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion and Custom.* Animism is defined as the belief in a personal soul that animates every thing, living or nonliving. Under this ideology, it is common for a culture to deify natural phenomena that are related to agriculture and sustenance, such as rain or thunder.

The principal deity in Vedic religion was Agni, the god of fire. Agni was a significant Vedic god because fire sacrifice was the means of communication between man and the gods, and thus the most important ritual of Vedism. In this ritual, sacrifices were burned and subsequently brought up to the gods through the fire’s smoke. Two pieces of wood, one from the sami tree and another from the sacred fig tree, were rubbed together in order to start the fire. The

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4. Haberman, 71. The Vedic period comprises the time during the fall of the Indus Valley Civilization and the second urbanization of the Gangetic Plain around 600 BCE. The period is named after the Vedas, which are ancient religious texts that provide much of the extant historical, philosophical and religious information of the period, and later become the basis of Hindu religion.


6. Haberman, 71.
wood of the sami tree was understood as female and served as the static, bottom piece. The wood of the sacred fig tree was seen as male and rubbed into the static piece of the sami tree. Further, it was believed that Agni lived inside the sacred fig tree and manifested once the wood was rubbed as part of this ritual. It was also said that wood from the sacred fig was used to light the fire of knowledge, which was gifted from the gods to mankind.

In the Vedic period, literature also describes the sacred fig tree as both the home of all gods and the Trimurti, or the triad of the three primary Vedic gods: Shiva, Vishnu and Brahma. It was believed that Shiva the destroyer dwelled in the tree’s roots, Vishnu the preserver lived in its branches and Brahma the creator resided in the trunk.

During this time period, the sacred fig tree was also understood to contain the entire universe, which was likewise made up of three parts: earth, middle space, and the heavens. The earth could be envisioned as located below in the roots of the tree, the middle space in the trunk and the heavens above in the branches. If the tree is imagined upside down, this order can also be flipped, with the earth located in the branches and the heavens located in the roots. In this version, the earth remains located below and the heavens above, but residing in different parts of the tree.

This relates to the Buddhist cosmology and its conceptualization of the axis mundi, or central axis of the universe, as a mountain or tree. As Adrian Snodgrass discusses in his book,

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7. Ibid., 72.
8. Ibid. This idea is similar to those surrounding the Greek god Prometheus and his stealing of the sacred fire, which is related to human progress and knowledge.
9. Ibid. These three Vedic gods, Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu, are also the three principal gods in Hinduism.
10. Ibid., 73. The sacred fig imagined as embodying the entire universe was also associated with “the all-encompassing god Krishna or Vishnu.” This concerns the Hindu pantheon, which is more prevalent in Haberman’s work given that his research concerns contemporary life. While Buddhism began in India and persisted for centuries, the religion largely died out in its mother country with the end of the Pala dynasty in northeastern India around 1200 CE. Today, India is predominantly a Hindu country. My own research is more concerned with Buddhist ideology but naturally requires a look back to India and earlier conceptualizations such as Hindu beliefs.
The universe is visualized as a sphere of undifferentiated space and matter in Buddhist thought. Once bifurcated by the axis mundi, the sphere is elongated into an oval, called the world egg, and space and matter become differentiated. Space is divided into three parts, with a middle space between heaven above and earth below, which are located at the axis’s two extremities. Without the axis mundi, heaven and earth would collapse back into one another. Thus, the axis mundi necessarily keeps heaven and earth separate.

Furthermore, across a horizontal axis, heaven and earth mirror one another with the heavens as high as the earth is low. If the axis mundi is visualized as a tree, one can imagine how a tree’s branches and roots mirror one other in a similar manner. Just as the branches split and spread, so do the roots.

This concept of the sacred fig tree as containing the universe, or as the Cosmic Tree, was first envisioned in Hindu literature and many say that this Hindu Cosmic Tree, referred to as Asvattha in Sanskrit, was later adopted as the Enlightenment Tree or Bodhi Tree in Buddhism. In her book Beasts, Birds, and Blossoms in Thai Art (1994), Pamela York Taylor describes how a common image type of the Buddha seated on the lotus throne and meditating beneath the Bodhi Tree illustrates the originally Hindu concept of the Cosmic Tree. She explains that the base of the triad, the lotus throne, represents the earth and female aspects of the universe; the upright

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12. See Snodgrass, 228 Fig. 150 for a diagram of the Buddhist conception of the universe, the mountain within the world egg.
16. See Taylor, Color Plate 21 for the author’s photograph of a painting of the seated Buddha beneath the Bodhi Tree as Cosmic Tree from Buddhaisawan Chapel, Bangkok.
torso of the seated Buddha represents the middle space or axis; and the canopy of the Bodhi Tree above the Buddha represents the heavens and male aspects of the universe. In this example, not only the Bodhi Tree contains the universe, but also a popular Buddha image type.

Similar to the adoption of the Cosmic Tree as the Enlightenment Tree or Bodhi Tree in Buddhism, later Vedic texts variously refer to the sacred fig (Asvattha) as Brahma-tāru, which can be translated as, or likened to, a tree of knowledge, life, or creation. These associations of the sacred fig tree as containing the universe or ultimate reality, referred to as Brahman in Hinduism, and thus also having the quality of all knowing in the Vedas, are continued in the Upanishads and the Mahabharata.

The Upanishads also refer to the specific benefit the sacred fig gives to those in meditation. In his book, The Garden of Life: An Introduction to the Healing Plants of India (1994), Naveen Patnaik states that the sacred fig is known for medicinal properties that support important functions and parts of the body, such as “circulation, vision, the lungs and kidneys.” Further, as a symbol of the “origin and symbiosis of life” the sacred fig is known to “induce illumination.” In other words, the sacred fig was particularly known to help sages, such as the Buddha, attain enlightenment while meditating beneath the tree.

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17. Ibid., 96.
18. See footnote 3.
19. Haberman, 73. The Upanishads are a part of the Vedas that tells the central philosophical tenents of Hinduism and the Mahabharata is one of the two great Sanskrit epics, alongside the Ramayana.
21. Ibid., 37.
22. Ibid. An image from Bangladesh possibly expresses the association between the sacred fig tree and healing or medicine. Paranasbari, a terrifying incarnation of Tara, seen in her three heads and three pairs of arms, is a Tantric Buddhist goddess and protectress from diseases and epidemics. Dressed in a loincloth made of (sacred fig?) leaves and holding a branch with leaves in her right upper hand, the goddess steps on personifications of disease and epidemic, which are illustrated as figures with sores all over their bodies. See Vincent Lefèvre, Chefs-d’œuvre du delta du Gange - Collections des musées du Bangladesh: Établissement Public du Musée des Arts Asiatiques Guimet, 24 octobre 2007-3 mars 2008 (Paris: Éd. de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 2007), 214.
23. Ibid..
In fact, locals interviewed by Haberman describe the sacred fig as the only tree to emit oxygen twenty-four hours a day.\textsuperscript{24} Further, a local physicist living in Varanasi stated that the oxygen from the sacred fig was “different than that coming out of other trees…[allowing for] great peace,”\textsuperscript{25} and thus aiding in meditation and perhaps, the attainment of enlightenment.

Further, the Puranas discuss the many benefits that come specifically from worshipping the sacred fig tree, beyond its aid in meditation. The texts variously refer to worship of the sacred fig tree as the highest form of worship, earning one the most merit and ridding one of all misfortune. Further, it was believed that worship of the sacred fig tree would grant one a blessed long life, a place in heaven, or even liberation. Liberation is the ultimate goal of Hindu and Buddhist followers alike.\textsuperscript{26} Referred to as \textit{moksha} by Hindus and nirvana by Buddhists, this liberation means freedom from the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth, known as \textit{samsara} in both religious traditions.

Haberman’s fieldwork in northern India also attests to the popularity of worship of the sacred fig tree today. Through his interviews with local people nearby tree shrines, Haberman concludes that the sacred fig tree is the most sacred tree in India.\textsuperscript{27} He found that while different people gave different reasons as to why the sacred fig tree is the most important, they nonetheless agreed that it is so. Some believed that all gods lived within the sacred fig tree, and thus to worship it was to worship all gods. Others believed that the tree contained the Hindu gods

\textsuperscript{24} Haberman, 69. Haberman conducted field research in Benares in northern India, interviewing local people near several tree shrines.
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid. Haberman notes that this quote came from a physicist, a profession typically associated with hard science, demonstrating a simultaneous understanding of science and spiritual beliefs.
\textsuperscript{26} Haberman, 73. He notes that the neem and banyan trees also receive significant mention. Together with the sacred fig tree, the tree trees are the most sacred in India.
\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 70-71.
Vasudeva, Krishna or Vishnu, whether these gods lived in the tree or were embodied by it.28

Buddhists of course principally associate the sacred fig tree with the Buddha and the Bodhi Tree. Haberman notes that Buddhists differ from Hindu worshippers in that they hold the sacred fig tree at Bodh Gaya, or the Bodhi Tree and site of the Buddha’s enlightenment, as sacred, and other sacred fig trees do not necessarily hold the same significance. Meanwhile, Hindus revere all sacred fig trees as homes or embodiments of the divine and do not place particular emphasis on the sacred fig tree at Bodh Gaya.29

This relates to general beliefs surrounding the sacred fig tree, based on Haberman’s interviews. Some worshippers understood the sacred fig as a home of the divine (vas),30 others as the embodiment of it (rupa or svarupa).31 People also described the tree as animate (sajiv), having personhood (vytita), having consciousness (cetana), having a soul (jiv or atma), or as a person (vyakti). They also said they had a personal relationship with the trees they worshipped and believed it took a special kind of person to have such a relationship with a tree, specifically those with “very clean hearts.”32

Cultural evolutionist anthropologists of the nineteenth century would categorize the earlier belief, that a tree embodies the divine, as idolatry, and the later belief, the tree as human or having human characteristics, as anthropomorphism. Both idolatry and anthropomorphism were understood as “primitive” beliefs and practices, and thus mistaken thought.33 This point of view will be discussed later in this chapter.

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28. Ibid., 71. All three gods are forms of the god Vishnu. Vasudeva is the father of the eighth incarnation of Vishnu, Krishna.
29. Ibid., 98.
30. This is a Hindu word, as are the italicized words that follow and are as translated and used by Haberman in People Trees.
31. Haberman, 79. Haberman concluded that the latter conception was more common.
32. Haberman, 74.
33. Ibid., 23-24. Haberman discusses David Hume and Stewart Guthrie’s thoughts on anthropomorphism as a cognitive strategy for human survival.
Tree Worship Around the World

In addition to the consistent veneration of trees in India, tree worship or veneration proves to be a worldwide phenomenon since ancient times. Again, Haberman provides a concise survey of the pervasive practice of tree worship around the world, although nearly each book on tree symbolism, folklore or worship reviewed as part of this thesis mentions the universality of tree worship. In his discussion of the concept of the axis mundi in his book, *Trees in Indian Art, Mythology and Folklore* (2000), Bansi Lal Malla states that each culture associates a particular tree with cosmic grandeur, for example:

- the fig tree in India; the oak of the Celts and the Gauls; the oak of Zeus at Dodona; of the Capitoline Jupiter, of Abraham at Sichem and at Hebron; the ash of the Greeks in Hesiod; the date palm of the Mesopotamians; the Siberian birch; the Chinese *Chienmu* tree; and the cedar of Lebanon. (3)

Haberman makes a similar statement, that "[h]uman beings have revered trees on every inhabited continent, at least certain trees during certain historical periods." This truth is apparent through a brief look at several cultures from all over the world. Haberman discusses the many trees conceived as sources of life: a certain Mayan myth tells the story of creation as born from a pregnant tree, another describes a ‘cosmic tree’ located at the center of the world, which connects the under, middle and upper worlds; the concept of the Tree of Life is well-known from Near Eastern mythology and from the Book of Genesis in the Garden of Eden; the Sioux of North America liken the strength of their nation to that of the sacred

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35. See footnote 3.
cottonwood tree; Northwest Coast Native Americans associate cedar trees with health, longevity and good luck; the redwood trees of the northern California coast are sacred to the local Native American tribe of the Chilula people; the Cherokee respect the white oak; the oak tree is understood as God or God’s tree in Finland, but is also significant to Greek, Italian, German and Celtic cultures; sycamore trees are seen as the home or embodiment of the divine in Egypt; and sacred fig trees are revered in Sub-Saharan African countries such as Kenya and Uganda.\textsuperscript{37}

From the Americas to Europe, the Near East, Asia and Africa, particular species of trees are associated with life, creation and the sacred. Lending explanation for this worldwide practice, in her introduction to \textit{The Social Life of Trees: Anthropological Perspectives on Tree Symbolism} (2001), Laura Rival says the only reasonable conclusion of cross-cultural study is “the clear picture of a recurrent theme, the vitality and power of self-generation of trees.”\textsuperscript{38}

\textbf{Tree Symbolism}

Drawing on Rivals’ conclusion of the common symbolism of trees for people all over the world, the authors included in this study restate many of the same qualities of trees to explain humanity’s basic instinct to venerate them. Several refer to the simple, pragmatic fact that trees provided ancient man with an abundance of resources necessary for sustaining life: food in the form of fruit, shelter in extreme climates, and wood for fire.\textsuperscript{39} Therefore, trees were friends to ancient man in many ways that humankind no longer necessarily relies on, and perhaps cannot

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 32-33.
fully appreciate today. In their book, *Folklore and Symbolism of Flowers, Plants and Trees* (1960), Ernst and Johanna Lehner also mention that because trees provided man with many resources, particularly those linked to sustenance or survival, trees seemed to have a supernatural power over life. For example, trees could either grant life, with the bearing of fruit, or deny it, if barren.

The Lehners also mention that because trees were part of man’s everyday life, they naturally became symbols of human expression, sentiment, belief, fear and superstition. Haberman likewise recognizes the possible fears and superstitions associated with trees. Besides his chapter on the sacred fig as the ‘King of Trees,’ Haberman has a separate chapter on the negative beliefs surrounding the tree, including its association with ghosts and a fearful god named Saturn. In a different cultural context of the New World, Haberman also discusses how New Englanders in North America feared forests and saw them as something to control.

Further, the Lehners note how trees, plants and flowers appeal to each of the five senses of sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing. In relation to the sacred fig tree in particular, Patnaik mentions that the sound of the wind passing through the sacred fig tree’s leaves has been likened to the sound of the ancient string instrument of the lute, or *vina*, in India.

Trees also served as symbols of birth, death and regeneration. Man saw trees grow stronger and taller every year, dying each winter but regenerating in the spring. Further, trees present at one’s birth remained throughout one’s life and likely lived beyond one’s death. The

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41. Ibid., 13.
42. Ibid., 12.
44. Haberman, 38.
45. Lehner, 11.
46. Patnaik, 37.
same tree could survive generations of any given family line, standing the test of time and mortality. Witnessing the cycle of life in trees provided ancient man with a symbol of the unity and regeneration of life, fertility and reproduction, as well as the concept of eternity. In his book, *Maha Bodhi Tree in Anuradhapura Sri Lanka: The Oldest Historical Tree in the World* (1996), HSS Nissanka says that the sacred fig tree has always been worshipped for its ability to grow in a difficult climate and continuously provide shelter. This is not unlike the symbolism of the pine tree in Chinese landscape painting, which stands as a representation of perseverance due its ability to survive harsh winters.

Max Muller, who considered as the father of comparative religion, surmises that trees have long been venerated because they combine the knowable and unknowable. Man can see and touch parts of a tree; reach around its trunk, see its roots growing above or near the surface of the ground, or view some of its branches if they are not too high. But it is impossible for man to take in the entirety of a tree; most of its roots grow too deep and its branches too high, rendering its whole impossible to sense. At any given moment or from any given vantage point, the parts of a tree are both accessible and inaccessible, which lends a quality of mystery to man’s experience of trees. As aforementioned, the extent of a tree, reaching above and below, also became a natural symbol of the axis mundi, able to reach, and thus connect, the three realms of the universe.

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47. Lehner, 12. Patnaik also describes the sacred fig tree as a “a symbol of the symbiosis of life,” 37. Further, the tree as a symbol of the unity of life applies particularly to Buddhist countries, where time is understood as cyclical. Man’s life cycles through birth, death and regeneration just like the tree. In this way, the tree quite literally represented life.
48. See footnote 17.
49. Ibid., vi.
50. Haberman, 32.
51. Malla, 7.
As previously discussed regarding the Vedic period and a belief in the personal soul of all things, cultural evolutionist theory regards animism as the earliest form of religion and provides a term with which to describe tree worship in the realm of religion. Cultural evolutionists, spearheaded by Edward B. Tylor, argued for a linear evolution of religion, which began with animism and was followed by polytheism, monotheism and ultimately scientific thought. Theories of animism have since been refuted because of this progressive model. Writing the history of religion from animism to science creates a hierarchy of religions, with each belief system surpassing the one that came before. Thus, a hierarchy of associated cultures is likewise created, with “primitive” or “animist” cultures at the bottom and cultures that have “advanced” to monotheism or scientific thought at the top.

Haberman calls for a return to animism, which was a focus of nineteenth century anthropology, but without the dichotomy of western and non-western thought that it once applied. According to Haberman, the Indian worldview, which is a belief in the unity of all things, primed the country for its long history of the veneration of trees. Further, he argues that western cultures, which with the advent of Christianity only gave humans a soul and thus created a hierarchy between humans and other living things, have something to learn from the Indian point of view.

Haberman also argues that the divide created between man and all other living things, such as trees, has lead to the absence of ethical responsibility for them, and thus allowed for the destruction of natural resources. Malla’s book similarly connects the beliefs surrounding trees with the state of the environment. He explains that humanity was motivated to protect trees due

52. Haberman, 9.
to its reliance on trees for survival. Later, a belief that god lived in trees helped to enforce the practice of protecting them. In venerating trees, god would reward. In neglecting their care and protection, god could punish. In this way, there was once an incentive to protect trees that was rooted in religious beliefs.53

A comparison between the myths of two popular tree symbols, the Bodhi Tree of the East and the Tree of Life of the Near East, which was later propagated in the West through Christianity, reveals some of the meanings found in tree symbols. An examination of their related folklore echoes some of the previously discussed ideas scholars have posed as to why humans respect trees.

**Bodhi Tree**

The Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya and the monument built to honor it, the Mahabodhi Temple, serve as physical landmarks of the Buddha’s enlightenment. Other important sites in northern India related to major life events of the Buddha, such as Sarnath, the location of his first sermon, or Lumbini, where he was born, likewise serve as the major pilgrimage sites for Buddhist devotees. Of these Buddhist sites, the place of the Buddha’s enlightenment can be thought of as the most significant. Worshippers follow the path of the Buddha and look to his life as a model, precisely because of the Buddha’s attainment of enlightenment. For this reason, the Mahabodhi Temple and the Bodhi Tree have received much attention throughout history up until the present day. For example, the temple has been replicated at numerous sites; including Pagan, Burma; Chiang Mai, Thailand and Beijing, China. Further, Haberman observed Buddhist worshippers from all over the world, including countries such as “Tibet, Japan, Thailand, Sri

53. Malla, xii.
Lanka, Korea, India, Burma, Vietnam, Europe, and North America,” paying homage to the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya.\textsuperscript{54}

According to legend, the present Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya is a direct descendent of the original Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha reached enlightenment. The first Indian king to convert to Buddhism, King Asoka (r. 268-232 BCE), is said to have adopted the religion when he tried to destroy the Bodhi Tree. As part of a desire to eradicate all Buddhist sites, Asoka chopped up the Bodhi Tree and burned its pieces to ash. When the pile of ashes was miraculously unmoved by the wind, Asoka was convinced to follow the teachings of the Buddha. After King Asoka, many others similarly cut down the Bodhi Tree in an attempt to destroy it, but the tree always magically regenerated.\textsuperscript{55} Therefore, while the extant Bodhi Tree is not the original from the Buddha’s time, it is understood as a direct descendent.

This lineage of the Bodhi Tree not only exists at Bodh Gaya, but also extends around the world. Certain locations are folded into places of Buddhist significance through their connection to the Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya. For example, legend tells that Asoka’s daughter brought a cutting of the Bodhi Tree to Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka in the third century BCE where it was planted and grew to be the tree that lives there today.\textsuperscript{56} Due to its genealogical relation to the tree at Bodh Gaya, the Bodhi Tree at Anuradhapura is directly linked to the original tree and works to extend this family line from India to Sri Lanka. In fact, cuttings from the tree in Sri Lanka have been used to regenerate the tree at Bodh Gaya throughout history because of its close genealogical link to the original tree. Further, the Bodhi Tree at Anuradhapura legitimizes Sri Lanka as another stronghold of Buddhism, in addition to India where the religion was born.

\textsuperscript{54} Haberman, 96.  
\textsuperscript{55} Renée Tallantyre, “Sacred Tree and Diamond Throne,” \textit{Folklore} 50, no. 4 (Dec. 1939): 380-381.  
\textsuperscript{56} Sri Lanka is regarded as preserver of the conservative Buddhist canon, which was later given the name Theravada. Through interactions with both India and Sri Lanka, Buddhism spread to Southeast Asia.
In a similar manner, saplings of the Bodhi Tree have been brought to Buddhist centers in Hawai’i, California and other cities in India, where they are given as gifts by Buddhist teachers and the like. These gifts of saplings that grow into other bodhi trees around the world help to extend the family line of the Bodhi Tree and symbolically represent the spread of Buddhism. At my undergraduate school, my Indian art history professor walked my summer class over to see a Bodhi Tree planted on campus, which had been donated by a family to the university.

Tree of Life

Similar to the importance of the Bodhi Tree in Buddhism, the Tree of Life in the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is a well-known sacred symbol, which also pervades the realms of art, literature and popular culture beyond its original religious context. The concept of the Tree of Life has a long history and is known by various names and forms, but its meaning ultimately traces back to the innate human fear of death. In E.O. James’s article “Tree of Life,” a truncated version of his book on the subject, the author explains the Tree of Life’s rich history and mythology.57

The myth of the Tree of Life dates to before the advent of Christianity, specifically to ancient Mesopotamia and its epic stories of heroes such as King Gilgamesh.58 In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* from circa 2100 BCE, King Gilgamesh goes on a quest for eternal life. While on his journey, he successfully finds a plant of immortality at the bottom of the ocean. However, while stopping for a drink of water on his way home, a serpent digests the plant and receives the gift of

58. Ibid., 241. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* comes from the earliest Semitic cultures of Sumer and Akkad, from which the Hebrew tradition was born.
immortality in his stead. Thus, the serpent lives on forever shedding its skin, while King Gilgamesh and the rest of humankind are doomed to mortality. 

In another story from the ancient Near East, the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden from the Book of Genesis, humankind is similarly blocked from the ultimate divine-quality of immortality. In the garden, humankind receives divine knowledge from God when Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge. However, though given divine knowledge of the procreative acts such as “sex, childbirth, life and death,” Adam and Eve are guarded from the divine gift of immortality when they are banned from the garden for eating the fruit.

While both of these stories, King Gilgamesh and Adam and Eve, serve to remind mankind of their eventual mortality, beyond the meaning of death it seems the Tree of Life symbolizes a kind of threshold. Though King Gilgamesh attains the plant of immortality, at least for a time, and Adam and Eve manage to eat fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, all three protagonists are essentially barred from full access to these ‘trees of life’ and their sacred gift of immortality. The snake eats the plant, keeping King Gilgamesh from digesting it, and Adam and Eve are banned from the eternal life in the garden after eating the fruit. In both cases, King Gilgamesh and Adam and Eve nearly reach the realm of divinity and immortality, but are ultimately cast away.

James also discusses several other biblical figures that communicate with God through trees: Abraham and the sacred tree, David and the mulberry tree, and Deborah and the palm tree. 

Through these many examples, I would argue that the Tree of Life on an initial level represents a gateway between the sacred and profane or immortality and mortality, but further a
border that is ultimately never crossed. As a boundary, the Tree of Life forever divides the worlds of heaven and earth.

Beyond the space of religion, the Tree of Life permeates popular culture as well. Various ‘trees of life’ take form in famous artistic representations, such as Gustav Klimt’s masterpiece *Tree of Life* (1905-1911), which illustrates the phases of life within the shelter of a large tree; in modern literature, such as Sylvia Plath’s semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963), which images a young woman seated at the base of a fig tree whose fruit represents the various paths in life that she can take; in children’s literature with Shel Silverstein’s *The Giving Tree* (1964), in which the tree acting as mother gives all it can to a young boy; and in contemporary film, with *Tree of Life* (2011), a philosophical film that grapples with family relationships and the meaning of life.

While these popular iterations at times lose the distinct lesson of human mortality or the relationship between god and man, they all certainly question the meaning of life, for example what it can or should provide to human beings. In its pervasiveness throughout several forms of art and literature, it is clear that this religious symbol has sustained its significance from the ancient and religious world to our contemporary everyday lives.
CHAPTER 3

VISUAL ANALYSIS: ANCIENT DEPICTIONS OF THE SACRED FIG TREE

Indus Valley Civilization: Seals and Other Material Culture

As aforementioned, depictions of the sacred fig tree in Indian culture predate the advent of Buddhism and begin in the Indus Valley Civilization (IVC), which flourished from 2600 to 1900 BCE in the modern day areas of Pakistan and western India.\(^1\) While these examples do not represent images of the Bodhi Tree, in that these are not Buddhist objects portraying the Buddha’s enlightenment, they do represent the earliest depictions of the sacred fig tree and demonstrate the long history of the importance of this particular species of tree in India, as well as its continued naturalistic representation.

Depictions of the sacred fig tree from the IVC are most often found on steatite seals and molded terracotta tablets. Similar seals were used in the contemporaneous civilizations of Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, and in the IVC they were owned by elite townspeople such as rulers or well-to-do merchants. These are important objects of study because, similar to the Buddhist votive tablets we will discuss later in this section, seals and tablets from the IVC provide a large amount of material culture for scholars to analyze and, particular to this project, illustrate some of earliest depictions of the sacred fig tree in India. Further, as quotidian objects

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1. The Indus Valley Civilization was an Iron Age urban civilization located in what is today northwestern India surrounding the Indus River Valley. It was contemporaneous with the other great civilizations of Ancient Mesopotamia and Ancient Egypt.
owned by the elite, seals and tablets can help reveal the common imagery of that time, as well as possibly beliefs or religious practices.

Based on the imagery found in the material culture, the elite seemed to control the two principal IVC cities of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa through religion and trade, rather than brute force. Each seal belonged to an individual and featured text that perhaps references one’s name, clan, social position or occupation. While Indus Valley script has yet to be deciphered, the seals’ compositions are typified by what is often a single animal motif, some type of offering or trough nearby the animal, and a band of script running across the top.

Square-shaped seals had a knob at the back and long rectangular seals were drilled through their center in order to create a hole. In either case, this allowed the seal to be strung onto a necklace and worn around the owner’s neck or waist. Many broken seals were found in city streets or buried within houses. These seals likely fell and were broken and lost, or seals were purposely broken after the knob was damaged and the seal could no longer be strung. Other seals that were found buried under houses could have been hidden in order to protect them.

To make the seals, the steatite was carved, fired in order to harden for continued use, and finally used to stamp clay sealings that marked trade goods or important documents. Terracotta tablets are another type of object, and differ from steatite seals because they were not used to make impressions. Both seals and tablets vary in form, being square, rectangular and at times

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1. Kenoyer notes that images of battles, humans against humans, or portraits of rulers and their conquest are not found in Indus Valley art or material culture, as one finds in Mesopotamian and Egyptian culture. Commercial and religious control and the building and renewing of city gates, markets and streets demonstrated wealth and status. Extant seals are the principal evidence of social status we still have today, along with particular forms of pottery. See Jonathan Mark Kenoyer, Ancient Cities of the Indus Valley Civilization (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 81.
2. Ibid., 73.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid. It was important to intentionally break a defective seal because it represented the owner and provided certification for the movement of goods.
5. Steatite is also called soapstone, having a similar texture to soap, and could be easily carved.
cylindrical in the case of tablets, and range from compositions that are simple, for the identification of individuals and their property, to those that contain many elements and possibly serve a more narrative purpose related to ritual.

Plant imagery is relatively rare in IVC material culture and depictions of the sacred fig tree only appear on twelve of the extant seals. However, beyond seals and tablets, the motif is found on other types of objects. For example, the sacred fig tree, identifiable by its iconic heart shaped leaves that end in a long extended tip, was commonly depicted on pottery before the development of cities in the Indus River Valley during the Early Harappan period (Figure 11). The leaves of the tree were often painted in groups of three onto small jars and continued to appear on pottery during the Indus period. Further, the motif has also been found on faience ornaments and shell inlay and was used in Indus script.

On seals, the sacred fig tree is often shown with a human figure, typically identified by scholars as a deity due to his or her special and singular appearance (Figures 12 and 13). The figure is normally adorned with a headpiece, a kind of horned headdress that sometimes includes the identifiable sacred fig leaf, that distinguishes him or her from other figures that are likewise covered in arm bangles and have long hair, perhaps tied in a ponytail or braid as the hair sticks out from the base of a head in a rectangular shape. Kenoyer distinguishes a regional convention of the depiction of this sacred fig tree deity, stating that Mohenjo-daro imagery illustrates the deity standing within the tree, which forms a kind of U-shape around the figure, while Harappan objects show the deity standing below an arch of sacred fig leaves.

7. Kenoyer, 105. In botanical terms, the leaf shape can also be described as cordate, referring to the heart, and the long tip is called a drip tip.
8. Ibid.
One steatite seal from Mohenjo-daro demonstrates the former motif that Kenoyer describes (Figure 12). The square seal is highly decorated, indicating a more narrative scene that is perhaps related to religion or ritual, and its composition is divided into two horizontal registers. At the top left of the seal a human figure stands within a tree, which is shown as two large branches that grow from a shared oval base and form a U-shape around the figure. Each branch on either side of the figure carries three of the sacred fig tree’s iconic leaves, six in total, which identify the species of tree for the viewer. The deity stands with his or her arms hanging down stiffly and close to the body, which are covered in bangles from shoulder to wrist as indicated by horizontal marks up and down the arms. Further, the figure is shown in twisted perspective, with the head in profile and the arms, torso and legs viewed from straight on. The deity’s hair is depicted abstractly as a flat rectangular shape hanging from the back of the head. Finally, the figure wears a three-pronged headpiece that possibly represents a horned headdress with a central protrusion.

Another figure on the seal that also wears a horned headdress, but with three sacred fig leaves on the central prong, crouches to the right of the sacred fig tree-deity with both arms outstretched and palms upward, reaching toward the standing tree-deity figure. This crouching figure seems to make a gesture of reverence toward the tree-deity figure and is visually linked to the deity through his or her sacred fig leaf headpiece. To the right of this subservient figure is a bison with five writing characters above it. Additionally, there is a sixth character to the lower left of the tree-deity motif. Bedsides these elements that fill the top register of the seal, the bottom register consists of seven figures that face to the right. All wear the same knee length garment, have arms covered in bangles, a headpiece with a single protrusion that curves backward, and long hair that is tied or braided reaching down to the lower back.
A second seal from Harappa demonstrates the latter type of tree-deity grouping that is particular to this city, as stated by Kenoyer (Figure 13). On the reverse of a seal that depicts a bull, its trough and a band of writing at the top on its obverse, a figure carved with a full body stands in twisted perspective with the feet, hips and head facing to the left and the torso and arms seen from straight on. The figure also has tied hair at the back of the head and a headpiece with three protrusions. This appears similar to the headpiece from the Mohenjo-daro example, though shown from a different angle. The Mohenjo-daro deity’s crown is shown from straight on with the three prongs forming a horizontal band beside one another, while the Harappa example possibly tries to show the same type of crown from a side view, with the prongs stacked on top of one another in a vertical axis. A decorative arch surrounds the figure and both ends curl upward at the base of the arch. Thirteen sacred fig leaves grow on the topside of the arch. The leaves are more abstractly rendered than other examples, though they are still clearly identifiable through an effort to show a leaf with a wide base, and thus a cordate or heart shape, and an exaggerated long tip. Together, these features of the heart shape and long tip reference the two most recognizable parts of the iconic sacred fig leaf.

The two types of tree-deity figures, though Kenoyer distinguishes them as regional types, are quite similar. In either type, the anthropomorphic figure stands at the center of a U-shaped arch of sacred fig leaves, whether that arch frames the figure from below or above. Both figures are also similarly dressed, with bangles all down the arms, a three pronged headpiece and standing in twisted perspective with the head in profile and a long piece of hair at the back of the head. The bodies are also carved in the same way, full-bodied, with arms, torso and legs, rather than a stick figure-like appearance. The naturalism of the body is in line with other naturalistic elements of IVC seals, such as the depiction of the sacred fig tree leaves and numerous types of
animals. Due to the special treatment and appearance of these tree-related figures, and their similar appearance between the two representations, this figure appears to be a type of deity associated with the sacred fig tree. It is interesting that the figure is shown as if within the tree, standing at the center with the branches growing around it or forming an arch overhead. This is in line with many theories of the development of religion or earliest forms of religion, such as cultural evolutionist theory in the field of anthropology. Trees were venerated for their natural qualities of shelter and sustenance, and overtime were believed to embody or be the home of a god, which was often understood as the god dwelling inside.

Besides seals, the image of the sacred fig leaf has also been found on pottery and shell and faience pieces, as aforementioned. Additionally, a well built in the shape of the sacred fig leaf was found at Mohenjo-daro and is now installed at the site museum (Figure 14). Further, an impression of a sacred fig leaf was found in the upper levels of clay of a drain in Harappa (Figure 15), which lead archaeologists to believe that a sacred fig tree grew in the city of Harappa. Kenoyer mentions that within the context of Islam, Muslim saints are even buried beneath the protection of the sacred fig tree, without any religious or symbolic significance of the tree as found in IVC, Hindu and Buddhist culture. Beyond religious associations, the sacred fig tree was and is clearly revered for its physical properties and benefits of shade, shelter, and food. With the presence of the motif on different types of objects, as well as its association with

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11. “Pipal Leaves: Revisited.”
13. Ibid.
a deity figure on several seals, the significance of the sacred fig tree dating back to India’s prehistory is apparent.¹⁴

Early Buddhist Art: Bas-Relief Panels from Sanchi and Bharhut

The next iteration of the sacred fig tree’s visual depiction, and the first time the species specifically represents the Bodhi Tree, comes with Buddhism’s earliest permanent structures in stone. I will focus on depictions of the Bodhi Tree in bas relief panels from the railings, or vedika, surrounding stupas, or reliquary mounds, built to house relics of the Buddha at Sanchi and Bharhut in central India, from the second to first centuries BCE. These representations of the Bodhi Tree are identifiable due to the accurate depiction of the iconic shape of the leaves, but are also at times identified by inscriptions that explicitly name the tree.¹⁵

What these representations of the Bodhi Tree mean exactly is up for debate. Beginning in the early twentieth century with Alfred Foucher’s theory of aniconism,¹⁶ these relief panels featuring symbols such as an empty seat, parasol, the Buddha’s footprints, a pillar or the Bodhi Tree were interpreted as life scenes and past life scenes (jataka tales) of the Buddha that utilized symbols in place of the Buddha’s anthropomorphic depiction, and thus were interpreted as aniconic representations of the Buddha. Foucher’s theory suggested that the anthropomorphic depiction of the Buddha was avoided for a certain period of time in early Buddhist art. Thus, this

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¹⁴. Without contemporaneous textural information to explain many of the motifs on IVC material culture, Kenoyer looks to later Hindu and Buddhist belief, practice and symbolism to provide possible meaning for IVC motifs.


period prior to the common anthropomorphic form of the Buddha became known as the aniconic period in the Buddhist art history of India.¹⁷

While this theory was long held throughout the twentieth century, a reason for the purposeful avoidance of the Buddha’s anthropomorphic depiction was never definitively proven. Instead, the theory was simply taken to be true. Some scholars said that the avoidance was written down in Buddhist doctrine, though when others have combed through the literature there is scant textual evidence to support this claim.¹⁸ Foucher suggested that Indian artists were not inspired to depict the Buddha anthropomorphically until contact with the West in the early centuries CE, specifically the Greco-Roman sculptural tradition in the area of Gandhara, located in what is today Pakistan. However, these ideas clearly represent a Western imperialist point of view regarding non-Western art. Further, anthropomorphic images predating the so-called “aniconic” period in question have been found, which argues against the idea that the anthropomorphic image of the Buddha necessitated contact with the West or patronage under the Kushan dynasty during the early centuries CE.¹⁹

It was also argued that Theravada Buddhist doctrine in particular banned anthropomorphic imagery and that the contested “aniconic” reliefs were representative of that tradition. In contrast, Mahayana Buddhist doctrine lacked any ban, and thus anthropomorphic Buddha images begin with the growth of Mahayana Buddhism in India. These ideas created a Theravada vs. Mahayana divide, with Theravada Buddhists against anthropomorphic images of the Buddha and Mahayanists for them. However, this has also been disproven, as Theravada

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¹⁷ The period when anthropomorphic images of the Buddha become more commonplace is during the early centuries CE. The Mathuran and Gandharan schools of Buddhist art, centered at Mathura in northern India and Gandhara in Pakistan, respectively, produced many in the round sculptures of the Buddha in anthropomorphic form. ¹⁸ Huntington found one quote in the Theravada Buddhist scripture. Otherwise, it is not explicitly expressed. See Huntington, “Early Buddhist Art,” 401. ¹⁹ Ibid., 402. Anthropomorphic images of the Buddha become widespread in the early centuries CE, centered at workshops in Gandhara and Mathura, with each known for its particular style.
Buddhist literature does not emphasize avoidance of the Buddha’s anthropomorphistic depiction, nor are anthropomorphistic images absent from Theravada Buddhist art. Therefore, none of the theories put forth have proven a deliberate avoidance of anthropomorphistic images of the Buddha during a certain period of time.

Prominent scholars of Indian art, Susan L. Huntington and Vidya Dehejia, debated over the theory of aniconism in the early 1990s. In her article, “Aniconism and the Multivalence of Emblems” (1991), Dehejia argues in favor of aniconism. She expands on Foucher’s theory by organizing the meaning of Buddhist symbols into three categories. Firstly, Buddhist symbols can serve as aniconic representations of the Buddha, as argued by Foucher; secondly, they can reference tirthas, or sacred spots, and the associated events or meanings of these sites; and thirdly, they can evoke different aspects of Buddhist faith such as the Buddha’s wisdom or his teachings. Dehejia notes that these three types of meaning are not mutually exclusive, because one or several types of meaning can be read in any given use of the symbols. However, she also states that meaning is contextual, and thus any of these three categories of meaning are identifiable based on the surrounding visual cues.

I think it would be too difficult to definitively determine the exact intention or interpretation of any given use of these symbols, in the way Dehejia attempts with her three categories of meaning and the context of other visual elements that are used to identify the category in use. For example, when a symbol is meant to represent a site and its significance, Dehejia’s second category of meaning, presumably after the life of the Buddha when the site is recognized for its association with him, that symbol would naturally give rise to other meanings.

One cannot see a *dharmacakra*, or wheel of Buddhist law, and not think only of the site of Sarnath, but also the associated life event of the Buddha’s first sermon that took place there, as well as the general idea of the Buddha’s teachings, even if it is determined that in this instance the *dharmacakra* was meant to represent contemporary worship at the site and not necessarily a moment from the Buddha’s life or his teachings, based on the visual context as Dehejia argues is possible.

On the other hand, Huntington refutes the idea that these reliefs ever represent narrative life scenes of the Buddha at all. Therefore, the symbols would not serve as aniconic images in place of the Buddha in scenes representing his life or past lives. Instead, she argues that the symbols are worshipped as the focus of sacred sites related to the Buddha, similar to Dehejia’s second categorization of meaning. Through this interpretation, the reliefs illustrate contemporary worship at various sacred sites after the life of the Buddha, which emphasize general themes of pilgrimage and worship for contemporary lay followers. Huntington uses careful visual analysis to prove that none of the early Buddhist reliefs in question necessarily include features that would place the scene during the life of the Buddha. Further, she believes because the aniconic theory was so prevalent, scholars never looked at these reliefs for the visual evidence to prove the reliefs represented life scenes of the Buddha.

When comparing life scenes of the Buddha, where he is depicted in anthropomorphic form, against the supposed aniconic reliefs, one realizes that the “aniconic reliefs” often lack any indicators of time or place to illustrate that the scene takes place during the life of the Buddha. For example, an image from Gandhara dated to the second century CE typifies a composition that illustrates the narrative scene of the Buddha’s first sermon (Figure 16). Firstly, the Buddha is represented in anthropomorphic form. Further, at this event, the Buddha preached to five
nonbelievers who became monks, who are typically present in narrative scenes that depict the Buddha’s first sermon. In this example, two monks stand to the left of the Buddha and three to the right, identifiable by their shaved heads and monk’s robes. Other symbols associated with the event, and present in this example, are the dharmacakra, which represents the Buddhist teachings, and a pair of deer located at the base of the Buddha’s seat, which represent the location of Deer Park at Sarnath where the Buddha’s first sermon took place. In this example and others like it, the presence of the Buddha in anthropomorphic form, as well as the presence of five monks, serve to temporally place the scene during the Buddha’s lifetime, and the pair of deer serves to geographically place the event at Sarnath.

In contrast, “aniconic reliefs” that feature the dharmacakra but lack the anthropomorphic depiction of the Buddha, are also missing the Buddha’s five recent converts in order to temporally place the event during the Buddha’s lifetime. Instead, these types of reliefs commonly illustrate a number of laypersons paying homage to the dharmacakra on top of a pillar, in which case it is referred to as a dharmacakrastambha (Figure 17).

In Figure 17, a relief panel from Stupa 1 at Sanchi, the worshippers hands are clasped together in a gesture of veneration, and most turn to face the dharmacakrastambha. Further, the dharmacakrastambha is topped with umbrellas, a royal symbol of veneration, and garlands, which illustrate the importance of the object. Huntington notes that without the time or location specifics that later narrative reliefs include, such as the Gandharan example just discussed, images that simply illustrate a symbol at the center of a worship scene more likely represent lay worship of an object at an important site, which became important places of worship after the life of the Buddha.

21. The viewer’s left and right.
Further, Huntington notes that themes of lay worship and pilgrimage were prevalent in the Buddhist literature concurrent with these monuments, and thus represent concepts that more closely relate to the contemporaneous function of these sites, rather than the didactic lesson a life scene of the Buddha would provide. Monuments and their decoration, which were built and maintained for lay worship, serve as reminders for Buddhist followers. Further, worship of and pilgrimage to these sites were popular and accessible ways for laypersons to earn merit. Therefore, themes of lay worship and pilgrimage not only fit with contemporaneous religious literature and practice, but also make for appropriate visual decoration of early stupa sites, which served to enshrine body or contact relics and provide places for remembrance, worship and pilgrimage. Due to Huntington’s careful visual analysis and compelling argument for themes of lay worship and pilgrimage, I find her interpretation of the reliefs as representations of worship after the life of the Buddha more persuasive than an aniconic reading.

Huntington’s theory also applies to reliefs featuring other common Buddhist symbols, such as an empty throne, pillar, stupa, or the Bodhi Tree. In narrative reliefs of the Buddha’s enlightenment, which would include the depiction of the Bodhi Tree, the Buddha appears in anthropomorphic form alongside other symbols. For example, in a Gandharan relief from the Freer Gallery of Art dated to the second to third centuries CE, the Buddha is shown seated with his right hand in *bhumiṃsparśamudra*, or earth-touching gesture, in order to call the earth goddess to witness his enlightenment (Figure 18). Additionally, Mara’s army, represented by a mixture of human and animal-headed figures holding various weapons, surrounds the Buddha on either side. According to the story of the Buddha’s enlightenment, Mara the demon and his army attempt to distract the Buddha from his meditation. Mara and his army of demons are unsuccessful, and the Buddha attains his goal of enlightenment.
In this relief, the presence of Mara’s army, the Buddha in anthropomorphic form, and the Buddha’s hand in *bhumisparsamudra* all work to establish the time of the event. Each element helps to illustrate that the scene takes place during the life of the Buddha by demonstrating elements of the narrative. Further, the Bodhi Tree, identifiable by the naturalistic representation of its iconic heart-shaped leaves, hangs above the head of Buddha. This indicates the location of the scene at Bodh Gaya, because the Buddha reached enlightenment while meditating underneath the Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gaya. In this case, time and location are clearly specified, which Huntington argues are the two visual cues that help to differentiate narrative scenes from those that illustrate worship at sacred sites after the life of the Buddha.

In contrast to this narrative example, non-narrative relief panels that center on the Bodhi Tree may include an empty seat, known as the diamond throne, or a sacred fence depicted at the base of the Bodhi Tree (Figures 19 and 20). In a relief panel from Stupa 1 at Sanchi (Figure 19), the Bodhi Tree is demarcated by a fence and decorated by a pair of garlands. In another relief from the stupa at Bharhut (Figure 20), a fence that is hung with garlands likewise demarcates the Bodhi Tree, and the diamond throne is depicted below it.

Both the fence and throne, as depicted in these relief panels, would have been erected after the Buddha’s lifetime in order to mark and venerate the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment, and do not necessarily support the scene as taking place during the life of the Buddha. Though one could argue that these objects represent anachronistic elements of the relief, they more reasonably place the scene after the life of the Buddha when significant sites were honored with permanent structures as places for worship.\(^\text{22}\) Further, in both panels, rows of laypersons surround the Bodhi Tree with their hands in prayer towards the tree or throne, similar to the

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\(^\text{22}\) For example, the Buddha’s seat beneath the Bodhi Tree was immortalized by the stone diamond throne and the tree is protected and set apart by a fence, which is true for all bodhi trees within religious complexes.
aforementioned worship scene of the dharmacakrastambha from Sanchi, as well as many other relief examples Huntington includes in her article, which emphasizes themes of pilgrimage and worship.

Between these three ancient examples that include depictions the Bodhi Tree (Figures 18-20), the general presentation of the tree differs. In the Sanchi panel (Figure 19), the canopy of the tree grows out from a large trunk. The tree’s branches split from one another and disappear into a round form filled with leaves. In the Bharhut relief (Figure 20), the viewer sees a cross section of the tree. The trunk extends into a vertical axis that runs from the top of the tree presumably to its base, though the bottom half of the tree is blocked by the representation of its protective railing and surrounding worshippers. The viewer is left only to observe the crown the tree, where three pairs of branches mirror one another across the trunk, decreasing in length as they reach the top of the tree. The crown is an irregular shape, unlike the round form of the Sanchi example, and leaves fill the spaces between the tree’s branches and its amorphous outline. Lastly, in the Gandharan example (Figure 18), the overall shape of the tree is not rendered at all. Instead, a floating canopy of leaves, which create an arch around the Buddha’s head, is used to suggest the presence of the Bodhi Tree.

From just three examples expanding a few centuries, we can see that the overall form of the Bodhi Tree varies. However, the naturalistic, and thus clearly recognizable, rendering of the tree’s leaves remains constant. These iconic heart-shaped leaves, from their prehistoric depiction in the IVC, through these early Buddhist examples and eventually contemporary graphic iterations in business logos, are nearly always clearly defined. Across varying types of media and ranges of scale, the naturalistic depiction of the sacred fig tree’s leaves are delicately carved and drawn. This close representation unmistakably identifies the species of the tree for the viewer,
which could in turn reference the Buddha, his teachings and qualities, and the site of Bodh Gaya, where he sat beneath the Bodhi Tree and attained enlightenment.

Similar to the naturalistic depiction of the sacred fig tree, Mohindar Singh Randhawa is able to identify several species of plants, trees and flowers in early Hindu and Buddhist art by comparing their depiction in bas-relief against natural drawings in his book, *The Cult of Trees and Tree-Worship in Buddhist-Hindu Sculpture* (1964). Randhawa begins his study with a brief overview of the universality of tree worship, as many of the publications on tree worship in India begin, and organizes his comparisons by site. For the most part, Randhawa simply gives descriptions of the relief panels, which are illustrated with a photograph of the relief and an image or biological drawing of the plant species represented. Therefore, his work mostly serves as an image catalog. In comparing images of many plant species with their depiction in stone, one can readily see the attention to naturalism present in early and Hindu and Buddhist art. Each plant or tree is easily recognizable to those familiar with Indian flora, and one species could not be mistaken for another. Given the significance of tree worship since the Indus Valley Civilization to the present day, as well as the personal nature between worshipper and tree, it would seem fitting that the depiction of plants and trees in Indian art is so particular.

**Significance of Bodh Gaya: Votive Tablets from Bodh Gaya, Pagan and Northern Thailand**

Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment, became an intensely popular pilgrimage site during the Pala period in India (750-1200 CE). The Palas, a dynasty of successive kings that each took Pala as part of their epithet, were one of a series of empires to control the

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24. Haberman, 4. Throughout his book, Haberman discusses trees as people and the individualized and personal relationships contemporary worshippers have with the local trees they worship.
eastern Gangetic region, which encompasses the present-day Indian states of Bihar and West Bengal in northeastern India, as well as the neighboring country of Bangladesh. The region is located at a nexus of land and water trade networks and is rich in natural resources, encompassing the mouth of the Ganges River and receiving water from two major watersheds.\(^{25}\)

Due to its strategic location and sustained rule under the Palas, the region flourished and received international pilgrims and traders from all over, particularly Southeast Asia, China, the Arab world and other parts of India.\(^{26}\) The significance of the region’s advantageous location and abundant natural resources is expressly described in Susan L. Huntington and John C. Huntington’s exhibition catalog, *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pāla India (8th-12th centuries) and its International Legacy* (1990), and Michael Asher’s book on the pre-Pala period, *Art of Eastern India: 300-800* (2009).\(^{27}\) Each explains the geographical, economic and political benefits of the region that seem to have facilitated the markedly unified and influential style of Pala art, which is in part famous today due to its widespread influence in other parts of Buddhist Asia, particularly mainland Southeast Asia.\(^{28}\)

Though I, along with others, describe Pala art as unified and influential, it is important to note that it also represented a diverse range of cultures and traditions given the large area the empire controlled. Further, Pala art was not wholly unique, in that it received as well as gave

\(^{25}\) Susan L. Huntington and John C. Huntington, *Leaves from the Bodhi Tree: The Art of Pāla India (8th-12th centuries) and its International Legacy* (Dayton, Ohio: Dayton Art Institute, 1990), 75-77.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., 77.

\(^{27}\) Huntington and Huntington discuss the unified art style of Pala period artwork, centered on depictions of the Maravijaya Buddha, as a political strategy to promote a pilgrimage site located within the Pala Empire and to image Pala royalty. See Huntington and Huntington, 86 and 103-5. In *Art of Eastern India: 300-800*, Michael Asher describes the period of art between the Gupta and Pala empires, two empires that at different times held control of the eastern Gangetic region, which he refers to as a pre-Pala period. He questions the myth of a new art school born during the Pala period, born of two artists, a father and son. Instead, Asher argues that the unity of Pala art was due to the geography and nature of the eastern Gangetic region and the prosperity brought by the Palas after a long period following the fall of the Guptas. See Michael Asher, *Art of Eastern India: 300-800* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3-12.

\(^{28}\) This is evidenced in the prevalence of the Buddha presented as the Maravijaya Buddha in the art of mainland Southeast Asia.
influence, namely from Nepal and other artistic traditions in India.\textsuperscript{29} The most relevant way, to this paper, in which Pala art is unique, is its single most popular subject matter of the Buddha. The Buddha, and more specifically his depiction as the Maravijaya Buddha, was the most common theme of Pala period artwork.\textsuperscript{30}

The Maravijaya Buddha, or “victory over Mara” Buddha, is recognizable by the Buddha’s right hand in \textit{bhumisparsamudra}, or earth-touching gesture, which signals the moment the Buddha reached his hand toward the earth in order to call the earth goddess to witness his defeat over Mara, and subsequent enlightenment. Further, the Maravijaya Buddha may sit on a double lotus pedestal, be accompanied by various figures, such as other buddhas, bodhisattvas or celestial figures, and be surmounted by the Bodhi Tree and or Mahabodhi Temple. However, in its simplest form, the Buddha seated on a double lotus pedestal with his right hand in \textit{bhumisparsamudra} is enough to signal the Maravijaya scene (Figure 21).\textsuperscript{31}

Additionally, though the Maravijaya Buddha can appear alone and serve as the singular subject of a work of art, during the Pala period it also commonly appeared as the central composition within a standardized grouping of eight great events from the Buddha’s life. This

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{29} Huntington and Huntington, 103.\\ \textsuperscript{30} Huntington and Huntington refer to the Buddha in this form as the Vajrasana Buddha, which refers to the \textit{vajrasana}, or diamond throne, the name given to the Buddha’s seat beneath the Bodhi Tree when he defeated Mara and his demon army and attained enlightenment. This depiction or moment can also be referred to as the Maravijaya scene, or defeat over Mara. While meditating beneath the Bodhi Tree, Mara, a demon, and his demon army attempted to distract the Buddha in order to prevent his enlightenment. The Buddha remains undisturbed in the face of Mara’s attempt and attains enlightenment. The scene, and its visual depiction, can also simply be called the Buddha’s enlightenment, even though the scene portrayed is technically the moment before his attainment of enlightenment. See Huntington and Huntington, 104.\\ \textsuperscript{31} Painted murals or other sculptural pieces may accompany stand alone images, such as this, in a temple setting, enhancing the Buddha sculpture and filling out details of the scene portrayed. In Figure 21, a seated Buddha image at Htilominlo Temple in Pagan, the Buddha is presented as the Maravijaya Buddha, simply seated with his right hand in \textit{bhumisparsamudra}. But the image is enhanced by an architectural decoration behind the image, which is painted with green Bodhi leaves in the recessed part of the niche surrounding the Buddha, see Figure 22. The inclusion of the Bodhi tree leaves helps to locate the scene at Bodh Gaya, the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment, which aids the viewer in understanding the life scene that is portrayed, in addition to the Buddha’s hand in \textit{bhumisparsamudra}.}
grouping is called the *astamahapratiharya*, or eight great illusory events (Figure 23). Both the Maravijaya Buddha and eight great events can be found in earlier periods of Buddhist art, but neither had received the popularity or particular characterization as they did in the Pala period.\(^{32}\) And subsequent to their popularization in Pala India, both themes spread to the art of mainland Southeast Asia, present in sculpture and votive tablets. Large-scale sculpture was principally meant for a temple setting, while votive tablets were small, handheld portable objects intended for personal use at pilgrimage sites or home shrines.

In relation to the former, an example of the Maravijaya Buddha from the Cleveland Art Museum illustrates some of its standard iconography as previously discussed (Figure 24). The approximately three-foot tall stele from Bihar, India, where the site of Bodh Gaya is located, is made of chloritic schist and dates to the early 800s, or early Pala period.

The Buddha is seated on a double lotus pedestal, represented by two horizontal rows of lotus petals with the top row facing upward and the bottom row facing downward. His right hand is in *bhumisparasamudra*, with his palm facing downward and reaching toward the earth. Further, two buddhas flank his left and right sides. They are identifiable by their similar iconography to the Buddha, including their monk’s robes, elongated earlobes, snail shell curls of hair on the top of their head and an *ushnisha*, or cranial bump that is a mark of wisdom.\(^{33}\) Both buddhas make a *mudra*, or gesture, with their right hands, while they clutch the hem of their robes with their left hands. The buddha on the right makes the *abhayamudra*, or fear not gesture, with his hand held at chest level and palm facing outward toward the viewer in a gesture of

\(^{32}\) Huntington and Huntington, 103.

\(^{33}\) The elongated earlobes remind the viewer of the material world an ascetic would have left behind, by representing absent heavy earrings that a man of the material world would have worn. Snail shell curls refer to how each strand of hair has curled in a clockwise direction, resembling the form of a snail shell. Both the snail shell curls and *ushnisha* are marks of a great man in Indian ideology. A great man was destined to become a *cakravartin*, meaning universal ruler, or a buddha, an enlightened being.
reassurance, and the buddha on the left makes the varadamudra, or boon giving gesture, with his hand held near the thigh and palm facing upward in a gesture of giving. Two celestial figures, with their legs conventionally bent upward, in order to show they are flying, appear from the left and right sides of the Buddha’s head.

Further, a decorative halo surrounds the Buddha’s head and the Bodhi Tree grows above at the apex of the stele. The tree is represented by three groupings of branches that grow in three directions, left, right and outward toward the viewer (Figure 25). Each of these clusters has two to three branches that taper toward the end and do not seem entirely naturalistic. As with earlier depictions we have viewed from prehistoric and ancient India, the overall form of the Bodhi Tree and its branches varies. However, the species of tree is clearly identifiable by the naturalistic representation of its iconic heart shaped leaves. With what appears to be the hard texture of stone, given the clear detail of the sculpture, the midrib and several veins of the leaf are also clearly rendered and contribute to the naturalistic depiction of the leaves.

The composition and iconography present in large-scale sculpture, such as this one, are similar to that of small votive tablets. During the Pala period, the making of votive tablets became popular practice at Bodh Gaya, which is attested by the large number found buried at the site. Further, given that Bodh Gaya is located in a delta region where clay is abundant, votive tablets were inexpensive objects that a range of Buddhist followers could afford.34

Tablets could be hand molded, but were most often stamped out from a mold, which also accounts for their mass quantities. The tablet design was first carved into a terracotta or metal

34. Votive tablets were also used to decorate stupas and have been found lining the walls of cave dwellings used as places of retreat and meditation by monks. In addition to laypersons or monks, votive tablets were also commissioned by the king and other wealthy patrons, as evidenced in the donative inscriptions on the back of some votive tablets, particularly ones made of metal that were naturally more expensive, see Figure 26. For discussion of epigraphic evidence regarding royal patronage of tablets in Burma, see John Guy, “Offering Up a Rare Jewel: Buddhist Merit-Making and Votive Tablets in Early Burma,” in Burma: Art and Archaeology, eds. Alexandra Green and T. Richard Blurton (London: British Museum, 2002), 24.
mold from which the tablet was pressed. With a metal mold, the artist could achieve much finer carving than one made of clay, which made for a more detailed image on the tablet. Over time and many stampings, the mold could eventually wear and produce a less clear image. Once the tablet was stamped out, the donor could have his or her name inscribed on the back while the clay was still wet. Finally, the tablet was sun dried, leaving it more fragile, or low fired in a kiln, in order to set.\textsuperscript{35}

The purpose of votive tablets was to earn Buddhist followers merit. The more merit a Buddhist earns in a lifetime, the better life they are born into in the next.\textsuperscript{36} The act of stamping out the tablet, as well as pilgrimage to the site or burial of the object at Bodh Gaya or another place along the way home, in order to spread the Buddhist teachings, were all ways to earn merit. Votive tablets could also be placed in a home shrine to remind the worshipper of their pilgrimage and serve as an object of reflection or meditation.\textsuperscript{37}

The origin of individual votive tablets is difficult to determine because both molds and tablets traveled by land and sea with the help of pilgrims, traders and monks. This means that neither the style of the tablet nor its find spot necessarily determines where the tablet was made. A certain tablet could have been made in Bodh Gaya and carried to Burma. Or a mold made in Bodh Gaya could have been brought to Thailand and used to stamp out tablets there. Thus, the only way to definitively know the origin of the tablet is to test the clay.\textsuperscript{38} Regardless, the similar

\textsuperscript{35} Guy, 24.
\textsuperscript{36} Buddhists believe in the continuous cycle of birth, death and rebirth called \textit{samsara}. Earning good merit in one lifetime guarantees a better station in life in the next. The ultimate goal for Buddhists is to break the cycle of \textit{samsara}, because the endless cycle of rebirth is considered painful. Release from the cycle and the end of rebirth is called \textit{nirvana}.

\textsuperscript{37} Guy argues for the doctrinal move toward a focus on the Buddhist teachings rather than worship of body relics, hence the Buddhist creed present on tablets and the circulation of early tablets that only featured the creed. He also discusses the emphasis on the act of making things in order to earn merit, as well as the lack of importance placed on the monetary value of such objects, in Buddhist literature. See Guy, 24.

\textsuperscript{38} Guy, 23.
style and composition of tablets from India, Burma and Thailand, dating to the Pala period, demonstrate the stylistic influence of votive tablets from Bodh Gaya. While each locality illustrates its own character, in the style of the figures, decorative elements, or shape of the tablet, it is clear that particular compositional and iconographic programs, such as the Maravijaya Buddha and the eight great illusory events, were solidified in Pala India and then transmitted to parts of mainland Southeast Asia.

I will examine examples of votive tablets from Bodh Gaya, India; Pagan, Burma; and northern Thailand, as it is well known these three areas were linked during the Pala period, evidenced by the spread of Pala votive tablets to these particular areas of mainland Southeast Asia and their influence on the artwork there. Further, because the subject matter of votive tablets is not exclusive to images of the Buddha, let alone those including the Bodhi Tree, tablets from these areas are more likely to feature depictions of the Bodhi Tree due to Pala influence.  

In an example attributed to Bodh Gaya, the Buddha is seated on a double lotus pedestal with his right hand in bhumisparsamudra (Figure 3). He is surrounded by a temple structure that is meant to evoke the Mahabodhi Temple (Figure 28), which forms a niche in which the Buddha sits. Several stupas of varying sizes, as opposed to flanking buddhas, surround the

39. Both Guy and Chirapravati discusses the influence of Pala style on votive tablets in Burma and Thailand, which is notable by an iconographical change to the dominance of the Buddha seated in vajrasana with his right hand in bhumisparsamudra below the Mahabodhi Temple and or Bodhi Tree. This iconography and style differs from the earlier and local styles, such as Pyu and Mon styles in Burma and Mon styles in Thailand. See Guy 30-31 for his comparison between Pyu and Pagan style votive tablets from Burma. See ML Pattaratorn Chirapravati, Votive Tablets in Thailand: Origin, Styles and Uses (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1999), 6 for her discussion of the influence of the Pala style in Pagan period Burma (twelfth to fourteenth centuries CE) and the late Mon period of Thailand (tenth to eleventh centuries CE).

40. Guy published a votive tablet from the Victoria and Albert Museum that is nearly identical in design and attributed to the Pagan period of Burma from the eleventh to twelfth centuries. He discusses how this composition is typical of Burmese tablets at this time, referring to it as the “classic Bodhgaya-type” and says that the Burmese tablets were most likely made from imported Indian molds. See Guy, 29-30 and Figure 3.9 on page 29.

41. The Mahabodhi Temple has an iconic tall tower that is quite unique is its form and is thus recognizable as the Mahabodhi Temple. Though its artistic representation on votive tablets is not always exact, a tall tower
Buddha in his niche. At the base is the Buddhist creed, or ye dharma, inscribed in Devanagari script. One can find the Buddhist creed inscribed on most votive tablets.

Two branches of the Bodhi Tree grow behind the top of the temple structure (Figure 27). Again, while the appearance of the overall tree differs from image to image, in this case its sinuous branches are thick and follow the winding lines of the leaves, the tree is clearly identifiable by the iconic shape of the leaves, though quite stylized in this depiction. The leaves have a heart shape, in that they widen at their base, and a long central vein, which creates a continuous line that curves dynamically left and right from stem to tip. However, the overall style is more angular, which can also be seen in the delineation of the Buddha’s eyes, which is representative of the Indian style when compared to similar compositions of tablets attributed to Burma or Thailand. Further, one could argue that the overall shape of the votive tablet, wide at its base and almost ending in a point at the top, is also meant to evoke the shape of the Bodhi Tree’s iconic leaves.

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42. These small stupas may represent the several funerary stupas that surround the Mahabodhi Temple and are smaller in size, further realistically portraying the site.

43. The ye dharma is a response given by one of the Buddha’s disciples when asked about the Buddha’s teachings and is understood as a statement that explains the core tenets of Buddhism. It roughly means: there are causes of life’s suffering and the Buddhist teachings, as taught by the Buddha, identify those causes and offers a solution to them. Devanagari, also called nagari, is an ancient script from India. It is used to write both Sanskrit and Pali.

44. The earliest form of votive tablets simply stated the Buddhist creed or other parts of Buddhist scripture, possibly with a single image such as a stupa or the dharmacakra. Overtime, this came to include more and more imagery. In her book on Thai votive tablets, Chirapravati divides tablets into two categories: votive tablets that feature images of the Buddha, bodhisattvas or Tantric gods and goddesses that are inscribed with the Buddhist creed; and dharini sealings with Buddhist words, often spoken by the Buddha. See Figure 3.1 in Guy, 25 and Figure 1 in Chirapravati, 5.

45. Not everyone would agree with this interpretation of the votive tablet’s shape. Though it is sometimes mentioned in descriptions of votive tablets shaped such as this one, I asked my Thai teacher in Chiang Mai, who is a devout Buddhist and collector of amulets and votive tablets, if he thought this is what the shape was meant to symbolize and he disagreed. The shape could be interpreted as a lotus petal, diamond, or maybe holding no significance at all.
In my research, it has been difficult to find tablets attributed to India, possibly due to the aforementioned issues regarding origin. Instead, most Pala style tablets in American museum collections are attributed to Burma, specifically Pagan,\textsuperscript{46} which was an ancient Buddhist kingdom contemporaneous with the Pala kingdom in India.\textsuperscript{47} In Burma, the molds were pressed into thick pieces of clay that were larger than the area needed to produce the image, so the tablets are distinguishable by their wide and deep borders surrounding the image (Figures 29-31, 34 and 35).\textsuperscript{48}

The Burma Art Collection (BAC) at Northern Illinois University has several Pagan period tablets in its collection that represent many of the common compositions: The Buddha seated beneath the Mahabodhi Temple and Bodhi Tree with flanking disciples, the same composition but with surrounding stupas as opposed to disciples, and The Buddha Triad, where he is flanked by buddhas and all three are encased in niches. The last composition is the most complex and contains all of the aforementioned iconography, including the Mahabodhi Temple, Bodhi Tree and surrounding stupas. Though it can sometimes be difficult to notice, every tablet in the collection that is included here contains the depiction of the Bodhi Tree. Depending on the depth of the relief, the trace of the leaves can be difficult to discern. However, upon close inspection, they can always be found surrounding the Mahabodhi Temple structure.

\textsuperscript{46} The Pagan kingdom grew from a settlement in Pagan, Burma in the ninth century CE and declined around the mid-thirteenth century CE. It is famous for its many extant Buddhist temples, built by the Theravada Buddhist kings of Pagan. For the key text on Pagan period Burma, see G.H. Luce, \textit{Old Burma—Early Pagan}, 3 vols. (Locust Valley, New York: Published for Artibus Asiae and the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University by J.J. Augustin, 1969).

\textsuperscript{47} Guy notes the difficulty in discussing tablets attributed to Burma as originating from Burma. He says that Indian historian Rajendralala Mitra witnessed hundreds of tablets being taken away by Burmese, who had intent to bring them back to Burma, in 1879. Tablets attributed to Burma could have been made in India and carried to Burma at anytime between the dates of their manufacture, during the Pala period, to more recent history. See Guy, 31.

\textsuperscript{48} Guy, 24.
Three of the eight votive tablets included here from the BAC represent the same compositional type (Figures 29-31). The Maravijaya Buddha is seated within a Mahabodhi Temple structure surmounted by the Bodhi Tree and two flanking disciples, Shariputra and Maudgalyayana, who sit upon lotus flowers that emerge from below the Buddha’s seat. In Figures 29 and 30, the branches and leaves of the Bodhi Tree fill the rest of the background surrounding the Mahabodhi Temple structure. In Figure 31, in addition to the tree, two stupas float above the flanking disciples. Figures 29-31 share a similar Indian style, noticeable in the elongated proportions of the Buddha, particularly his face, arms and abdomen. Further, Figures 29-31 share a similar tablet shape. Each has a square base and pointed top, forming a kind of curved triangle, which could possibly be interpreted as a Bodhi Tree leaf shape.

Figures 32 and 33 relate to Figures 29-31 in that they also feature the Buddha seated within a Mahabodhi Temple like structure, accompanied by the Bodhi Tree above. They also compare to Figure 31 in that two disciples flank the Buddha with stupas floating above them. The Buddha in Figure 32 displays bhumisparsamudra like Figures 29-31, but the Buddha in Figure 33 appears to display dhayanamudra, a meditation gesture where the hands are placed one top of the other, palms facing up. Figure 32 is inscribed with a line of text, likely the Buddhist creed, at its base while the rest of the tablets thus mentioned do not appear to be inscribed on their front face.49 Both Figures 32 and 33 have rounded bases and pointed tops, and so more closely evoke the shape of the Bodhi Tree leaf than Figures 29-31, which have square bases.

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49. In Pala style tablets, the Buddhist creed is normally inscribed at the base of the votive tablet on the front side, located below the Buddha’s seat and thus a part of the mold design. Donative inscriptions that identify the patron are most commonly found written on the back, which were inscribed while the clay was still wet.
Further, Figure 32 does not relate to Figures 29-31 in their Indian style. The Buddha in Figure 32 has a much rounder face, perhaps reflecting a local style. The style of Figure 33 is difficult to read as the tablet is quite worn. The Buddha’s proportions appear elongated, but do not seem to compare stylistically with Figures 29-31. The Bodhi Tree, which is present on all five of these tablets, is most visible on Figure 29. Three branches grow out from each side of the Mahabodhi Temple and each branch carries four distinctive heart shaped leaves with a strong midrib. The Bodhi Tree is depicted in the same way on Figures 30 and 31.

Figure 34 relates in composition to Figures 29-33. The Maravijaya Buddha is seated within an architectural niche resembling the Mahabodhi Temple and a Bodhi Tree grows behind it. However, the composition varies slightly in that the Buddha is surrounded by four stupas as opposed to flanking disciples. The Bodhi Tree is beautifully rendered with carefully delineated leaves that grow on either sides of the Mahabodhi Temple structure. Two naturalistically rendered leaves appear on either side of the temple with a thin branch between them. The leaves’ midribs and branching veins are clearly visible and the tip of each leaf extends long. At least two lines of small script inscribe the base of the tablet below the Buddha’s seat. The overall shape is almost ovoid, round at the base and tapering towards the top into a rounded point.

Figure 35 represents the Buddha Triad composition. The Maravijaya Buddha is flanked by two standing buddhas that are also encompassed within their own architectural niches. Two lines of script are inscribed below the triad at the base of the tablet and several stupa forms fill the space above the figures. The Bodhi Tree is represented at the base of the Mahabodhi Temple structure. A single branch carrying three naturalistically depicted leaves grows on either side of the niche surrounding the Buddha’s head. The branches are thick and curve side to side. The leaves have a strong midrib, long pointed end and are clearly heart shaped. Overall, this
depiction of the Bodhi Tree is comparable in form to that of the Bodh Gaya votive tablet first discussed in this section (Figure 36).

In his essay on votive tablets of early Burma, John Guy discusses the composition of Figure 35 as a variant of the “classical Bodhgaya type,” represented by the Bodh Gaya example offered here (Figure 3) and his Figure 3.9.\(^{50}\) In addition to the depiction of the Maravijaya scene at the center of the composition, which is located in Bodh Gaya by the presence of the Mahabodhi Temple and Bodhi Tree, the flanking buddhas present opposite mudras in opposite hands in order to represent the Twin Miracles at Sravasti, another moment of the Buddha’s life that took place after his enlightenment during the many years that he traveled and taught until his parinirvana or final extinguishment.\(^{51}\)

Guy explains that variants of the classical Bodh Gaya type such as this, which add or change elements in addition to the presence of the Buddha beneath the Mahabodhi Temple and Bodhi Tree, incorporate themes that were already popular in Pyu style tablets from Burma.\(^{52}\) Guy argues the blend of the standard Bodh Gaya type with iconography from Pyu styles shows the continued importance of local styles amongst the influence of Pala style tablets in Burma.

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50. See Guy, 30.
51. The two flanking buddhas, present the opposite gestures in opposite hands. The buddha on the right presents abhayamudra with his right hand. His right hand is held up to his chest and faces outward in a gesture of reassurance. The buddha on the left presents vitarkamudra with his left hand, which is teaching gesture shown by touching one’s pointer finger to one’s thumb.
52. Pyu refers to early city-states located in what is today Upper Burma, extant from around the second to mid-eleventh centuries CE. The Pyu were a Buddhist civilization that was eventually absorbed by the Pagan kingdom.
53. In addition to the depiction of the Twin Miracles, Guy includes an example of a tablet that swaps the Maravijaya Buddha for the Buddha preaching his first sermon, demonstrated by his hands in dharmacakramudra. The Buddha sits with pendant legs, or in a chair with legs hanging down, inside an architectural niche surmounted by a Mahabodhi Temple structure and surrounded by many stupas. It is not apparent in the photo whether or not the Bodhi Tree is depicted. In these examples, the Maravijaya scene, as canonized in Pala period artwork, is supplemented with another life event of the Buddha already common in the iconography of locally made tablets in Burma. See Guy, 30.
While the surrounding elements may slightly change, such as the inclusion of certain attendants or stupas, and the localized styles of the tablets can make them appear different from one another on the surface, the composition and iconography of these Pagan period tablets from the BAC are quite similar, due to the fact that they represent Pala influence, specifically its canonized depiction of the Maravijaya Buddha seated beneath the Mahabodhi Temple and Bodhi Tree.

Similar to the Pala influence apparent in Pagan period tablets from Burma, Pala influence can also be detected in the iconographic change of late Mon period tablets in Thailand. According to ML Pattaratorn Chirapravati in *Votive Tablets in Thailand: Origin, Styles and Uses* (1999), 54 Pala period tablets from India were most influential during the Pagan period of Burma during the twelfth and fourteenth centuries CE, and the late Mon period of Thailand in the tenth to eleventh centuries CE. In Thailand, Pala influence, partly via Pagan, was most apparent in the Northern Region, 55 centered at Hariphunchai in Lamphun Province. 56

Chirapravati divides tablets from Hariphunchai into two periods, early and late, based on their style. Earlier tablets reflected local styles inherited from Dvaravati, the Mon kingdom of the Central Plain (sixth to thirteenth centuries CE), and later tablets showed Pala and Pagan influence. Iconographical changes made subsequent to Pala and Pagan influence include the Buddha performing *bhumisparsamudra*, earth-touching gesture, as opposed to *dhayanamudra*, meditation gesture, and the Buddha seated in *vajrasana*, legs crossed with soles of the feet facing up, as opposed to *virasana*, legs bent underneath the body with feet under hips. Essentially, the

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54. See footnote 40.
55. Chirapravati discusses the tablets regionally. There are four major regions of Thailand, the Central Plain, Peninsula, Northeastern Plateau and Northern Region, see Chirapravati, 7-8.
56. Hariphunchai was a Mon kingdom from around 700 to 1293 CE that was eventually overtaken by the Lan Na kingdom centered at Chiang Mai, located in the neighboring province of Chiang Mai.
changes result from the influence of the canonized iconography of the Maravijaya Buddha as portrayed in Pala period artwork.

The most interesting iteration of this influence presented in Chirapravati’s book is represented by three examples of a particular type of tablet found in mass quantities at Hariphunchai (Figure 4). Referred to as Phra Kong in Thai, the tablets are small, 2 to 3 centimeters tall, and lack any inscription, whether donative or of Buddhist scripture.\(^{57}\) Pattaratorn surmises that laypersons donated tablets of this type, due to their small size, lack of inscription, and thus inexpensive cost. The Phra Kong tablet type is simplified to the depiction of the Maravijaya Buddha with only few extraneous elements. The Buddha is seated in \textit{vajrasana} on a double lotus pedestal, with his right hand in \textit{bhumisparsamudra} and left hand in his lap facing upward. The leaves of the Bodhi Tree, which are charmingly identifiable in their naturalistic shape, even on such a small scale, fill the rest of the background behind the Buddha. Chirapravati notes that at times leaves and branches represent the Bodhi Tree, other times leaves alone. In the examples seen here, many leaves stem out from thin branches that are visually insignificant. The Mahabodhi Temple is not depicted.

A few votive tablets from the Metropolitan Museum of Art represent an earlier style with which to compare those from the Hariphunchai period. The museum appears to have three of the same type (Figures 37-39). All three illustrate the Buddha seated in \textit{vajrasana}, with the soles of his feet facing upward, below the Bodhi Tree. Two disciples stand in profile, turning to face the Buddha, and make gestures of reverence with their hands clasped in front of their chests. A stupa floats above each flanking disciple. All three tablets originate from Buriram Province in northeastern Thailand, or the Northeastern Plateau, not far from Central Thailand. They date to

\(^{57}\) Chirapravati notes that the Northern Region tablets range from three to seventeen centimeters, demonstrating that these tablets represent the smallest size within this range. See Chirapravati, 28.
the seventh to ninth centuries CE, within the Mon-Dvaravati period. They each measure six inches tall, or about fifteen centimeters, representing a relatively much larger size than the Phra Kong tablets from Hariphunchai. As Chirapravati discusses, the earlier and thus local style of these tablets from Buriram is reflected in the representation of the Buddha with his hands in dhayanamudra as opposed to bhumisparsamudra. The Buddha’s face is also round and reflects the local Mon-Dvaravati style rather than Indian influence.

Somewhat similar to the representation of the Bodhi Tree on the Hariphunchai tablets, the Bodhi Tree on the Buriram tablets is depicted with thin branches and many naturalistically rendered leaves. There is no depiction of the Mahabodhi Temple and the canopy of Bodhi Tree leaves fills the upper third of the background. The leaves are roughly heart shaped with a clear midrib running through the center of each leaf, which continues into a long pointed end.

In examining votive tables from Bodh Gaya, Pagan and pre-Thai Mon kingdoms in Thailand, the influence of Pala style votive tablets on tablets from Burma and Thailand is clear. While these areas were already producing their own tablets, with their own preferred motifs and styles, the influence of the Buddha portrayed as the Maravijaya Buddha is marked and can still be seen in the Buddhist art of Burma and Thailand today.  

In viewing depictions of the sacred fig tree from before the advent of Buddhism, during the Indus Valley Civilization, through its use in the early Buddhist art of India and canonization under Pala rule in the eastern Gangetic region, which then spread to the art of mainland Southeast Asia, its clear that the depiction of the Bodhi Tree necessitates the naturalistic rendering of its iconic heart shaped leaves. Across these depictions, the overall appearance of

58. It is common to see the Buddha as the Maravijaya Buddha, or seated on a double lotus pedestal with his right hand in bhumisparsamudra, in Burma and Thailand, though not necessarily accompanied by the Mahabodhi Temple or the Bodhi Tree. However, the prevalence of the Buddha in this particular form is a direct influence of its popularity during the Pala period.
the tree, such as its branches, size or form, varies. However, in a variety of sculptural media that ranges in scale, such as seals, votive tablets, reliefs and sculpture in the round, special attention is given over to the carving the shape of the leaf, its midrib, veins and long pointed end. When exploring the ways in which the Bodhi Tree is represented today, outside the realm of Buddhist art in India and Southeast Asia, we see that the Bodhi Tree is indeed reduced to the portrayal of its iconic leaves alone.
Upon researching the historical depiction of the sacred fig tree and discovering the careful attention given to its identifying leaves, it seems a natural progression that the leaves alone are now predominantly used to represent the tree. As we have seen in numerous examples from the Indus Valley Civilization, early Buddhist art, and the art of some of India and mainland Southeast Asia’s greatest Buddhist kingdoms, the form of the overall tree varies greatly while the naturalistic depiction of the leaves remains constant, even on small scale and relatively mundane objects such as votive tablets.

We have also discovered the sacred fig tree’s myriad associations within the larger context of tree worship. Tree worship, a universal practice innate to human beings, was motivated by man’s reliance on trees in the ancient world, when man and nature were more inextricably linked. Trees provided humanity with shelter, food and the power of fire. Their apparent superhuman capabilities became associated with the divine. God or gods were believed to live within trees. Trees served as meeting places between heaven and earth and tree groves provided the earliest spaces for religious worship. The tree’s natural shape and often-unfathomable size inspired an organization of the cosmos, divided into the three parts of heaven, earth and below. The top of the tree reached up into the unattainable heavens, and its roots grew down into an unknowable underworld.
Many species of trees are regarded as sacred trees, as the dominant and native species of different places tend to become revered by the respective local population. In India and Southeast Asia, this meant the sacred fig tree. A large, spreading tree providing shade and bearing fruit, the sacred fig offered food and shelter in the painfully hot summers and soaking wet rainy seasons of the region (Figure 40). Beginning with the Indus Valley Civilization, which would serve as the foundation of India’s oldest religions of Vedism and subsequently Hinduism, the sacred fig tree was associated with the divine as memorialized on seals from the ancient cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro. Later, beliefs and practices surrounding the sacred fig tree were recorded in the literature of India’s early history, including the Vedas, Upanishads and Puranas.

Finally, with the birth of Buddhism in northern India, circa sixth to fourth centuries BCE, the sacred fig would become associated with the Buddha and his most significant life event, his enlightenment at the site of Bodh Gaya. It would possibly stand for the Buddha’s visual depiction in reliefs from the decorative railings at India’s early stupas at Sanchi and Bharhut in the early centuries CE. If the image of the Bodhi Tree was not meant to visually stand in his place, serving as an aniconic representation of the Buddha, the reliefs may instead depict worship of the Bodhi Tree at the site of Bodh Gaya, after the Buddha’s parinirvana, when sites related to his life became important places of pilgrimage. It is said that the Buddha himself equated worship of the Bodhi Tree to worship of himself and encouraged pilgrimage to significant sites.

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1. Parinirvana refers to the death of a person, or the end of a person’s physical body, who has reached enlightenment. As discussed in the introduction, nirvana is the breaking the cycle of samsara through attaining enlightenment. Parinirvana is the final extinction of one who has attained enlightenment and reached nirvana who will no longer be reborn and has ended their final life cycle.

2. Many references quote that the Buddha encouraged the worship of places tied to his significant life events, as well as the example King Asoka set during the third century BCE by visiting these places and encouraging pilgrimage. See Haberman, 102; Dehejia, 56; and Huntington, “Early Buddhist,” 404-5.

or tirthas. Subsequently, pilgrimage to the sites of his major life events, most importantly Bodh Gaya, was encouraged. These reliefs, if not aniconic, could thus portray contemporary worship of sites and objects associated with the Buddha and represent the important theme of pilgrimage for Buddhists during the early centuries CE, which remains an important tenet of Buddhism today.

Under Pala rule in the eastern Gangetic region (eighth to thirteenth centuries CE), the last Buddhist stronghold in Indian history, the site of Bodh Gaya became an international center, receiving traders, pilgrims and monks from across Asia. Utilizing their strategic position in a fertile plain along the Ganges River, which also happened to encompass the home of the Buddha, the Palas spread the image of their kingship via a standardized depiction of the Buddha that emphasized his famed site of enlightenment. The image of the Maravijaya Buddha, with right hand in bhumisparsamudra and seated on a double lotus pedestal below the Mahabodhi Temple and Bodhi Tree, was then transported to parts of mainland Southeast Asia. The Bodhi Tree came to signify the Buddha, the moment of his enlightenment, site of his enlightenment, his life and teachings. Thereafter, the Maravijaya Buddha persisted in the Buddhist art of mainland Southeast Asia, while Buddhism largely died out from its country of origin, following the fall of the Pala Empire and the growth of Hinduism and Islam in India.

Signs, Symbols and Their Cultural Myths

This thesis was first inspired by an assignment in a design history course at Northern Illinois University. Students were charged with the task of utilizing French literary critic, theorist and philosopher Roland Barthes’s (1915-1980) concept of myth to analyze a symbol of their...
choice. Partly inspired by Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1857-1913) semiotic approach to language, Barthes’s concept of myth added levels of interpretation beyond the singular level of linguistic analysis. On this first level of analysis, meaning is born between the signifier, an empty word or string of syllables, and the signified, the meaning, which then come together to form the sign (Figure 41). The combination of the signifier and signified become a new thing, the sign, because, separate of one another, the signifier and signified do not hold the same meaning and are not represented in the same way, respectively.

According to Barthes’s concept of myth, beyond the sign are extended levels of meaning. The sign is associated with another signified, which together become the signification. It is on this secondary level of meaning that language becomes myth. The more associations, or signifieds, any given sign has, the increasing levels of meaning it has. This opens up the meaning of signs and symbols that surround us in our everyday lives. Most importantly, the meaning of any given sign is historically rooted, dependent on time and place, or in other words, its historical, social and cultural context. Therefore, the meaning a sign once held could presently be lost and the signs of today require historical research in order to understand their manifold meanings, past and present.

Though Saussure focused on language, Barthes’s semiotic approach includes the study of images, which, like text, can also be “read.” Barthes most famously used his method to understand the cultural myths told through the popular culture of his own reality, twentieth century France. Examining the signs of his time, such as the cover of a popular magazine or an iconic glass of red wine, Barthes sought to discover the cultural “truths” promoted in everyday

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images. In this way, Barthes’s aim was political, social and cultural. In his examination of the images that surrounded him, he implied that these images necessitated analysis because they were speaking to viewers in ways that were not readily visible. The twentieth century French viewer saw the image of a glass of red wine, but what associations did it carry? What messages did it communicate?

In her book, *New Mythologies in Design and Culture: Reading Signs and Symbols in the Visual Landscape* (2016), Rebecca Houze utilizes this methodology to examine the everyday images taken for granted in the twenty-first century United States. As a design historian, Houze draws on her knowledge of industrial and product design since the nineteenth century and is most interested in the contemporary inheritor of this history—consumer products, which includes their design, branding and marketing. Writing essays on products and designs such as the Apple iPhone, McDonald’s golden arches or Chicago Blackhawk’s “noble savage” logo, Houze historicizes the allure of these consumer goods and the signs of our present day cultural context.

Inspired by Houze’s exploration of the everyday symbols that fill our contemporary lives, I aim to examine in the same way one symbol in particular, the Bodhi leaf. In the context of its historical depiction and use, as previously surveyed in this thesis, how does the Bodhi leaf appear today and what does it mean? I will first look to its use in the West, specifically the United States, but was also encouraged to look at present day Thailand. Thai was my first Asian research language and early Buddhist art in Thailand has been my focus in the study of Buddhist art in South and Southeast Asia. Thailand provides a proper comparison against the United States, as the former is a historically Buddhist nation while the later is not. In looking at the Bodhi leaf symbol in the contemporary United States and Thailand, we can compare its depiction

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and meaning between ancient and contemporary, east and west and Buddhist and non-Buddhist contexts.

Symbol of the Bodhi Leaf in the United States

Earlier in this thesis, I discussed the commercialization of the symbol and mythology of the Tree of Life. The concept and image of the Tree of Life has transferred from religion to popular culture in the form of art, film and literature. Certain aspects of Buddhism, from Zen to the symbol of the Bodhi Tree, have similarly found popularity in American culture. From its birthplace of India and subsequent spread to Southeast and East Asia, Buddhism has succeeded to reach the United States as well.

One of the most common topics when researching Buddhism in the United States is the growth in popularity of Zen Buddhism in the 1950s and 60s, particularly Japanese Zen. In an atmosphere of fear and terrorism, as a result of McCarthyism and the Cold War, individuals who associated with the youth counterculture sought new answers outside of their home religions. Beat poets such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder discovered a sense of freedom in the teachings of Zen Buddhism, and its influence on their writing helped to spread the concept of the religion.

This sense of relative freedom seems to stem from what Westerners regard as a basic difference between Buddhism and Western religions. For some, Buddhism is better described as a lifestyle or philosophy, as opposed to an institutionalized religion. In the introduction to her

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7. Zen Buddhism is a sect within the Mahayana Buddhist tradition that originated in China and spread to parts of Vietnam, Korea and Japan. Zen Buddhism, particularly Japanese Zen, became popular in the United States through the writings of several Japanese Zen teachers in the early twentieth century, its publicity through its influence on Beat poets in the 1950s and the opening of Zen centers in California in the 1960s.

to the riddle of the Western attraction to Zen Buddhism:

> Zen, although considered a religion by its followers, has no sacred scriptures whose words are law; no fixed canon; no rigid dogma; no Savior or Divine Being through whose favor or intercession one's eventual salvation is assured. The absence of attributes common to all other religious systems lends Zen a certain air of freedom to which many modern people respond. (5)

While descriptions like these romanticize Buddhism, regarding it as somehow different from other world religions, in practice it shares many similarities with formal religion. The different schools of Buddhism each have their own canon, a body of literature, there is a formal religious community, the *sangha* or monastic community, that follow certain rules and set an example for the laity, there are shared practices, such as pilgrimage or worship of a home shrine, and images are certainly used as objects of devotion, or in the least as reminders or points of focus.

Further, similar to other religions, the literature and doctrine of Buddhism can vary greatly from its lived experience. Scholars who study Buddhist literature often find contradictions in everyday life. Buddhist studies scholar Gregory Schopen challenged many of the widely assumed Buddhist ideals by reexamining long accepted interpretations of ancient Buddhist texts and inscriptions. His new and original translations overturned many of the understanding, regarding monks, the lay community, relics, and other laws and practices, that were previously read in Buddhist literature and epigraphy.10

Similarly, in his history of Theravada Buddhism, anthropologist and Buddhist studies scholar Charles Keyes related the Theravada Buddhist ideal to real life, reminding students of the

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possible gap between text and experience. The beliefs and philosophies of Theravada Buddhism would ideally require an ascetic lifestyle, as well as the cycling through of many lifetimes, in order to reach enlightenment, similar to the path of the Buddha. However, for the average person, this way is unrealistic and the goal unattainable. Many people have jobs, families or various obligations that perhaps prevents them from taking on entirely the life of a monk or nun.

Instead, what Buddhism can provide is a moral code to live by and an ideal to strive toward. The core tenets of Buddhism, such as a belief in *samsara* and the law of karma, or that every action has a consequence whether good or bad, remind individuals that no matter their current situation, they have the ability to change it through their actions. These acts namely work toward the goal of reducing life’s suffering, which was the ultimate goal of the Buddhist teachings. According to the law of karma, anyone can perform small deeds—often those that do not require certain wealth—in order to earn good merit, better their karma, and be born into a better next life. Further, bad karma earned in a past life at least offers an explanation for life’s pain or seemingly unpredictable events. In this way, a version of doctrinal Buddhism can be applied to everyday life.

Beyond the popularity of Zen Buddhism, other Eastern practices, such as yoga, acupuncture and meditation, have subsequently taken off in the United States. Associated objects and symbols, such as incense, singing bowls, images of the Buddha and even the symbol of the

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12. Anyone can also join a monastery for a limited amount of days, weeks or years. It is a kind of rite of passage for young girls and boys to ordain and join the monastery for at least a few days in both Thailand and Burma. Having a son ordain as a monk is worth so much good merit that it is said to earn the mother instant enlightenment, as told to me by Dr. Tharaphi Than, my Burmese professor and a Theravada Buddhist from Burma.
Bodhi Tree, have naturally accompanied these practices. Specifically, the myth and symbol of the Bodhi Tree can be found in the logos and promotion of several types of American businesses, including those related to food, books, gifts, and health and wellness. Each of these examples ranges in their apparent knowledge of the history and associated meanings of the Bodhi Tree, but compare in their use of the Bodhi Tree’s iconic leaves to represent the tree.

Though the possible examples of American business logos utilizing the symbol of the Bodhi leaf are many, I will discuss only a few here. The selection is arbitrary, but represents a range of the depiction of the symbol, as well as varied messages it communicates. The first example comes from the Los Angeles-based Bodhi Tree Bookstore. The history of the store is well documented on the company’s website and provides insight to the use of the symbol in both its logo and namesake.14

The store was originally opened on Melrose Avenue in 1970, specifically on July 10 at 2:00 pm, a date and time that were auspiciously chosen by an astrologer.15 It is described as a metaphysical bookstore, selling “Eastern and Western religious and mystical literature.”16 The historical context during which the store was open is also referenced, specifically the “sweeping challenges to society brought about by the Beat Generation, the Vietnam war, political assassinations, psychedelics, an innovative dynamic West-coast folk-rock music, flower children, hippies, and the Beatles.” It also states that Stan Madson and Phil Thompson, co-owners and ex-aerospace engineers, were motivated to open the Bodhi Tree Bookstore in order

14. “A Page from our History,” Bodhi Tree, accessed March 6, 2019, https://visit.bodhitree.com/about-bodhi-tree/. I will reference two different versions of the store’s history as published on their website. In spring 2018 Steffie Nelson published the history as an article on the store website. The current history, as of March 2019, has no known author. The general history is the same, though some of the details included in each history vary.
16. “A Page from our History.”
to spread spiritual knowledge. Madson and Thompson wanted to create a space and community where books on spirituality were easily accessible, which they felt had not previously existed.¹⁷

The Melrose store eventually closed in 2012, due to increasing rent prices¹⁸ and parking laws that made it more difficult to visit the store,¹⁹ but has continued as an online iteration with new owners, consulted by Madson and Thompson. Currently, the Bodhi Tree Bookstore website sells books and products related to spiritual well being. The company also has an online Amazon store that sells natural and plant-based goods that are specifically used for cleansing the home, including candles, palo santo and sage. Further, the new ownership has stated that they intend to open a new storefront, once a suitable location is found, and possibly expand internationally.²⁰

Though the Bodhi Tree Bookstore’s original logo is unclear,²¹ the meaning of its namesake is explicitly explained in the store’s online documentation of its history. It relates the connection of the Bodhi Tree to the Buddha and his moment of enlightenment, the “religious iconography” of its “heart-shaped leaves,”²² and features a photo of Bodhi leaves as the banner image at the top of the webpage (Figure 42). Further, the store had its own Bodhi Tree planted out front, gifted by a neighborhood resident.²³

From a photo in a 2012 LA Weekly article on the store’s closing, the old logo appears to be a black and white Bodhi Tree symbol, recognizable by its iconic leaves, which is then surrounded by two concentric rings of Bodhi leaves (Figure 43). Today, the website has a new

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¹⁷. Ibid.
¹⁹. “A Page from our History”
²¹. In March 2018 during my research for this thesis, the Bodhi Tree Bookstore did not have a logo on its webpage and the store was no longer extant. An LA Weekly article on the store has a photo of the storefront that possibly shows the logo in 2012. See footnote 17.
²³. Ibid.
logo that is reduced to the simple depiction of a single Bodhi leaf (Figure 44). Its style is slightly abstract; the leaf is presented strictly upright and symmetrical with the long pointed end at the top and a short stem at the bottom. The iconic heart shape of the leaf forms a bold outline against a white background and is filled with a violet color that borders navy and purple. It is further accented, and made slightly more naturalistic, by a contrasting midrib in white.

The logo is not applied in a standard way across both the Bodhi Tree Bookstore and Bodhi Tree Amazon websites, only appearing on certain pages. A version of the logo in gold is also used on the “Signature Bodhi” scented candle sold in the Amazon store (Figure 45). One of four scents, the “Signature Bodhi” was made in memory of the aroma of the original Melrose store.24 The Bodhi scented candle is the only one that features the Bodhi leaf logo, which is etched onto the candle’s glass container. The other scents of “Frankincense,” “Cedarwood” and “Nag Champa” each have their own design. The logo, which is also on a temporary tattoo included with the candle, is described as such on the Amazon website:

SACRED SYMBOL & TEMPORARY TATTOO: A gold Bodhi Tree leaf adorns the glass candle vessel, representing the ancient symbol of rebirth. The heart-shaped leaf links it to self-realization and the unity of consciousness. The enclosed matching temporary tattoo is an offering to help you bring the meaning of the candle and symbol to your day.25

As seen in the description, the message of the logo as presented on Amazon is less connected to the historical meaning of the Bodhi Tree and its leaves, than as explained on the Bodhi Tree Bookstore website. There, the Buddha’s enlightenment and the translation of the word bodhi as enlightenment are clearly explained. Here, the Bodhi leaf symbol is now described as a symbol of rebirth, which is not necessarily linked with the Buddha’s enlightenment, as his enlightenment


25. Ibid.
essentially signaled the end of the cycle of rebirth. They also use the words “self-realization” and “consciousness,” which do relate to the concept of enlightenment, though they do not reference enlightenment specifically. In addition to the candle, the Bodhi leaf logo is stitched onto bags used to enclose some of the products sold on the Bodhi Tree Bookstore merchandise page (Figure 46).

The second example also comes from Southern California. Bodhi Leaf Coffee Traders is a self-described small-scale coffee importer, roaster and café. They currently have six shops located within Orange County, California with two more locations opening soon. The company sources coffee beans from all over the world, which are then roasted, ground, brewed and served to customers in the café. In addition to the beverages served in store, customers can buy roasted or unroasted, also called green, coffee. And in order to enjoy the coffee at home, the store also sells roasting and brewing equipment. Further, clothing, accessories, drink ware and educational classes are all for sale on the company website.

Similar to the Bodhi Tree Bookstore logo, the Bodhi Leaf Coffee Roasters logo features a single Bodhi leaf, which is encompassed within a circle (Figure 47). Less abstract and more naturalistic, the leaf curves to the left. Its veins, midrib and heart shape are all clearly illustrated. A bold line traces the edges of the leaf, emphasizing its iconic shape. Between the logo and its various iterations as featured on merchandise including coffee bags, mugs, hats, t-shirts and jackets, it appears in several color ways using orange, white, gray, and army green (Figures 48-50). In the original logo, the leaf is colored green with a white midrib, white veins and a strong outline in brown, lending a natural quality to the illustration. When featured on products, the

design is usually in monotone or two-tone on a contrasting background, giving it a more graphic appearance.

The company’s reasoning behind the Bodhi leaf logo is explained on their website and reads:

The Bodhi Leaf has long been a symbol for peace, happiness, prosperity, longevity and good luck. It is a reminder of the ultimate potential that lies within us all. We use this philosophy to continually build and strengthen relationships with coffee farmers and their families all over the world. These relationships allow us to provide high-end specialty coffee directly from their farms to your cup.27

Distant from the explanation given by the Bodhi Tree Bookstore, this description lacks any mention of the Buddha or enlightenment. Further, it vaguely states that the symbol has “long been” representative of “peace, happiness, prosperity, longevity and good luck.” For how long has the symbol held this meaning? From where does the symbol, or its meaning, originate? Further, associations of peace, happiness, prosperity, longevity and good luck have nowhere been referenced in this paper, and thus are not present in the history of the Bodhi Tree. Instead, these concepts more accurately align with Eastern, perhaps specifically Chinese, philosophy rather than Indian or Southeast Asian.

Despite the disconnected explanation given, the company seems to aim to use the symbol in a positive way, particularly in relation to their customer service and company philosophy. Specifically, they believe that the Bodhi leaf symbolizes “the ultimate potential that lies within us all,” which can be used to “continually build and strengthen relationships.” For Bodhi Leaf Coffee Traders, they are referring to relationships between the company, its coffee farmers and customers.

The final example comes from Bodhi Thai Bistro, a Thai food restaurant with two locations near Chicago, Illinois. The first location was opened in 2008 in Berwyn, a city in Cook County outside the city of Chicago, and a second location was later opened in Pilsen, a neighborhood in the Lower West Side of Chicago. The restaurant specializes in “street style Thai” and “down home cooking.”

By street food, the restaurant means the “the Thai freestyle method which derives from the locals in small neighborhoods that wanted to make a living cooking in Thailand.” This method is comprised of recipes that were passed through generations, ingredients purchased from local markets and improvisation on behalf of each vendor that strived to make traditional dishes with a personal flair. The restaurant explains that this style of cooking and entrepreneurship was made for and supported by the local community, which inspired the restaurant’s mission “to introduce Thai street style cooking, its health benefits and bold flavors, to the locals and communities around” it.

In contrast to the two previous examples, the Bodhi Thai Bistro uses the word “bodhi” itself as its logo, which appears in a stylized font with leaves growing from each of the letters (Figure 51). While it relates to the other two logos in that it utilizes the Bodhi Tree’s leaves, as opposed to the entire tree, to signal the Bodhi Tree, it differs in that the leaves are not entirely naturalistic. Thus, they leaves are not necessarily recognizable as Bodhi Tree leaves and the tree species is not identifiable without the inclusion of the word “bodhi” in the logo itself. However, in addition to the logo, the website utilizes banner images in a light green color that feature

30. Ibid.
naturalistic illustrations of the iconic Bodhi leaf, with its veins, midrib, long pointed end and heart shape. The leaves are colored either white and green or dark gray and green (Figure 52).

It is interesting to name a Thai restaurant after the Bodhi Tree because the Bodhi Tree does not specifically reference Thailand, as we have seen in surveying the history of the tree and its visual depiction. Instead, it signals Buddhism, particularly the Buddha and his moment and site of enlightenment, and perhaps the many countries where the religion has spread. Therefore, naming a restaurant Bodhi would not tell the customer anything about the type of food served there, other than that it is possibly Asian. Thailand is of course one of the Asian countries strongly associated with Buddhism, but again one of many.

However, the use of the term bodhi could be less so meant to reference the religion in general, but more specifically the Bodhi Tree and its aid in the spread of Buddhism. As previously discussed, saplings of the Bodhi Tree are given as gifts at various institutions and Buddhist centers around the world, its fallen leaves are taken home as souvenirs by followers, and its image on small votive tablets helped in spreading the Buddhist teachings, thus creating a shared Buddhist “imaginaire” across borderlines and bodies of water. In this way, the Bodhi leaf can signal community, similar to the sense of community Bodhi Thai Bistro hopes to connect through food, Bodhi Leaf Coffee Roasters fosters through coffee and the Bodhi Tree Bookstore creates through access to spiritual knowledge.

Symbol of the Bodhi Leaf in Thailand

In addition to my own context of the United States, I was interested to explore the ways in which the Bodhi leaf symbol is used in mainland Southeast Asia today, specifically in Thailand where Buddhism remains the predominant religion. Through a Google search of the
words “brand bodhi leaf” in Thai (ตราใบโพธิ traa bai pho), many companies utilizing the Bodhi leaf as part of their logo were found.

Applied in perhaps a more standard way than in the United States, the Bodhi leaf as used in Thai logos is presented in a primarily naturalistic manner. Further, only the leaves of the tree are represented—no parts of the tree or a version of the tree with its leaves is shown. Similar to this more limited mode of depiction, the types of companies and products that use the Bodhi leaf in their logos are likewise limited. While in the United States we examined the Bodhi leaf attached to rather arbitrary spaces such as coffee shops, gift stores, and restaurants, not to mention a number of health and wellness entrepreneurs and businesses not discussed here, in Thailand the Bodhi leaf symbol seems to be predominantly associated with companies selling natural or traditional products. From a selection of just six items, we can categorize the goods branded with the Bodhi leaf into three types: natural or traditional medicine, agricultural and food products, and traditional clothing.

The first product is Bodhi Leaf Brand green medicine (ยาเขียวตราใบโพธิ yaa khiaw traa bai pho). It comes in a package decorated with Thai and Chinese text and the only graphic is a naturalistically rendered Bodhi leaf, drawn in a simple outline of its iconic shape, mid rib, veins and long pointed end (Figure 53). Green medicine is regarded as ancient holistic medicine in Thailand, the type that has been used by one’s parents, grandparents, and preceding generations. Though the brand is named Bodhi Leaf and the symbol appears on the package, the medicine itself is not made from Bodhi leaves. Instead, it is made of other natural products, including leaves from other types of trees, as well as roots and other plants. The concept of the medicine

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31. There is no standard way to transliterate Thai into English. I have simply transliterated the Thai into English based on my experience as a native English speaker learning Thai.
seems related to Chinese medicine, in that it is described as having cooling properties and is thus meant to treat excessive heat in the body. Excessive heat could show as fever or symptoms of “hot” skin, such as rash and other irritations. The medicine comes in small pellets, which are then dissolved in water and consumed to relieve these symptoms.

The second product is another type of traditional medicine. Photiwat Brand green medicine comes in the form of balms and oils and is artificially colored bright green. A stylized version of the Bodhi leaf symbol appears on its bottles in two shades of green, and the Thai letters ผ (pha) and ว (wa) stand at the center of the leaf, which reference the brand name Photiwat (Figures 54 and 55). The medicine is primarily made of menthol and is used to relieve insect bites, headaches and sore muscles, similar to related products like Bengay, Icy Hot or Tiger Balm.

The second category of products includes those related to food and agriculture. Figure 56 shows a pink bag of Nine Bodhi Leaves (เก๋อใบโพธิ กew bai pho) brand Jasmine rice. The bag is decorated with a large logo front and center, along with a photograph of the cooked rice and other dishes. The green and white logo is the shape of one large Bodhi leaf with nine smaller Bodhi leaves inside. The outline of each leaf is wavy and the green leaves are made more naturalistic with inclusion of the midrib and veins drawn in white.

Figure 57 shows packages of Bodhi Leaf Brand (ตราใบโพธิ traa bai pho) rice noodles. The logo, located at the top right side of the bag, is a single Bodhi leaf drawn in bright blue outline on a white background. Its depiction is very similar to the leaves from the Nine Bodhi Leaves logo with many veins that lend texture to the leaf. The last example, Figure 58, is a logo from a brand
of fertilizer. Similar to the Nine Bodhi Leaves logo, the Bodhi leaf is colored green with a white midrib and white veins.

These three examples relate in their connection to agriculture in Thailand, as well as their naturalistic rendering of the Bodhi leaf as their logo. Rice is Thailand’s staple crop. The word for rice in Thai, ข้าว (khaaw), is also used for the word “meal,” because food is only considered a meal when accompanied with rice, otherwise it is referred to as a snack. Fertilizer would of course be used to aid in the growing of crops, such as rice.

The final category of Thai products that utilize the Bodhi leaf in their branding are items of traditional clothing. Figure 59 displays a large logo in the packaging of a monk’s robe. The brand is called Pair of Bodhi Leaves (ใบโพธิคู่ bai pho khuu) and like the name, the logo illustrates a pair of Bodhi leaves. The leaves are slightly stylized, stiffly fanning out from one another. Similar to Thai examples discussed thus far, the leaves are recognizable by their iconic shape, midrib and veins. The leaves are colored in a golden yellow that stands out against a bright red background. The rectangular insert on which the logo is printed is further accented by a decorative floral border.

Figure 60 shows three traditional women’s skirts, each with a different design. They appear to come from the same brand as the monk’s robe, Pair of Bodhi Leaves. A traditional Thai women’s skirt is essentially one wide piece of fabric that is stepped into and secured by wrapping tightly around the waist. Before Westernization, this type of skirt would have been regularly worn by Thai women. Today, most Thais dress in Western clothes, such as pants and a t-shirt, but many wear traditional clothing, such as these long skirts, for special or formal events. The logo on the packing of the skirts is slightly different than that of the monk’s robe. It
similarly displays a pair of Bodhi leaves that diverge from one another, but they appear less stylized and more naturalistic. The leaves are a natural green color and their outline is more irregular and organic compared with leaves from the monk’s robe logo.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

From a brief survey of the types of products that use the Bodhi leaf symbol in their branding, it is interesting to note the limited range in the types of products in Thailand compared to the wide variety in the United States. While the products utilizing the Bodhi leaf symbol in Thailand are related to natural and traditional products, all kinds of businesses in the United States use the Bodhi leaf symbol as part of their logo and namesake. Though definitely popular among businesses within the health and wellness industry, the symbol is also used in the promotion of a mix of commercial businesses hoping to promote a positive outlook, particularly a sense of community between the business and its vendors and customers.

Each of the American businesses discussed here, Bodhi Tree Bookstore, Bodhi Leaf Coffee Traders and Bodhi Thai Bistro, were also aiming to share knowledge with and educate the public, in addition to building and creating community. Bodhi Tree Bookstore wanted to create a space and venue for the spiritually-minded by giving the public access to books on spirituality and hosting talks with leaders of the field. Bodhi Leaf Coffee Traders emphasized the connection between coffee farmer and coffee drinker, serving as liaison between the two. The store sold roasting, grinding and brewing equipment so that customers could better understand the process of coffee making for themselves. Bodhi Thai Bistro wanted to share the flavors and cooking style of Thai street food, as inspired by local cooks in Thailand. Through exposure to a
different type of food, the restaurant sought to bring together the surrounding Chicago community. Though perhaps a distant connection, the sense of community reflected by these uses of the Bodhi leaf symbol is not unlike the Pan-Buddhist community that is connected across the world through the Bodhi Tree, including its saplings, leaves and image.

In contrast, Thai brands utilizing the Bodhi leaf symbol seem to be more purposefully related to nature and tradition, perhaps reflecting more specifically the ancient associations of the sacred fig tree and sacred trees in general, as discussed earlier in this thesis. Revered for its ability to provide shelter and food, the sacred fig tree in India became associated with the divine, supernatural power and medicinal or healing properties.

In analyzing the visual depiction of the Bodhi Tree and its leaves from its earliest depiction to the present day, in relation to its historical and cultural context, we have viewed its varied representation. Ranging in form, the Bodhi Tree can appear as a whole tree, a few of its branches or leaves, or a single leaf. Regardless of these various forms, the Bodhi Tree is identifiable by its iconic heart-shaped leaves alone. While at times wavering between stylization and naturalism, the natural and iconic elements of the leaves, their midrib, veins, long pointed end and heart shape, are often carefully delineated on objects and images, from small terracotta seals of the Indus Valley Civilization to contemporary business logos in the United States and Thailand.

Further, through the comparison of the symbol’s meaning between its historical context and the present day, as well as its place within the larger context of sacred trees, the meaning of the Bodhi Tree broadens from the Buddha and his enlightenment. Linked with the divine, healing, protection, pilgrimage, the spread of Buddhism and community, the symbol of the Bodhi Tree conveys manifold meaning.


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FIGURES
Figure 1. Leaves of the sacred fig tree. The tree is also referred to as the Bodhi Tree, pipal tree, Asvattha, Bo Tree, and ficus religosa. Creative Commons. Attribution Share Alike 3.0 Unported license. Attributed to Marshman at the English Wikipedia.

Figure 2. Map of modern day Southeast Asia. Map data ©2019 Google.
Figure 3. Votive plaque with figure of the Buddha, temple at Bodhgaya and stupas. 800s, India, Bihar, Bodhgaya, Terracotta, H.15.2 cm (6 in.). Cleveland Museum of Art. Gift of Michael De Havenon 1985.219. Creative Commons (CC0 1.0).

Figure 4. Three votive objects illustrating the Buddha in bhūmisparśamudrā from Lamphun Province. Haripunchai period, eleventh century, terracotta, h. 3 cm. Therm Mitem Collection. Chirapravati’s photo. Indicative of square-based arch-topped type, From Chirapravati 1997, 3 with permission from the author.
Figure 5. Dharmacakra. Mon-Dvaravati period, seventh to eleventh centuries CE, Sri Thep, Sri Thep District, Patachbun Province, Thailand, sandstone. Author’s photograph.

Figure 6. Relief depicting cakravartin or universal ruler. Illustrates dharmacakrastambha, or the dharmacakra erected onto a pillar, on the upper left of the image. Amaravathi village, Guntur District, Andra Pradesh, India. Guimet Museum, Paris. Creative Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0).
Figure 7. Deer. Mon-Dvaravati period, circa eighth century, Thailand, sandstone. 14 7/8 x 15 ¾ x 5 7/8 in. (37.78 x 40 x 14.92 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Lenart (M.81.157.1). Public domain.
Figure 8. Standing Buddha (double vitarkamudra). Mon-Dvaravati period, eight to ninth century, Thailand (Nakhon Pathom Province), bronze with traces of gilt. H. 27 in. (68.6 cm); W. 10 1/4 in. (26 cm); D. 5 3/8 in. (13.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 59.149. Fletcher Fund, 1959. Public domain.
Figure 9. Buddha flanked by figures standing on a mythical creature. Mon-Dvaravati period, eight to ninth century, Thailand, schist. 31 x 18 ½ x 9 in. (78.7 x 47 x 22.9 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Gift of Mr and Mrs. Harry Lenart (M.77.83). Public domain.
Figure 10. Map of the four regions of Thailand indicated in gray-blocked text.
Map data ©2019 Google.
Figure 11. Small storage jar painted with sacred fig tree leaves. Early Harappan period, 2600-2550 BCE, after Samzun 1992, fig. 29.4, no. 2. From Kenoyer 1994, Fig. 6.4, with permission from the author.

Figure 12. Steatite seal with deity figure standing within sacred fig tree, Mohenjodaro. Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1900 BCE). From Kenoyer 1994, Fig. 6.1, with permission from the author.

Figure 13. Steatite seal with deity figure standing within sacred fig tree, Harappa. Indus Valley Civilization (2600-1900 BCE). From Kenoyer 1994, Fig. 6.5, with permission from the author.
Figure 14. A well in the shape of a sacred fig tree leaf that is part of a bathing platform. Found during construction at Mohenjo-daro and is now installed at the Mohenjo-daro site museum. Accessed February 16, 2019 https://www.harappa.com/blog/pipal-leaves-revisited, with the Webmaster’s permission.

Figure 15. The impression of a sacred fig tree leaf found in the upper levels of a drain in Harappa with a scale and modern sacred fig tree leaf for comparison. Accessed February 16, 2019 https://www.harappa.com/blog/pipal-leaves-revisited, with the Webmaster’s permission.

Figure 18. Sculptural fragment depicting Buddha’s enlightenment. Gandhara, Kushana period, second to third century CE. Schist. Smithsonian, Freer Gallery of Art.

Figure 19. Adoration of the Bodhi Tree, Stupa 1, Sanchi, India. Ca. 1st century CE. Relief carving. ARTstor.

Figure 20. Worship of the Bodhi Tree and diamond throne. Stupa vedika (railing), Bharhut, India, circa 100 BCE. Purple sandstone, bas relief. ARTstor.
Figure 21. Maravijaya Buddha. Htilominlo Temple, Pagan period, Pagan, Burma. Author’s photograph.
Figure 22. Detail, Maravijaya Buddha. Htilominlo Temple, Pagan period, Pagan, Burma. Author’s photograph.
Figure 23. Buddha calling the earth to witness. 1000-1100s, northern India, Bihar, eleventh to twelfth century. H. 8.2 x W. 6.1 cm (3 3/16 x 2 3/8 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Andrew R. and Martha Holden Jennings Fund. 1965.27. Public domain (CC0).
Figure 24. Buddha calling on earth to witness. 800s, Northeastern India, Bihar, Tetravan, Pala Period (750-1197). Chloritic schist; H. 94 cm (37 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Dudley P. Allen Fund 1935.146. Public domain (CC0).
Figure 25. Detail, Buddha Calling on Earth to Witness, 800s. Northeastern India, Bihar, Tetravan, Pala Period (750-1197). Chloritic schist; H. 94 cm (37 in.). The Cleveland Museum of Art, Dudley P. Allen Fund 1935.146. Public domain (CC0).
Figure 26. Buddhist votive tablet. Bihar, India or Tibet, eleventh century, copper alloy. H. 3 ¾ x W. 3 5/16 x D. ¾ in. (9.53 x 8.41. 1.91 cm). Walters Art Museum 54.30. Creative Commons (CC0 1.0).
Figure 27. Detail, votive plaque with figure of the Buddha, temple at Bodhgaya and stupas. 800s, India, Bihar, Bodhgaya, Terracotta, H.15.2 cm (6 in.). Cleveland Museum of Art. Gift of Michael De Havenon 1985.219. Creative Commons (CC0 1.0).
Figure 28. Mahabodhi Temple with Bodhi Tree located at the back. Bodh Gaya, Bihar, India. Creative Commons (CC BY-SA 2.5).
Figure 29. Maravijaya Buddha with flanking disciples. Pagan, Burma, Pagan period. Burma Art Collection, Northern Illinois University. BC 87.1.38. Author’s photograph.
Figure 30. Maravijaya Buddha with flanking disciples, Pagan period, Pagan, Burma. Burma Art Collection, Northern Illinois University. BC 88.2.1. Author’s photograph.
Figure 31. Maravijaya Buddha with flanking disciples, Pagan period, Pagan, Burma. Burma Art Collection, Northern Illinois University. BC 87.1.37. Author’s photograph.
Figure 32. Maravijaya Buddha with flanking disciples, Pyu period, circa seventh to eighth century, terracotta. Burma Art Collection, Northern Illinois University. BC 2004.1.2. Gift of Barbara Moore, 2004. Author’s photograph.

Figure 33. Maravijaya Buddha. Pagan, Burma, Pagan period, terracotta. Burma Art Collection, Northern Illinois University. BC 2011.01.03. Author’s photograph.
Figure 34. Maravijaya Buddha with flanking stupas. Pagan, Burma, Pagan period, terracotta. Burma Art Collection, Northern Illinois University. BC 2011.01.01. Author’s photograph.

Figure 35. Maravijaya Buddha triad. Pagan, Burma, Pagan period, terracotta. Burma Art Collection, Northern Illinois University. BC 96.3.02. Author’s photograph.
Figure 36. Comparison between details of the Bodhi Tree from Figures 17 (left) and 26 (right).
Figure 37. Buddha seated under the Bodhi Tree. Mon-Dvaravati period, 7th–9th century, Thailand (Buriram province, probably Prakhon Chai), terracotta with traces of red lacquer(?). H. 6 1/2 in. (16.5 cm); W. 3 5/8 in. (9.2 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, gifts of friends of Jim Thompson, in his memory, 1991. 1991.243. Public domain (CC0 1.0).

Figure 38. Buddha seated under the Bodhi Tree. Mon-Dvaravati period, 7th–9th century, Thailand (Buriram province [?]), terracotta. H. 6 1/2 in. (16.5 cm); W. 3 5/8 in. (9.2 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, fund from various donors, 1990. 1997.131. Public domain (CC0 1.0).

Figure 39. Buddha seated under the Bodhi Tree. 8th–9th century, Thailand (Buriram province, Prakhon Chai), terracotta. H. 6 in. (15.3 cm); W. 3 9/16 in. (9.1 cm); D. 7/8 in. (2.2 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Cynthia Hazen Polsky, 1984. 1984.491.3. Public domain (CC0 1.0).
Figure 40. A sacred fig tree in Deeksha Bhoomi, Nagpur, Mahashtrastra that demonstrates the wide spread of the tree, able to provide shelter. Creative Commons.


Figure 43. Bodhi Tree Bookstore logo from January 2012. Photograph by Gendy Alimurung. https://www.laweekly.com/arts/bodhi-tree-bookstores-final-hours-2373470

Figure 44. Bodhi Tree Bookstore logo, as of March 2019. http://www.amymswift.com/bodhi-tree-1/
Figure 45. Bodhi Tree Bookstore bodhi leaf logo in gold on their Signature Bodhi scented candle, sold in the Bodhi Tree Amazon store. https://www.amazon.com/BODHI-TREE-Hand-Poured-Signature-Scented-All-Natural/dp/B0789KLZBC

Figure 46. Bodhi Tree Bookstore Bodhi leaf logo stitched onto a bag as part of their Ritual Box for Surrendering and Releasing, available on the Bodhi Tree Bookstore website. https://bodhitree.com/product/mercantile/ritual-box-for-surrendering-releasing/?adTribesID=00b421afc95f5f5240ff2e95f67d1d13%7C6ftribes%7C183534&utm_source=Custom%20Feed&utm_campaign=Exclusive_BodhiTree&utm_medium=cpc&utm_term=183534&gclid=Cj0KCQjwyoHlBRCNARIchj6DLsJdZnAxP7wibosr26KXwjwGYq04MCq-pGgsRVE7yBWRZiVPZ4rAaAl-BEALw_wcB

Figures 48-50. (From top left then clockwise) Bodhi Leaf Coffee Traders logo on their diner mug, hat and hoodie jacket available for purchase on their website. https://www.bodhileafcoffee.com/, with permission from the company.
Figure 51. Bodhi Thai Bistro logo.
https://www.bodhithaichicago.com/

Figure 52. Top and bottom banner images from Contact page on Bodhi Thai Bistro website.
https://www.bodhithaichicago.com/contact-1
Figure 53. Bodhi Leaf Brand green medicine. 
https://news.buriramworld.com

Figure 54. Photiwat brand medicinal balm. 
http://www.photiwat.com/product/

Figure 55. Photiwat brand medicinal oil. 
http://www.photiwat.com/product/
Figure 56. Nine Bodhi Leaves brand jasmine rice.
https://www.google.com/search?q=%E0%B8%8A%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%9A%E0%B8%95%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%99&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiD4Paa_bnhAhWB64MKHeGWC

Figure 57. Bodhi Leaf Brand rice noodles.
https://www.google.com/search?q=%E0%B8%8A%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%9A%E0%B8%95%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%99&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiD4Paa_bnhAhWB64MKHeGWC

Figure 58. A Bodhi leaf logo from a brand of fertilizer.
https://www.google.com/search?q=%E0%B8%8A%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%9A%E0%B8%95%E0%B9%89%E0%B8%B2%E0%B8%99&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiD4Paa_bnhAhWB64MKHeGWC
Figure 59. Pair of Bodhi Leaves brand monk’s robe. https://www.g-tarad.com/product/2370/ผ้าห่มพระ-ขนาด-60x80quot-ตราใบโพธิคู่

Figure 60. Pair of Bodhi Leaves brand traditional women’s skirt. http://www.jjgiftshops.com/store/product/view/ผ้าถุงตราใบโพธิคู่_-ขนาด_-42x_-หลา-20996815-th.html