

# How Does the Buddha Recognize a Forest?

*Ho-duck Kang & Sung-hyun Shin*

*We understand trees as a kind of symbol in the buddhist religion. For example, the Bodhi tree is a symbol of Buddha's enlightenment. There are many examples in relation to forests and Buddha. The Buddha lived in the forest for most of his life and his meaningful momentum was achieved near forest. He was born beneath the Bodhi tree in Lumbinī, then later left for the forest to practice asceticism, and finally achieved enlightenment. A place where he used to preach sermons was in Migadāya, which was a most beautiful green forest and his death(parinirvāṇa) also took place in the Kusinagara forest. His disciples also spent a great deal of time in the forest throughout their lives.*

*Many Buddhist scriptures make reference to forests. Buddha mentioned that trees and forests should be conserved in a sustainable manner because they are part of human life and told his disciples "don't cut down a tree or a weed in its natural environment" .*

*In a scientific manner, forests have significant value and benefits for human-beings. It is well known that trees produce sugars, filter oxygen and phytoncide chemicals by using carbon dioxide and water via photosynthesis. In addition, forests are essential for avoiding direct sunlight under hot and humid conditions in countries such as India. The Buddha realized that forests play an important role in our lives as shown in the Buddhist scriptures.*

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## **I . Introduction**

A forest gives us psychological and mental relief. The forest also offers shade in which we can avoid the heat, and firewood with which we can win the cold. In addition, it gives us various fruits and acts as a shelter to protect us when wild animals threaten to attack. As long as man has lived on the earth, he has made an indispensable and coexistent relationship with forests. Man depends on them. In ancient times, a tree was considered as the greatest of all living things, growing higher than everything. Ancient people gave religious value and meaning to all trees. The worship of trees helped to settle down man's heart and sometimes this worship took shape as a form of religion. Religions generally relate to trees symbolically. For example, the Bodhi tree has a symbolic meaning of spiritual awakening in Buddhism. There are many stories regarding trees or forests in Buddhism, especially in the important stories related to Gautama Buddha. Buddha never left the forest throughout his life. Already the first moments of his life were significant in regard as he was born under the Sorrowless tree in Lumbini. He not only practiced asceticism by renouncing the world and entering the forest alone, but also later experienced spiritual awakening under the bodhi tree. The first place he preached was a beautiful green forest in Sarnath, and the place where he entered nirvāṇa was the Sorrowless forest in Kushinagar. Besides, Buddha spent most of his time in forests. It was while he was sitting under the tree that he attained the state of dhyana (when evil passion has disappeared, and body and soul are unified) and he gave a sermon. Buddha's disciples also practiced asceticism living in forests. It seems that Buddha recognized the value of the forest much better than anyone else. It is evident in a variety of the Sutras. Forests and trees are dealt with significantly in that sense in Buddhism.

## **II . Forests and the Life of Buddha**

Where Gotama Buddha was born, there was an area between two

cities where people from both cities lived together and there was an auspicious Salavana called Lumbini forest.

At that time, the trees were very beautiful as if the whole tree was a fully-blown flower from root to petal. One day the queen, who was Gotama's mother, was travelling by the forest. Upon seeing the fine view, she wanted to play in the Salavana for a short time. So, her attendants stopped her cortege and helped her down. She wanted to hold a thorn of the auspicious Salavrksa. . . . . As she was standing holding the thorn, she gave birth to a prince. At that moment, four pure-minded Maha-brahmans showed up with a golden net. Then, they picked up the baby, the bodhisattva, with a net and set him before his mother, and said, My queen. Be pleased. Your distinguished son was born just now" (*Jataka* vol. I pp.52-53).

He was born under the Sorrowless tree in the Lumbini forest, while his mother, Māyādevi, was on her way to her parents' home to give birth as the custom of the time. The Sutras describe the Sorrowless tree as having a beautiful blossom. Later, it was given a nicknam the sans souci tree, which means anxiety or sorrow. Its original name is Asoka and the scientific name is *Jonesia asoka* Roxb. One of seven Buddhas, Vipassin, is said to have been delivered from worldly existence while resting under this tree. The tree is an evergreen of about 25 meters in height, and it inhabits India, Sri Lanka and similar countries. It was considered a lucky sign in ancient India. In Sanskrit it is called Ashoka or Asoka, and sometimes transcribed 阿輪迦 阿叔迦 as it sounds. In English it is translated into Ashoka, the Asoka tree or Sorrowless tree.

Generally a saint's nativity has a very important meaning. It was under a tree where Buddha was born. The decisive events in his life occurred under a tree. After he was present at an agricultural rite at the age of seven, before leaving home, it was under a tree that Gautama Buddha became absorbed in deep meditation. His speculation also was accomplished under a tree. This event is called serene contemplation under the Jambu tree, because the tree under which he sat and contemplated was the Jambu tree. The shade of the tree must

have been the best place for meditation. After this made his mind to leave home. While he was travelling in Magadha, the Buddha, who always sought after the good and the highest truth, went to the town of Senanigama in Uruvela. As it is described in sutra, it was here that he walked on pleasant ground and observed a clean forest. A clean river meandered and the surrounding scenery was grand. The Buddha stopped to sit down beside a clear flowing stream. As he saw, this was a very good place to practice.(M.N vol. I Pararasi-Sutta p.212-216, N.D.P. ; p.163-167, P.T.S.) However, in the description of this scene there is no specific reference to *Ficus religiosa*. The sutra explains it as follows.

"Bhiksus. At that time I sought after whatever is good and made a trip to find an incomparable way to lead into peace, arriving in Uruvela by way of Magadha. There I saw a widely open land, a beautiful forest, a river (the Neranjara river) with low shallows running lightly, and a town nearby where I could ask for an offering. I thought, "largely expanded land, beautiful forest ... this place is indeed suitable for a youth who just starts devoting himself to disciplining. Bhiksus. So I sat down at the very place thinking that 'this is the best place for self-discipline indeed (I.B. Horner, *The Middle Length Sayings*, I, 210). "Buddha called Ananda and said, 'Well. Ananda. You prepare a bed for me between a pair of Salavrksa by making the upper berth face forward the north. Ananda. I must lie down from exhaustion.'

Ananda answered, 'Yes. My Buddha', and made the bed between a pair of Salavrksa. Buddha lay down on his right side, laid one foot on another foot. At that time, the pair of Salavrksa were in early full blossom. Their fruits and blossoms were scattered over Buddha's body as a means to pay respect to him" (*Digha -Nikaya* II p,106-120. *Mahaparinibbaina-Sutta*).

It is well known that the Buddha sat with his legs completely crossed to contemplate with monks or ascetics under the tree in an open place. The Mahapadhana-sutta(D.II.4), specifically referred to the tree. It is a sacred fig tree(Bodhi tree) and is referred to when describing their lives of the past six Buddhas. Sakyamuni Buddha gave the following sermon to his monks. "My monks. Now I am a man of achievement(Arhan), a man who has attained the highest state of enlightenment. I attained the highest spiritual awakening under the fig

tree(Bodhi tree).”

Ascetic exercises in Buddhism are used to lighten one's own nature and to quiet the restless mind. The best place for Buddhist ascetic exercises is in the forest. Buddha achieved the highest state of enlightenment, that is anuttarasamyaksambodhi, in the forest. Even after he attained spiritual enlightenment, that is, after he became a Buddha, he spent a lot of time in the forest. It was under a tree that he delivered his teachings and later entered nirvāṇa. The tree is known as the Sorrowless tree(*Digha -Nikāya* II p,106-120. *Mahāparinibbānasuttanta*).

The scientific name of the sorrow tree is *Shorea robusta*, and it has been worshipped in connection with Buddha's death. The tree is a tall, deciduous tree. It is 35-45 meters high, grows up to 1 meter in diameter, and its leaves fall in the dry season. It ranges widely from the central part of India to Assam and Nepal, and it is also found in the Himalayan mountainous area 32 degrees north latitude and 1,500 meters above sea level. The tree is used as timber because it is very solid. In India, it is the most important wood next to teak. Its resin is used for religious rites and painting.

### **III. Buddha's Attainment of Great Wisdom in the Forest**

Early ascetics are described as 'homeless' or 'forest dwellers' in the early Sutras, as they left home and took up the wanderer's life. Living under a tree in a forest, or in fields, they practised dhyana in stigma.

Like other early ascetics, Buddha himself stayed under a tree in the Uruvela forest before attaining great wisdom. It was there that Sujatta offered him milk soup. Buddha attained great wisdom under the bodhi tree after eating the mild soup and refreshing his exhausted body.

From his own experience Buddha realized that the best environment to practice dhyana leading to awakening and vimukti(deliverance) was in a natural environment.

"For some time, Sakyamuni sat under a Bodhi tree on the bank of the Neranjara in Uruvela. Sakyamuni, who attained right and satisfactory enlightenment there for the first time, enjoyed vimukti in samadhi with his legs crossed for seven days. Meanwhile, as he was speculating clearly, smoke came out and disappeared toward evening" (*The Vinaya-piṭakam Mahāvagga*, edited by H. Oldenberg Vol. 1.).

Why was the Bodhi tree the best place to achieve spiritual awakening? Such a tree must give shade with a comfortable temperature, and fresh air and incense from the tree provides an ideal environment for achieving tranquil mind. The Bodhi tree, *Asraltha Saraca Asoka*, is called Pippala in Sanskrit or Bodhi tree (scientific name: *Ficus religiosa*). In Buddhism the tree is considered a thing of worship because Buddha achieved enlightenment (*abhisamodhi*) under this tree. From the meaning, tree of spiritual awakening, it is also known as a Bori tree, from the Bodhi sound of they found throughout in Chinese characters. The Indian bodhi tree is in India and Sri Lanka. It can endure flood and drought because it extends an aerial root underground. This root looks like an air sac. Even today, a bodhi tree can be found in BuddhaGaya. However, it is said that the tree in Buddha Gaya is not same as the one when Buddha lived, but its offspring. This Bodhi tree has been worshiped as a symbol of spiritual awakening or Buddha. According to *Daedangseoyeokgi* by Hyecho, people gathered together on Buddhist festivals, offered sacred water and milk to this tree, and played music.

As we know, early Buddhists didn't make Buddhist statues and describe Buddha as a human image in Buddhist paintings. At that time the Bodhi tree symbolized Buddha and Dharma cakra represented his teachings. There is a deified bodhi tree in the Sūtras of Mahāyāna Buddhism. They say that the Bodhi tree which rises high in Buddhist paradise makes a subtle sound even in a gentle breeze and one can reach spiritual awakening by just hearing the sound. The Buddhists have deified this tree as a king of kings of trees in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia and built a temple next to the tall tree. The temples of each country have a custom to plant the Bodhi tree. In the Buddhist

sutras, we find many references to indicate that great men appreciated the beauty of landscapes. A Buddhist can look at images in nature in calmness and perceive truth. He can see the essence of anicca in the rhythm of nature: falling blossoms, rotting leaves, and seasonal changes.

Zen Buddhism has a direct relationship to nature. Zen means that I and nature are one, to blossom, to be wet with dew, and to bathe in the sun, as with the flower. And so I come to know all mysteries, pleasures, and sorrows of the flower, and then feel the whole life beating in the flower. The flower and I are not existing separately. And on a deeper level, to know the life of the flower is to realize the mystery of all the life of the universe intuitively and together we can live sharing joys and sorrows.

Even after attaining great wisdom, the Buddha stayed under the Bodhi tree for seven days. The following seven days, he stayed under the Ajapala nigrodha tree (*The Vinaya-piṭakam Mahāvagga* (edited by H.Oldenberg) Vol. 1. p.2.). Nigrodha is an Indian fig tree. It is tall, about 9-15 meters high, and gives ample shade under its leafy branches. Ajapala means "goat keeper". It is thought that name Ajapala comes from the local system because herdsmen often took a rest under this tree. Sakyamuni awakened from samadhi seven days later. Then, he left the Rajayatana tree and stayed under the Ajapala Nigrodha tree. A forest provides a natural experiential ground for realizing impermanence and dependent arising, so that one can overcome worry and doubt, the final two obstructions. Talaputa sees the forest as a place to be enjoyed in contemplation.

Fair -plumed, fair-crested passengers of the air  
With deep and many hued wings  
Give greetings to the muttering thunder cloud  
With cries melodious, manifold 'tis they  
Will give thee joy whilst thou art musing there.  
(*Majjhima-nikāya*,.1136)

#### IV. Tree Protection in Buddhism

Buddha lived in the forest and thus maintained a pure life

Thus it was heard: One day, Buddha arrived at Opasada, a brother town of Cosala, while traveling from Cosala with a group of Bhiksus. Buddha stayed in Opasada, in Salavana the northern locality where people held a memorial service for the gods of heaven [M.N. II, p.427~440(N.D.P)p.164~177(P.T.S)].

All the monasteries and temples where the Buddha stayed were in the forest.

Some time after he stayed in Kayasisa mountain, Buddha left for Raja-gaha with a thousand Bhiksus who were ascetics before. He kept traveling and arrived in Rajagaha at an opportune time. There he stayed at Sutpadatta temple in the palm forest(Mahavagga, Bhikkhu J. Kashyap, 1956, Nalanda).

The king thought, Yes. We have Velu forest. The forest is the best place for sitting in meditation: since the forest is not far from nor close to the town, it is convenient to come and go; it is easy for people of various purposes to humbly see him; while it is not overcrowded in the daytime, it is quiet at night; it is a good place to stay alone because it is uninhabited. I will dedicate Velu forest to Buddha's disciples so that they can use it as a monastery.

Hence, the king dedicated a golden bottle to Buddha and said, My Buddha, I'd like to dedicate Velu forest to the Bhiksus who have Buddha as their leader so they can use it for a monastery. Buddha received the monastery, and then gave a sermon to the king Bimbisara and he left after seeing that the king was pleased to hear him. With this karma the Buddha preached and said to the Bhiksus, Bhiksus. I made up my mind to receive the monastery(Mahavagga, Bhikkhu J.Kashyap, 1956, Nalanda)

Buddha lived his life in forests. Therefore, he was able to lead a pure life.(Majjhima-nikaya Vol. 2 Cankisutta pp.164~177(P.T.S)) The forests were presented to the Buddha. Pavilions and temples where the Buddha stayed were mainly located in forests,(The Vinaya pitakam Mahavagga, (edited by H.Olenberg) pp. 1-10) and these temples were



built in convenient proximity to villages. Buddha often would advise his disciples to go to the forest or the unoccupied ground. (*Samyutta-nikāya* 4. 133: 5. 157: *Ānguttara-nikāya* 4. 139 392: 5.88 131)

Actually, it is common practice for people to retire to a hermitage in such places as a forest, or stay under a tree, or the mid-slope of a mountain, waste land, a cave in a hill, a graveyard, an open place or on a stack of straw, to overcome, the five hinderances: desire for sensual pleasure, bad will, idleness or laziness, agitation or worry, and doubt. (*Majjhima-nikāya* I, 269, 346, 404-441: 3.3.)

The Buddha and his disciples often retired to a forest or to the foot of tree, for a siesta (*divāvihāra*)<sup>1</sup> especially after a meal, When a disciple named, *Girimānda* was taken ill, the Buddha advised him to be taken to a forest grove or the foot of a tree so that he could develop awareness of *saññā*, of the impermanent (*anicca*) the non-substantial (*anatta*), the auspicious (*asubha*), the ill effect (*ādinava*), renunciation (*pahāna*), the passionless (*virāga*), cessation (*nirodha*), non-delight (*anabhirati*), the impermanence (*sabbasan khāresu anabhirati*), and the awareness of breathing in and out (*ānāpānāsati*).

The term *ārāma*, generally used in the sense of monastery as in the case of *Anāthapiṇḍika's* *ārāma*, *Ghositarāma*, *Nigrodhārāma* or *Pubbarāma*, literally, means a 'place of delight' a pleasance. This is because the residences are surrounded by natural vegetation, especially fruit trees. Plants are believed to grow from five kinds of seeds: root (*mula*), stem (*khandha*), knot (*phalu*), branch (*agga*), and kernel (*bija*). (*Vinaya pitaka* vol. IV, p.34) It suggests that there are five kinds of plants grown from root, stem, knot, branch, and kernel. Finally, the monks refer to the forest as being praised by the Buddha (*buddhvaṇṇita*) (*Thera-gāthā*, 537). Many monks enjoyed the charm of the forest which they described vividly. *Saṅkicca* sings the praise of the forest (*Thera-gāthā* 601-602).

Therefore, the forest is an object to be protected in Buddhism. Although certain ascetics or disciples ate the food believers offered, they

1 Vinaya Piṭakam 1, 28: 3.208: *Digha-nikāya* 2.130: *Majjhima-nikāya* 1.147. 447. 501: 2. 186: *Samyutta-nikāya* 1.133, 135; 3.91, 235: *Ānguttara-nikāya* 3.75: 14, 356, 438.

hurt many seeds, trees, and plants: those propagaed by root, stem, knot, branch, and seed. However, Gautama avoied hurting seeds, trees, and plants. So, Buddha's disciples, ordinary men are just glorifying Buddha who comes to the world that way.(*Digha-Nikaya*, Vol.1, *Brahmajala-sutra*, p.3~40) Gautama, an ascetic, avoids hurting various seeds, trees, and plants. And thus, cutting trees and plants is prohibited by Article 11 of Paittiya in *Vinaya Pitaka*. "Cutting trees and plants is payattika."(*Vinaya-piṭakan*. Vol.IV, p.34)

The trees were venerated as devata in India. Therefore, cutting trees was prohibited. One of the reasons may be that it was hard to propogate trees and plants. In a hot and rainy place like northern India the trees and plants grow well, while they have trouble growing in central India. During the rainy season it rains for four months, but it seldom rains outside this season. Even mature plants will die if there no rain for just ten to twenty days. That's why there are many deserts in India. Although the rainfall is small throughout most of the year, they have torrential downpour during the rainy season. So, the trees grow and bud well with other plants during the rainy season. After the season, however, the earth becomes so dry that the bud withers and will not grow again next year. If a tree happens to meet a water vein and survives even in the rainy season, it can take root and grow next year. But, there is a tree that grows, even when other plants dry up. This kind of tree is thought to have a special life force, and the Indian people served the big tree. They worship the root of the tree as the image of devata. A shrine placed on the root is dedicated to devata and the tree also is worshiped as devata at the same time. In India a special tree isn't worshiped as a sacred tree, but any big tree is considered a sacred tree. Trees are planted in the streets in modern Indian cities. For trees to grow well in a dry season, they must be watered. Since cows eat green leaves, they protect the trees from the animals by making fences. As you see, it requires a great deal of labor for trees to flourish without withering. Korean's idea about tree growth is very different from that of the Indian people.(Akira Hirakawa, *The Collection of Akira Hirakawa' Works, The Study of 250 sikkāpada*,

pp.150-160.) In Korea trees can grow without effort, but they can't in India.

Buddha recognized Vedic lore which respects natural phenomena such as fire, wind, rain, and even trees. He encouraged people to respect natural plants, and talked about devatas living in only arama, vana, rukkha, osadhi, tina, and vanaspati. (*Majjhima-nikāya* 1. 306) It is said that those who are engaged with planting trees in arama or vana can reach heaven by building up Guna. (*Samyutta-nikāya* I. 33)

Besides, he who destroys the trees which make air fresh and provide shades for travelers under the midday sun is regarded as a betrayer of mittadubbi. (*Petavattu* 259)

Again, my followers. There are five offerings of blessing. What are they? First, laying out a garden. Second, cultivating a forest. Third, building a bridge. Forth, making a large ship. Fifth, building a house and rooms for living a long life. Those are called five offerings of great blessing.

Then, Buddha unexpectedly recited the following poem.  
A garden offers refreshment  
a bridge lets people cross over.  
He who build a house and rooms well  
is always blessed day and night.  
However, he who achieved commandments and meditations  
is necessarily born in Heaven.  
Therefore, my followers. Remember to carry out five offerings  
all the time.  
My pupils should learn in this way.  
At this time, his followers listened to Buddha and honored him  
in joy (*Ānguttara-Nikaya* Vol. 27, 35).

In Mahāyāna *Brahmājāla Sutta*, it is taught as sila and vinaya.

Buddhists. How will you put mountains and plains into a big fire with bad minds. Do not burn anything of either your owner or the neighbor's house, city, nunnery, field, shrine, or public facilities of government office anytime between April and September. Anyone who purposely burns during this time has committed a misdemeanour (*Mahayana Brahmājāla Sutta*. Vol 10 T.24, 1006 a).

In his Buddhist environmental ethics, de. Silva said that if we have

appropriate environmental ethics, we can renounce plundering nature just as we morally desist from raping women. This sort of basis appears in Buddhism at large. *Daesalchanigunja-Sūtra* gives us a more explanation.

You shouldn't burn or destroy plants and forests in city or country, stream and hill, palace and tower, all the roads and bridges, natural caves and all sorts of crops, and flowers and fruits. Don't drain them or cut off plants. That is because you might hurt or do harm to innocent lives since animals and insects live there. (*Daesalchanigunja-Sūtra* Vol.4 (T. 9, 335b))

When trees are cut down indiscriminately, recognition of the forests in Buddhism can be seen a valuable wisdom teaching.

## V. Conclusion

Although the value of trees and forests is highlighted scientifically, in reality this goes against the stream. Tundra forest, which corresponds to human lungs, is neglected, only to be burned and the Amazon jungle is being cut indiscriminately.

This is because of the commercialism emphasis of modern civilization which considers only immediate profits. It results from people's lack of understanding that as a result of cause and effect man will suffer just as forests and trees disappear. If trees disappear, air will be impure and the damage will finally return to man. The relationship of trees and man is not a preferential one in which only man can live but a coexistent one in which man and trees should live together.

Buddha recognized the value of trees and forests. He never left the forests all his life. He lived in the forests and enjoyed the beauty of the forests. His Enlightenment is not just an accident. The tree must have given him cool shade and helped him be tranquil with its incense. For spiritual awakening there can have been no other place as ideal as under a tree. From this perspective we see the special relationship between forests and Buddha's awakening. Like him, Buddha's disciples

lived in forests. Their residences or temples were built in the forests. They entered dhyana in the forests as well. Probably, many of his disciples attained the awakening under the trees. Buddha taught us to cultivate trees and forests. We are told to protect even one plant or one branch. As in all of *Vinaya Pitaka*, breaking off a twig of a tree is prohibited by payattika in *Sabunyyul*. It is also shown in the *Mahāyāna Brahmajala Sutta*. As we have discussed, the forests are of importance in Buddhism.