

Abstract

SHIFTING THE SEAT OF AWAKENING

by David Walker McConeghy

This thesis explores the relationship between non-Indian Buddhists and the Indian Buddhist site Bodhgaya. Chapter one examines the account of the 7th century Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang, and argues that Bodhgaya functioned as a living relic, providing direct access to the Buddha's presence. In the second chapter, the effects of the decline of Buddhism in India are examined, leading to the conclusion that even before the fall of the Pala Dynasty, Bodhgaya had become a prominent element in the imagination of Buddhists who now relied more often on images and souvenir models of the site's temple rather than making pilgrimages to it. In the final chapter, the phenomenon of the construction of replicas of Bodhgaya's temple outside of India is offered as evidence that foreign Buddhists had both incorporated the presence of the Buddha into their history and inscribed the Indian sacred landscape onto their native lands.

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A Thesis

Submitted to the
Faculty of Miami University
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Comparative Religion

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Oxford, Ohio

2006

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Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the ways in which the Buddhist holy place Bodhgaya has played a role in the religious life of Buddhists and Buddhist communities outside of India. Therefore, its primary concern is *how* Buddhists have perceived Bodhgaya and *how* they understood its place in the Buddhist world. Jacob Kinnard's understanding of Bourdieu's *habitus* will be applied to Bodhgaya as it is examined as a "structuring structure," a dynamic institution that "allows one to explicate how individuals follow [rules and doctrines], and also how they manipulate them, how they negotiate with and contest these rules and doctrines."¹ Thus, the term "Bodhgaya" is in fact used in two ways in this thesis; first, for the *place* in what is now Bihar, India, and second, as a concept that is present in the imagination of certain Buddhists. The conceptualization of Bodhgaya resembles Steven Collins' concept of a Pali *imaginaire*. Collins explains that "the noun *imaginaire* can refer to objects of the imagination," or "the ensemble of what is imagined, without implying falsity."² This understanding is particularly helpful in addressing the issues raised in Chapter Two, which argues that for many Buddhists living outside of India Bodhgaya became an imminently accessible conceptual creation grounded in the physical location in India. Throughout the thesis, a synthesis of Kinnard and Collins lies beneath the discussions of the Buddhists' relationship with Bodhgaya. As the changes in this relationship become clearer, the essential structure which is revealed is the tension between the absence of the Buddha and the Buddha's presence and the way Buddhists have imagined Bodhgaya to resolve this tension.

One of the main goals of this thesis is therefore to outline, in broad strokes, some of the historical factors which led to the transformation of the connection between the physical landscape in India and the mental landscape of Buddhists (primarily outside of India). As Buddhism declined in India and grew in strength abroad, Buddhists' perception of and interaction with Bodhgaya changed. For many of the earliest Buddhists prior to Buddhism's decline in India, Bodhgaya was the historical location of the Buddha's Awakening underneath

¹ Jacob N. Kinnard, *Imaging Wisdom: Seeing and Knowing in the Art of Indian Buddhism* (Great Britain: Curzon Press, 1999), 11.

² Steven Collins, *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 73.

the bodhi tree and where the Mahabodhi temple had been constructed. In this period, extending from the reign of Ashoka in the third century BCE until the fall of Harshavardhana, Bodhgaya was important enough to merit pilgrimage from all over Asia. The most prominent example is the pilgrimage of the seventh century monk Xuanzang, and his experience at Bodhgaya is focus of the first chapter of this thesis. Xuanzang arrived in India at a moment when Buddhism was near the peak of its strength, and the detailed account of his journey has been the focus of many scholarly studies. The work of Malcolm Eckel, John Strong, and John Huntington are used together to describe the complex issues of the Buddha's presence and absence at Bodhgaya. By examining Xuanzang's account alongside textual and archaeological evidence, it becomes clear that the Buddhists behaved as if the living Buddha were present at Bodhgaya. The concept of emptiness is cited as the most complete means of remedying any apparent contradictions between perceptions of absence and presence. Finally, Xuanzang's account provides valuable evidence that India was perceived as the source of living Buddhist tradition and the living Buddha, and ultimately affirms the value during this period of physically being in India.

Not all Buddhists had the opportunity or fortune to go to Bodhgaya, and in the period after Xuanzang's pilgrimage many instead accessed it through religious items such as *terracotta* plaques which depicted the eight most important Indian pilgrimage sites. The second chapter explores several such alternative methods to pilgrimage, and using historical evidence from a fortuitous Tibetan pilgrim in the thirteenth century, examines the condition of Bodhgaya as Buddhism declined in India. During this period it is most accurate to suggest that while Bodhgaya remained a destination for a very small number of pilgrims, many more Buddhists accessed Bodhgaya from outside India. For these Buddhists Bodhgaya was conceptually present in their imagination of the sacred landscape of India, and this mental topography did not require them to be present in India themselves to experience it.

In the third and final chapter Bodhgaya becomes more than a mental landscape for several Buddhist communities outside India: Burma, Thailand, Nepal, and China, all built large-scale replicas of 180ft Mahabodhi temple and other monuments from Bodhgaya. During this period, when very few Buddhists lived in India near Bodhgaya, Buddhism was thriving in other Asian countries. Burma and Thailand are especially poignant examples of the practice of replica-building which highlight the relationship between merit-making and temple building, but the construction of all replicas of the Mahabodhi confirms the enduring international appeal of

Bodhgaya. In particular, it seems evident that Buddhists believed that, by constructing Mahabodhi temples abroad, they could reproduce the Indian landscape and have access to the living presence of the historical Buddha. The very power of Bodhgaya was therefore redeployed by Buddhists outside of India as an element in their own native religious landscapes, which intimately connected their religious history with the Gautama Buddha.

The transformation of Bodhgaya from a historical place where the Buddha was present to the replication of that presence abroad by recreating Bodhgaya is quite remarkable. At once, this transformation suggests the persistence of the problem of the Buddha's absence and an eagerness to enact creative solutions which provide access to the Buddha's presence. The evidence which supports this conclusion comes not only from the behavior of Buddhists at Bodhgaya and in their own countries, but is supported by a variety of Buddhist texts and the interpretation by modern scholars of art historical, epigraphic and archaeological evidence. All evidence suggests that Buddhists responded to the decline of Indian Buddhism and newly developing devotional practices in ways which always validated their own religious histories. By incorporating the Buddha's presence into their own lives Buddhists were able to maintain the vitality and extend the biography of the Buddha into the present. In this way, Bodhgaya was shifted from the center of the Buddhist world to the centers of Buddhist communities throughout Asia.

Chapter One
Relics of the Buddha at Bodhgaya:
A Pilgrim's Experience of Absence and Presence

Introduction

For nearly a millennium after the Buddha's *parinirvana*, the event which broke the Buddha's connection to the world of *samsara*, Buddhists traveled to Bodhgaya in search of the Buddha's presence. It was clear, in some respects, that the Buddha was no longer present there; however, this did not prevent Buddhists from either believing or behaving as if the Buddha were still physically present and very much alive at Bodhgaya. This would seem to be an interesting contradiction between Buddhist practice and doctrine but the doctrine both supports this contradiction and explains how it can be resolved.

The first portion of this chapter establishes the canonical precedents for the practices of pilgrimage and relic worship, which provided places to *see* and be in the *presence* of the living Buddha even after his *parinirvana*. While textual sources certainly indicate that the Buddha authorized these activities, archaeological evidence suggests that the third century B.C.E king Ashoka also played an important role in what pilgrims encountered in India. Next, however, the discussion turns to how a specific pilgrim would have understood these pilgrimage sites and relics in India. The account of the seventh century Chinese monk Xuanzang, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Kingdoms* (hereafter *Record*), bears the burden of providing evidence for the contention that at Bodhgaya, following textual precedent, the bodhi tree especially was perceived to be and treated as a living relic of the Buddha.¹ One need not take Xuanzang's account alone to provide evidence that Buddhists at Bodhgaya behaved as if they were in the living presence of the Buddha, for textual and archaeological sources supplement his descriptions.

Xuanzang's experiences at Bodhgaya also suggest that along with the Buddha's presence, the absence of the Buddha was also perceptible. By investigating the way in which

¹ Xuanzang, *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*, trans. Li Rongxi (Berkeley: Numata Center, 1996), 245-246.

both absence and presence equally demonstrate the concept of emptiness, the tension between presence and absence is resolved. The resolution of this tension suggests that pilgrimage to India might not have been necessary at all, for the Buddha's absence or presence, in theory, should be equally accessible from any location. However, in practice, Xuanzang did go to India, and his account of India and his motivations for his pilgrimage suggests that it was important to be present in India at the most important religious sites like Bodhgaya. This serves not only as background for the historical transformations described in Chapter Two, but also to explain how Xuanzang was even able to undertake his famous journey, and thus to describe the favorable conditions of India for pilgrims at the time of his visit.

The Origin of the Pilgrimage and Veneration of Relics at Bodhgaya

The origins of pilgrimage and the veneration of relics at Bodhgaya was most likely the result of several comments which the Buddha made during his lifetime. Even though the Buddha may have provided the canonical warrants for both practices, in the experience of Buddhist pilgrims, one of the figures who most represented the instantiation of these practices was King Ashoka. Ashoka's pilgrimage to the sites associated with the Buddha, where he subsequently built monuments, was, at least according to Xuanzang, the force behind the popularity of Indian pilgrimage and also its exemplar.

During his lifetime Gautama Buddha informed his followers how and what they should worship after his *parinirvana*. In the *Jinalankara*, the Buddha tells his followers, "When I am gone, the dharma and vinaya which I taught you will be your master, as well as my bodily relics, the seat of awakening, and the most excellent bodhi tree. They too will also be your Master, after I am gone. I allow you to establish the bodhi tree and the relics in my place, and to venerate them in order to obtain the way to bliss."² The Buddha's prescription identifies appropriate substitutions for his presence, and in this account there is no clear indication that any one object is inferior to another. Every object that is included in this account is also a product of his

² John S. Strong, *Relics of the Buddha* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 153.

Awakening, and each object has been “infused” with the positive attributes and characteristics of a fully Awakened being.³

While the Buddha played an integral role in establishing the cult of relics from a textual standpoint, the figure who most influenced Buddhist devotional practices at Bodhgaya from an archaeological standpoint was Emperor Ashoka. Ashoka rose to the throne in 268 B.C.E., and legend has it that during the course of his reign he built 84,000 *stupas* all across India, each containing a portion of the Buddha’s bodily remains. Today, scholars dismiss the construction of the 84,000 stupas, but there is a considerable amount of archaeological and epigraphic evidence that Ashoka supported Buddhism. Xuanzang expressed no doubts about Ashoka’s role in the construction of an enclosure to protect the bodhi tree at Bodhgaya:

After the decease of the Tathagata, when King Ashoka had just ascended the throne, he believed in heretical doctrines and destroyed the sites left by the Buddha. He sent his troops and went in person to cut the [Bodhi] tree. He chopped the roots, stalks, branches, and leaves into small pieces and had them heaped up at a spot a few tens of paces to the west, where fire-worshipping Brahmans were ordered to burn the pile as a sacrifice to their god. But before the smoke and flames had vanished, two trees grew out of the furious fire with luxuriant and verdurous leaves; these trees were thus called Ash Bodhi Trees. Upon seeing this strange sight, King Ashoka repented his misdeeds and irrigated the remnant roots [of the bodhi tree] with sweet milk. When it was nearly dawn, the tree grew up as before. The king was highly exhilarated to have seen this spiritual wonder and made offerings to the tree in person with so much delight that he forgot to go back home. The queen, being a heretical believer, secretly sent a man to fell the tree after nightfall. When King Ashoka went to worship the tree at dawn, he was very sad to see only the stump of the tree. He prayed earnestly and irrigated the stump with sweet milk, and in a few days the tree grew up once again. With deep respect and astonishment, the king built a stone enclosure to the height of more than ten feet around the tree, which is still in existence.⁴

For the intrepid Chinese pilgrim, Ashoka’s heart had been changed by the miraculous appearance of the “Ash Bodhi Trees,” and through his sincere repentance and attention, the bodhi tree was restored to full health. This account is likely legendary, but Xuanzang’s inclusion of the story in his description of Bodhgaya and its history certainly agrees with John Strong’s conclusion that

³ Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks: Collected papers on the Archaeology, Epigraphy and Texts of Monastic Buddhism in India* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997), 128.

⁴ Xuanzang, 245-246.

“whatever he may have been historically, in Buddhist legend, Ashoka was seen as a relic venerator.”⁵

Ashoka was also the most prominent follower of another devotional practice the Buddha authorized during his lifetime; pilgrimage to four sites associated with Buddha’s life. The *Mahaparinirvana sutra* recalls an encounter between the Buddha and his follower Ananda which had established this tradition at the end of the Buddha’s life. Ananda is concerned that, after the Buddha’s *parinirvana*, devotees will no longer be able to see the physical bodies of persons who are properly “mentally cultivated.”⁶ In response the Buddha tells him that a devout follower who wishes to see the physical bodies of cultivated persons should go to the place where the Buddha was born, where he attained Awakening, where he first preached the dharma, and where he obtained *parinirvana*. Kevin Trainor has expressed his belief that this interpretation is misleading, but he also acknowledges that “it provides the canonical warrant from the practice of pilgrimage.”⁷ Soon after the Buddha’s *parinirvana* it became an essential part of Buddhist practice in India. While archaeologists still dispute Ashoka’s role in advancing this cult of pilgrimage, it is generally agreed upon that he marked several Buddhist sites, including Bodhgaya, with “commemorative *stupas* and pillars.”⁸ As before, the distinction between historical fact and legend is less important than the conviction of pilgrims like Xuanzang who believed that Ashoka truly had built monuments to the Buddha at each of the four sites named in the *Mahaparinirvana sutra* and even at 84,000 sites all across India.

While the origins of the cults of pilgrimage and relics may be the Buddha’s prescriptions cited above, by Xuanzang’s time, nearly a thousand years after the Buddha’s *parinirvana*, the presence of pilgrims and relics at Bodhgaya was indisputable. Xuanzang’s account of Bodhgaya has also provided information about how Buddhists perceived Ashoka’s role in the development of pilgrimage and relic veneration. As Gregory Schopen has cautioned, we should not overemphasize what Buddhists textual sources say about what Buddhists should do, but rather use them in conjunction with evidence that shows what Buddhists actually did.⁹ Together with evidence of Buddhist behavior at Bodhgaya, textual sources, like Xuanzang’s *Record*, provide

⁵ Strong, 124.

⁶ Kevin Trainor, *Relics, Ritual, and Representation in Buddhism: Rematerializing the Sri Lankan Theravada Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 50.

⁷ Trainor, 50.

⁸ John Guy, “The Mahabodhi Temple: Pilgrim Souvenirs of Buddhist India,” *The Burlington Magazine* 133, no. 1059 (June 1991), 357.

⁹ Schopen, *Bones*, 115.

important clues about how the Buddha's relics were perceived (e.g., they were stand-ins for the living Buddha) and the options available for Buddhists to *see* the Awakened Buddha. In the next section Xuanzang's record will be used to address both of these concerns as it becomes clear that Buddhist behavior at Bodhgaya indicates they believed and behaved as if the Gautama Buddha was very much present there.

The Presence of the Living Buddha at Bodhgaya

It was especially auspicious to be in the presence of the Buddha. In his work, *Imaging Wisdom*, Jacob Kinnard provides a variety of textual sources which indicate the critical roles of *seeing* and being in the *presence* of the Buddha. Most importantly, he argues that even though the Buddha's disciples recognize and acknowledge that the Buddha has specifically established items which are surrogates for his presence, "the desire to see the Buddha, to be in his physical presence, persists."¹⁰ As the *Visuddhimagga* explains, "Having seen the *Budharupam*, the monk acquires joy with the Blessed One as object (*Buddharammanam pitam*) and, increasing his insight (*vipassana*), becomes an *arahant*."¹¹ Progressing to more advanced spiritual states, or acquiring merit to gain a rebirth where Awakening might be possible, were common advantages associated with the seeing or being in the presence of the Buddha.

The following section argues that at Bodhgaya the bodhi tree was one relic which was believed to provide the same benefits as seeing or being in the Buddha. Not only was the bodhi tree recognized as functionally the same as the Buddha's presence, but Xuanzang's account makes it clear that the bodhi tree also acted as a living extension of the Buddha's biography. In his description of the story of the Gautama's Awakening, Xuanzang indicates that Bodhgaya also attracted veneration for its role in the Awakening of future Buddhas. The biography which Xuanzang articulates, then, does not just extend from the historical Buddha to the present, but actually encompasses past, present and future of Buddhism. We do not need to take only Xuanzang's account as evidence that Bodhgaya was perceived to extend the Buddha's presence into the present, for the funerary practices of pilgrims of Indian Buddhists confirm that Bodhgaya was indeed treated as if the merit produced was equal to that produced by seeing or being in the presence of a living Buddha.

¹⁰ Kinnard, *Imaging Wisdom*, 59.

¹¹ Kevin Trainor, 184.

The story of the Buddha's Enlightenment is well-known, but the details of Xuanzang's version, provided as his readers follow him from memorial to memorial around Bodhgaya, are worth reviewing for the insights they provide into how Buddhist pilgrims would have perceived the bodhi tree and the vajrasana after they had become objects of a pilgrimage and relic cult. Xuanzang's account begins with the Buddha's initial attempts to realize perfect enlightenment:

Having striven hard for six years, he [Gautama] did not gain perfect enlightenment; then he gave up austerities and accepted milk gruel. When he came from the northeast to this mountain [Pragbodhi], he saw that it was a quiet place and wished to gain enlightenment there. From the northeast ridge he climbed up to the summit of the mountain, where the earth quaked and the mountain trembled. As the mountain god was frightened, he told the Bodhisattva, 'This mountain is not a blessed place for you to achieve enlightenment. If you stay here and enter the Diamond Samdhi, the earth will sink and the mountain will topple down.'¹²

This incident is not the only time the Buddha selects a location which is inappropriate for gaining Enlightenment. For soon after the Buddha descends from the mountain in search of another location he comes upon a cave:

The Bodhisattva went in and sat cross-legged. The earth quaked again and the mountain trembled for a second time. At that time beings of the Pure Abode Heaven chanted in the air, 'This is not the place for the Tathagata to achieve enlightenment. Fourteen or fifteen *li* southwest from here and not far away from the place where you practiced austerities, there is a pipal tree, under which is a Diamond Seat. It is on this seat that all Buddhas of the past and future sit to achieve perfect enlightenment.'¹³

In both encounters, Gautama is told that he is not following the pre-established pattern for attaining Buddhahood. In his first attempt, Gautama is encouraged to move because the mountain-top he has chosen is not capable of supporting his Awakening. This theme is expanded upon in the second encounter, when Gautama learns that there is a "Diamond Seat" upon which he can and should become enlightened. Xuanzang explains for his readers that the Diamond Seat alone is suitable as the place of Awakening, for it:

came into existence together with the great earth at the beginning of the Bhadrakalpa. It is the middle of the Three Thousand Great Chiliocosm, reaching down to the golden wheel below the surface of the earth. It is made of diamond and is over one hundred paces in circuit. As the one thousand Buddhas of the

¹² Xuanzang, 243.

¹³ *ibid.*

Bhadrakalpa all sit on it to enter the Diamond Samadi, it is called the Diamond Seat, and because it is the place for realizing the Sacred Way, it is also called the *Bodhimanda* (Seat for realizing Buddhahood). When the earth quakes, this spot alone remains stable. Thus when the Tathagata was about to attain enlightenment, all the places where he went at the four corners of this seat trembled, and when he came here, it was calm and quiet without agitation.¹⁴

Xuanzang's description of the Diamond Seat identifies the fitness of the site's constitution for supporting the Awakening experience. However, taken together with the Buddha's search for such a spot, the goal of the extended narrative seems to be proving that Gautama has followed his predecessors' footsteps adequately. John Strong has argued this point, contending that "it is biography that makes a Buddha and not the Buddha who makes his biography. In other words, all buddhas... follow a biographical blueprint that defines them and makes them who they are... Another way of putting this is that it is the story of someone who becomes *present* as a Buddha..."¹⁵ In this way, Xuanzang's account frames Gautama's actual experiences as those necessary for attaining buddhahood. This is not a deceitful practice, but one where Gautama's actions can be interpreted and explained in light of *who* and *what* Xuanzang believed Gautama was—a Buddha.

If the transformation of the Buddha is the chapter of the story of the Buddha's life which Xuanzang is telling throughout his description of the sites at Bodhgaya, then we should also ask what Xuanzang believes Bodhgaya's role in this narrative is. The evidence provided so far has all highlighted the specific geographic location of the bodhi tree and Diamond Seat. Yet, if one looks at Xuanzang's entire descriptions of Bodhgaya, the accounts seems to suggest strongly that the spatial center at Bodhgaya is the Bodhi tree and not the Diamond Seat. In the excerpts above the Buddha must arrive at precisely the correct location, and Xuanzang understandably extends this theme through his descriptions of all the monuments and objects at Bodhgaya. Thus, the temple is said to be "to the east of the Bodhi Tree," and the place "where the Buddha walked up and down" is "to the north of the Bodhi Tree."¹⁶ In fact, all of the important memorials at Bodhgaya are geographically identified by their relative position to the bodhi tree. While Xuanzang identifies the Diamond Seat as the object "at the center of the Bodhi Tree enclosure," it is the bodhi tree which actually serves as the dominant spatial referent in the *Records*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 244.

¹⁵ Strong, 6.

¹⁶ Xuanzang, 250.

Even though Xuanzang is careful to note the meta-historical qualities of the Diamond seat, (e.g., its connection to all buddhas) his description of it being “made of diamond” is hardly believable. As the source of stability for the Awakening the Diamond Seat is no doubt an important relic at Bodhgaya, but Xuanzang’s account also shows a clear preference for the bodhi tree. In comparison to the vague description of the physical characteristics of the Diamond Seat, Xuanzang’s description of the bodhi tree is extensive:

The trunk of the tree is yellowish white in color, and its branches and leaves are always green; they never wither away nor change their luster, whether in the winter or in the summer. Each year on the day of the Tathagata’s Nirvana, the leaves fade and fall; but they grow out again very soon. On that day the monarchs of various countries and monks and laymen of different places, thousands and myriads in number, gather here by their own will to irrigate and bathe the tree with scented water and milk to the accompaniment of music; with arrays of fragrant flowers and lamps burning uninterruptedly the devotees vie with each other in making offerings to the tree.¹⁷

The lavish attentions to the bodhi tree echo the devotions of King Ashoka after the Brahmins and then his queen’s henchman injured the tree. In fact, the destruction of the bodhi tree and its miraculous recovery is a constant thread running through Bodhgaya’s history as recorded in Xuanzang’s *Record*. The tree, if one believes Xuanzang, was destroyed and miraculously restored no less than four times in the thousand years since the Buddha’s *parinirvana*. Since bodhi trees commonly live for less than 150 years, it is almost surprising that there are not more stories about the miraculous restoration of the bodhi tree over the course of that first millennial period. Xuanzang’s thorough description also marks not only the legendary qualities of the tree, but firmly establishes that the tree shows the *effects* of the Buddha’s Awakening. Hence, its leaves never wither and are always green. Xuanzang’s narrative therefore simultaneously establishes the historical fact of Gautama’s physical presence (i.e., something happened in the past to affect the tree), and attests to the continuing *presence* of the Awakened Buddha in the form of the venerable tree’s miraculous characteristics.

Not all scholars agree that the primary devotional object at Bodhgaya is a specific relic such as the bodhi tree which could reveal the living presence of the Buddha. John Huntington has argued, for instance, that the focus of devotion at Bodhgaya was not on the bodhi tree or the Seat or even the enlightenment itself, but on the moment when, confronted by the demon Mara,

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 245.

the Buddha asked the earth to testify to his right to become enlightened. “It is this moment,” Huntington argues, “the moment of gaining the right to enlightenment and not the actual Enlightenment, which is the validation of the soteriological methodology taught by the Buddhists.”¹⁸ It is unclear how we might distinguish Buddhist worship of this “moment” prior to the Buddha’s Awakening rather than the Buddha’s Awakening itself, but Huntington’s argument is persuasive, relying on the interpretation of a wide variety of sculptural reliefs and images which depict Bodhgaya and the Buddha. However, Huntington’s argument does not agree with any of the injunctions of the Buddha cited above, nor with Xuanzang’s account of Bodhgaya and the objects he felt were important. In fact, Huntington’s argument suffers not because he is incorrect that what Bodhgaya might stand for is the promise embodied in the Buddha, but rather because what Buddhists actually did at the site indicates that the products of the enlightenment—a living Buddha, the bodhi tree and the Diamond Seat—were the central objects of worship at Bodhgaya. Huntington’s theory fails to provide a satisfactory explanation for the actual devotional activities of Buddhists at Bodhgaya, despite his persuasive interpretation of what depiction of Bodhgaya might have meant to Buddhists.

Before discussing what Buddhists did at Bodhgaya and why this suggests that Huntington’s conclusions are incomplete, a few words are warranted about the distinctions between types of relics. Earlier, when evidence for the Buddha’s commission of relics in the *Jinalankara* was presented, it was argued that in that text no distinction was evident among the categories of objects the Buddha listed as stand-ins for his presence. Therefore, there was no indication that certain relics were more advantageous than others. It should be noted now that in some discussions of relics a hierarchy has emerged. John Strong writes about a text in which the efficacy of corporeal relics is questioned: “In one of the Perfection of Wisdom sutras, for instance, when it is asked which is better, the whole of ‘Jambudvipa filled up to the top with [Buddha]-relics’ or ‘a single written copy of this perfection of wisdom [sutra]?’ the answer is unequivocal: the perfection of wisdom scripture is preferable for the relics are subordinate to it...”¹⁹ Therefore, it was sometimes the case that “stupas and other objects which served as reminders of the Buddha were often consecrated or ‘enlivened’ by the insertion within them of a bodily relic (e.g., a piece of bone), or of a textual dharma relic (e.g., a written verse from the

¹⁸ John C. Huntington, “Sowing the Seeds of the Lotus: A Journey to the Great Pilgrimage Sites of Buddhism,” Part I, *Orientalism* 16, no. 11 (November 1985), 60-61.

¹⁹ Strong, 9.

Buddha's teaching), or of both."²⁰ The fact that it was necessary to supplement certain relics and not others again suggests that in practice a hierarchy was in operation. As a generalization one might even concede that relics of use, such as the bodhi tree or Diamond Seat, were often seen as less powerful or meritorious than corporeal relics or dharma relics.

Unfortunately, classifying the bodhi tree and the Diamond Seat exclusively as (less powerful) relics of use or claiming that they are secondary to Buddhism's "promise" does not agree "on the ground" with Buddhist practices at Bodhgaya. One of the strongest pieces of evidence which suggests that both the tree and the seat functioned in the same way as corporeal relics is funerary practices at Bodhgaya. These serve as well to demonstrate the difficulty with applying relic hierarchies to Bodhgaya, and provide a counterpoint to Huntington that explains how Buddhists treated Bodhgaya. Surrounding the bodhi tree and Diamond Seat, "Crowded in a jumbled mass around the central point of the site, the exact point of former contact, are hundreds and thousands of small *stupas* of various sizes."²¹ Gregory Schopen has argued that these *stupas*, which often contained the relics of a Buddhist devotee, shared "exactly the same" relationship to the bodhi tree and Diamond Seat as those *stupas* built at other sites containing corporeal relics.²² In both cases, Buddhists were motivated by their belief that if they died or were buried close to a place where the Buddha had formerly been, then they would receive great merit and improve their chances of a rebirth in a Buddhist heaven where they might attain Awakening. Since the practices of Buddhists towards both types of relics were the same, Schopen concludes the Buddhists likely believed that there was no difference in practice between the two, and perhaps little difference between the behavior of Buddhists at Bodhgaya and other Buddhist pilgrimage sites where corporeal relics were clearly present.

To supplement and extend his argument, Schopen goes on to cite several textual sources which indicate that Buddhists also saw "no distinction between a living Buddha and a collection of relics."²³ Not only did Buddhists act the same toward relics of use and corporeal relics, but as a whole relics were seen to be indistinguishable from the physical presence of Gautama Buddha. Therefore, being present at Bodhgaya or having one's own relics buried near relics allowed a devotee to receive the benefits of being in the presence of the living Buddha's body. The allure

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Schopen, *Bones*, 118.

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.*, 132.

of receiving the merit of the living Buddha's presence is understandable, but at Bodhgaya a devotee could honor the historical Buddha, receive the benefit of a living Buddha, and if their remains were buried there, they could even receive the benefits of the future Buddha, Maitreya. In this way Bodhgaya is an intersection of the present, past and future and provides Buddhists the opportunity to access all three simultaneously. The ramifications of this surely did not escape Xuanzang, whose account weaves the actions of the historical Buddha in the past with Xuanzang's description of Bodhgaya during the present, and assures readers of the future in Maitreya's Awakening on the Diamond Seat.

In fact, the role of the future Buddha Maitreya was especially important for Xuanzang. Like most pilgrims, and especially those whose remains were buried at Bodhgaya, Xuanzang hoped to gain enough merit to have the opportunity to become Awakened. Xuanzang was sure that in his past lives he had accrued insufficient merit to be born during the life of Gautama Buddha.²⁴ However, the pilgrim had no doubts that he would be reborn in the celestial heaven, Tusita, where Maitreya awaited his future birth. Upon his death bed, Xuanzang's disciples asked him whether he sure would be reborn in Tusita after he died and he answered, "Quite Certain!"²⁵ Access to this heaven was auspicious and a way for Xuanzang to make great strides toward becoming an awakened being. Since Xuanzang likely believed, as most pilgrims did, that his devotions at Bodhgaya would result in specific spiritual recompenses, we can speculate that Xuanzang would have been directing these gains towards being reborn in Tusita.

Regardless of whether the rewards of being at Bodhgaya were immediate or delayed, Buddhists undoubtedly believed that it was as meritorious to be *present* there as it was to see or be in the presence of the Buddha. Xuanzang's account also identifies the active and ongoing qualities of the Buddha's presence in his relics at Bodhgaya, especially the bodhi tree. By actively affecting the lives and rebirths of Buddhists, the relics at Bodhgaya could carry on the function of the Buddha's field of merit, and even, as Xuanzang's extensive descriptions of the bodhi tree suggest, carry on lives of their own. The accessibility of the Buddha's presence long after his *parinirvana* was surely one of the reasons that Bodhgaya remained such a vibrant and active pilgrimage site for Buddhists, but it should not be overlooked that the "promise" of the

²⁴ Hwui Li, *The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang*, trans. by Samuel Beal, (1911, Reprint, Connecticut: Hyperion Press, 1973), 102.

²⁵ Malcolm David Eckel, *To See the Buddha: A Philosopher's Quest for the Meaning of Emptiness* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 133-134.

Buddhist worldview was evident at Bodhgaya, and Buddhists were also surely attracted to the value of the place where that had occurred.

The Buddha's Absence at Bodhgaya

The problem of the Buddha's absence had emerged even before the Buddha's *parinirvana*. Earlier, the famous encounter between Ananda and the Buddha was offered as evidence of the Buddha's role in establishing the tradition of pilgrimage, but that encounter also identified the central problem of how one can *see* the Buddha after his *parinirvana*. Though the bodhi tree and other relics had been established as surrogates for the living Buddha, in practice they came to be seen and treated just as the living Buddha himself. The idea of the Buddha living through his relics after his *parinirvana* was not unproblematic. Tension was evident between what should have been the *absence* of any aspect of the Buddha in the world of *samsara* and the undeniable *presence* of the Buddha in the world of *samsara*. The tension between absence and presence will serve as a framework to examine closely Xuanzang's personal experiences at Bodhgaya. While the previous section identified Xuanzang's perceptions from a largely historical perspective (i.e., what he identified at the site and how he described the objects there), this section focuses on Xuanzang's devotional response to Bodhgaya (i.e., his emotional reaction). The two are not mutually exclusive; however, the primary object of Xuanzang's response was, at least superficially, the Buddha's absence. After first discussing what this absence means and how Xuanzang might have understood it, this section will then proceed to characterize the complex relationship between absence and presence as an opportunity to reflect on the presence of both understandings of the Buddha (i.e., his presence and his absence) in relics at Bodhgaya.

In order to discuss how absence and presence can be simultaneously present in the relics at Bodhgaya, it is necessary to develop a more complete understanding of the Buddha's absence. Eckel outlines the distinction in this way: "There is a time when the Buddha (or the being who is to become the Buddha) is present and capable of influencing the lives of his followers in an active way, but there comes a time when the Buddha can no longer affect them directly."²⁶ This raises a serious philosophical question: how can the Buddha be present to produce an effect in

²⁶ Eckel, 74.

any physical object? The differences between the Mahayana and Theravada positions on this issue are substantial, but Xuanzang's beliefs, which are of greatest concern here, are decidedly Mahayana. From the perspective of the Mahayana, the answer is he cannot. The Buddha is not present, or as Eckel offers, "the manifestation is an illusion, but, in a world where everything finally is an illusion, a manifestation can work just as efficiently as anything else to bring about a 'real' effect."²⁷ Thus, philosophically, relics and images of the Buddha can function just as if they were living manifestations of the Buddha, but they cannot physically be the living Buddha.

The Mahayana position opens up an interesting possibility: the Buddha can be just as present in his relics as he was in his living body. The explanation for this relies on the concept of emptiness (*sunyata*). Emptiness "defies simple expression but can be summarized by saying that everything, in the end, is empty (*sunya*) of individual identity (*svabhava*) and depends for the appearance of its own existence on an infinite network of other equally empty things."²⁸ Since everything is equally empty, equally an illusion, the living Buddha is as empty and as much an illusion as everything else. Thus, encountering the relics of the Buddha, the stand-ins for his person and teachings, was just as efficacious as encountering the Buddha. As Eckel neatly summarizes, "To see Emptiness was to see the Buddha, and vice versa."²⁹ Thus, we can conclude, in agreement with the previous section but arriving from an entirely different perspective, that there was no difference between the function of relics and a living Buddha: both generated insight into the emptiness of all forms.

Perhaps, for a brief moment when Xuanzang first arrived at Bodhgaya, he forgot this critical Mahayana insight, for the effect of his recognition of Buddha's absence at Bodhgaya upon his constitution is significant. As he approached the bodhi tree and an image of the Buddha purportedly constructed by Maitreya, he was overcome by emotion. His biographer, Hwui Li, describes the scene:

The Master worshipped the Bodhi-tree and the Buddha's image in the posture of attaining enlightenment made by the Bodhisattva Maitreya. After having respectfully worshipped the Bodhi-tree and the Buddha's image, he prostrated himself and wailed with regret, saying in a manner of self-reproach: "I do not know where I was born at the time when the Buddha attained

²⁷ *ibid.*, 85.

²⁸ *ibid.*, 3.

²⁹ *ibid.*

enlightenment. I can only have reached this place during this Image Period. How heavy my evil deeds must have been.³⁰

At first glance this account would seem to indicate that Xuanzang is only realizing that his negative karma must have caused him to miss the moment when an enlightened Buddha was in the world. However, Eckel reads this experience as providing much more insight into Xuanzang's understanding of emptiness and the Buddha's absence. The experience shows that "it is not only possible for the Buddha to be present at one moment and absent at another; the Buddha can also be present and absent simultaneously."³¹ For even while Xuanzang's karma has caused him to miss the Buddha's life, the Buddha is still present at Bodhgaya in the bodhi tree, the Maitreya image, and the Diamond Seat. All of these objects embody the Buddha's presence while simultaneously projecting evidence that he is not there. The Buddha is not under the bodhi tree, not on the Diamond Seat, and inside the temple is only a representation of the Buddha's body. These are all forceful reminders of the Buddha's absence, but even as the pilgrim weeps, Eckel reminds us that Xuanzang was able to "appropriate the Buddha's power, be reminded of the Buddha's message, and gain a paradoxical vision of the Buddha's manifested presence."³² By *seeing* the true nature of the manifestations of the Buddha's presence through recognizing the reality of the Buddha's absence, Xuanzang was also able to hold presence and absence in a complex tension. Relics were the bridge at Bodhgaya and elsewhere that accomplished this task.³³

A Foreigner's Perception of India before the Palas

While the previous sections have identified the primary value of being present at Bodhgaya to receive the merits of the Buddha's presence there and to come to a better understanding of the tension between the Buddha's presence and absence, Buddhists also came to India for far more pragmatic reasons. Xuanzang's pilgrimage account makes it clear that while he wished to "gaze on the sacred traces" like the bodhi tree and Diamond Seat, one of his primary objectives was to collect Buddhist texts to bring back to China. There is no question that India was perceived as a landscape infused with the presence of the Buddha, but it was also

³⁰ Hui-Li, *The Life of Hsuan-Tsang*, trans. by Li Yongshi (Peking: Chinese Buddhist Association, 1959), 101-102.

³¹ Eckel, 60.

³² *ibid.*, 49.

³³ Nancy Falk, "To Gaze on the Sacred Traces," *History of Religions* 16, no. 4 (May 1977), 281.

the center of the Buddhist world from a monastic and institutional standpoint. Part of the appeal of going to India for Buddhists would have been to receive instruction from its many Buddhist masters. In this final section, Xuanzang's account provides access to the way in which foreign Buddhists might have understood the centrality of India and Indian Buddhism. This perception may also have been challenged by some of the things that Xuanzang saw in India, especially in a group of comments he made about the decline of the dharma. Despite this challenge, Xuanzang was highly fortunate and extremely lucky in his experiences in India, and the political climate under the ruler in Magadha, the Buddhist heartland where Bodhgaya was located, is evidence of the delicate balance of forces which allowed Xuanzang's pilgrimage to occur.

Xuanzang left China in 625 C.E. to fulfill his "duty" to resolve the "doubtful passages" in his Buddhist holy books by following in the steps the fourth century pilgrim Faxian and venturing to the Buddhist heartland of Magadha in search of teachers, texts and traces.³⁴ According to Xuanzang's *Buddhist Records of the Western World* and Hwui-Li's biography *The Life of Hiuen Tsiang*, Xuanzang spent many years learning from Indian Buddhist masters, and when he returned to China in 645 C.E., he brought over six hundred Buddhist texts.³⁵ Along with his desire to resolve intellectual doubts about specific philosophical issues, Xuanzang also expressed his desire "to go and gaze on the sacred traces" of the historical Buddha Sakyamuni.

It is remarkable that Xuanzang even arrived at his destination and returned to record it, for very few and perhaps less than two percent of all of the pilgrims who left for India ever returned.³⁶ Moreover, Xuanzang encountered his share of unusual obstacles during his journey, but nothing seemed able to impede him, not even the threats of robbers or the entreaties of kings could prevent his arrival in the Buddhist heartland of Magadha. To confront these human obstacles – as opposed to geographic obstacles such as deserts, flooded rivers, or Himalayan mountain passes – Xuanzang often relied on an emotional appeal which restated the motivations for his journey. One such instance occurred early in Xuanzang's journey when he met the Khan of Western Turks at Tokmak (modern Kyrgyzstan). The Khan encouraged him to abandon his journey and return to China, claiming that India was hot and full of uncivilized persons.³⁷ The Khan's claims did not persuade Xuanzang to remain, so he pleaded with the Khan to permit him

³⁴ Hwui Li, 10.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 343.

³⁶ John Huntington, "Pilgrimage as Image: The Cult of the Astamahapratiharya," Part I, *Orientalism* 18, no. 4 (April 1987), 55.

³⁷ Sally Hovey Wriggins, *The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2004), 33.

“to go and gaze on the sacred traces, and earnestly search for the law.”³⁸ In another instance, a group of river-pirates were debating whether to sacrifice him to the goddess Durga, and in this instance, too, he begged them to avoid preventing him from paying his “reverence to the image of Bodhi” or seeking “the Sacred Books and the Law.”³⁹

Since it is not the case in either example that Xuanzang’s plea made the essential (or perhaps any) difference in his freedom or survival, these two examples serve to demonstrate the way in which Xuanzang presented the goals of his journey in the *Records*, and reflect the historical climate and situation of Buddhist Pilgrims during the seventh century. When he defied the Khan or pleaded with the pirates, Xuanzang would, at the very least, have been perceived by the readers of the *Record* as honest and religiously motivated, i.e., not just seeking to escape death or imprisonment, and thus one possible explanation for presence of his pleas, despite their ineffectiveness, was their accessibility to his readers in the religious culture of that period. The Khan, the pirates, and Xuanzang’s readers are all likely to have understood Xuanzang’s pilgrimage as a meritorious act of devotion, and therefore might have even believed that if they let Xuanzang complete his pilgrimage then they, too, might have gained some spiritual benefits. It is said, after all, that Xuanzang’s escape from the river pirates was due not to the sincerity of his entreaties, but the powerful storm his pre-sacrifice meditation conjured. The pirates realized that this was no “seemingly ordinary monk,” and were immediately reformed and converted to Buddhism.⁴⁰

While the storm may have spurred the pirates’ change of heart, it is likely that Xuanzang’s auspicious journey was reevaluated by and given new value for the pirates after this impressive display of “piety.” Even prior to their conversions, as followers of Durga, the river pirates were extremely likely to be familiar with pilgrimage and to have recognized a basic formulation of its merits: “To allow the devotee to imbibe the ‘sacred presence’ at a holy site and so be cleansed or healed by this experience and, more importantly to perform a religious observance or meritorious act (*karma*) in the hope of spiritual recompense.”⁴¹ Even so, Xuanzang, like many Mahayana Buddhists during this period, might have felt that his chances to become enlightened during his lifetime were not very good. While the Buddha, just prior to his

³⁸ Hwui Li, 44.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁴⁰ Eckel, 133.

⁴¹ Guy, 356.

parinirvana, had informed his followers that “the Dharma and the disciple will, at my passing, be your teacher,” many felt that they were living in a time when the Dharma was passing into a period of obscurity marked by the increasing difficulty of receiving proper teachings and becoming enlightened. The pilgrim describes the period he lives in as “the image period,” and perhaps he meant simply that the Buddha was only accessible in the form of images (or visualizations). If this is so, then Xuanzang may have also believed that he was living in a time when “the possibility of attaining enlightenment” has disappeared.⁴² In such a period “there is a gradual decline in the ability of people to reach the four fruits of the path. Initially, they lose the capacity to attain arhatship, and then, over time, the ability to reach the lesser stages of nonreturning, of once-returning, and of stream-entering.”⁴³ Thus, while Buddhism may still be present and visible and Buddhists follow the precepts, all of the highest and most difficult spiritual achievements are out of reach. Moreover, in this scheme the “last period of decline will see the disappearance of the relics (dhatu) of the Buddha... which eschatologically marks the final end of [the Buddha’s] *sasana* [teaching], and occurs prior to the advent of the next Buddha Maitreya.”⁴⁴

It is unlikely that Xuanzang believed he lived during the very last period of decline, because his *Records* clearly indicate that relics of the Buddha were abundant in India and Ceylon. Still, the physical evidence of the decline of the dharma and is articulated throughout his description of Bodhgaya:

Since the commencement of the period of decline at the end of the kalpa when the right Dharma started to decline, this site [Bodhgaya] was covered by sand and earth and became lost to sight. After the Buddha’s nirvana, the monarchs of various countries set up two sitting statues of Avalokitesvara facing the east at the southern and northern limits of the enclosure according to the Buddha’s description as they had heard from the tradition. Some old people said that when the statues of the Bodhisattva disappear and become invisible, the Buddha-dharma will come to an end, and now the statue at the south corner has already sunk down up to the chest.⁴⁵

Xuanzang may have just been relating religious folklore about the site or trying to account for its less-than-pristine upkeep, but this information about the loss of the dharma is placed alongside the account of the Buddha’s awakening on the Diamond Seat. Situated within a Buddhist

⁴² Strong, 221.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 223-224.

⁴⁵ Xuanzang, 245.

historical perspective it is apparent that the merit that Gautama has accumulated through his many previous lives that have enabled him to realize his Buddhahood. An entire body of literature, the *jatakas*, is devoted to retellings of the Buddha's past lives, describing the ways in which he demonstrated mastery of certain virtues such as generosity, patience and morality. The Buddha's rebirth as a prince within the Sakya clan indicates that he had accumulated significant merit, but within Xuanzang's narrative the earth itself is aware that the Tathagata's moment to achieve Buddhahood has arrived. Thus, Xuanzang's narrative also documents Gautama's journey to Buddhahood from his initial development of specific virtues to his Awakening, teaching, and the subsequent spread of the Dharma.

The image which John Huntington argues most embodies this journey at Bodhgaya is Buddha in the *Bhumisparsa mudra*, installed inside the Mahabodhi temple. Xuanzang explains that early in Bodhgaya's history a ruler wished to build a shrine to house "an image of the Tathagata as he was at the time of attaining Buddhahood."⁴⁶ When no craftsman responded to the inquiry for artisans to construct the image, a Brahman came forward and said he would make the image, claiming that all he needed was some scented clay, a lamp, and six months sealed inside the shrine. When the door was opened four days shy of six months by some curious monks, the image was nearly completed and the Brahman was nowhere to be found. The monks "realized that there was a divine hand at work," and later came to believe that Maitreya himself had come in person to make the image, posing as the Brahman.⁴⁷ Xuanzang's interest in Maitreya and the Buddha image constructed by Maitreya is further evidence for the source of his karmic breakdown discussed in the previous section, and in some ways Xuanzang's regret at having arrived at Bodhgaya nearly a millennium after the Buddha's *parinirvana* is the missing connection to his description of the half-buried Avalokitesvara statue. The statue established a visceral, physical, and historical connection between his inner-most thoughts as a Buddhist monk and the condition of Buddhism in the world (which, if the legend is accurate, is precarious).

One aspect of the condition of Buddhism in the world was the climate of religious toleration and support for Buddhists during the time of Xuanzang's pilgrimage. In Magadha, the kingdom Xuanzang was supported by a ruler named Harshavardhana. Harsha was the last indigenous ruler of India who was able to consolidate a kingdom stretching from the East

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 247.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 248.

(modern Bangladesh) to the West (modern Afghanistan). According to the *Record*, Harsha's victory against his rival Sasanka—the late Gupta ruler contemporary with Harsha's early rule in the first decades of the 7th century—paved the way for a renewal of Buddhism in this area. Xuanzang explains that when Sasanka conquered Magadha, he had “persecuted the Buddha-dharma” by desecrating the famous Buddha footprints, attacking them with a chisel and then hurling them into the Ganges.⁴⁸ According to Xuanzang, these traces of the Buddha, historically associated with the capital palace of King Ashoka and righteous kings, had remained miraculously unharmed and even unmoved despite Sasanka's efforts. Even the Bodhi tree, the last “living” relic of the Buddha after his passing, did not escape Sasanka's wrath. Xuanzang reports:

Recently King Sasanka, being a heretical believer, denounced the Buddha-dharma out of jealousy, destroyed monasteries, and cut down the Bodhi Tree. When he dug the ground so deep as to have reached spring water and could not get at the ends of the roots, he set fire to burn it and soaked it with sugarcane juice with the intention of making it rotten, so as to prevent it from sprouting.⁴⁹

Sasanka's wrath against the Bodhi Tree may indicate that he was acting against this important religious icon because it acted as a synecdoche for Buddhist power and authority in Magadha.⁵⁰ By substituting the tree, and perhaps a handful of skillfully selected monasteries, for all of Buddhism, Sasanka could subvert the existing Buddhist power structure which had flourished under earlier and more politically stable Gupta rulers.

Xuanzang's account goes on to suggest that Sasanka's actions are directly responsible for his death. It was not enough for Sasanka to strike down the tree, for he also wished to destroy the Maitreya Buddha image inside the temple at Bodhgaya. Sasanka could not bear to destroy it himself, so he appointed a minister to destroy the image. This man feared the repercussions the image's destruction might bring and he therefore decided to hide it behind a brick wall, and because he was “ashamed to see the image in utter darkness, he lit a lamp for it.”⁵¹ Shortly thereafter Sasanka mysteriously fell ill and suddenly died. Upon his ruler's death the minister returned to the hidden image and found that “after many days the lamp was still burning without extinction.” In many ways Xuanzang's account inverts the power of Sasanka, which is physical

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 226

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 246

⁵⁰ Mark Davis, *The Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 88-112.

⁵¹ Xuanzang, 249

and temporal, and offers the lamp's miraculous stamina as evidence of the inextinguishable non-human power of this site and the triumph of Buddhism and the dharma over this 'heretical' ruler. Not one of Sasanka's attempts to subvert Buddhism succeeds and even the Bodhi Tree, just roots left in a watery hole according to Xuanzang, is saved when a local leader restores the tree overnight through generous offerings of milk and his pious devotions.⁵²

The ultimate triumph of Buddhism should be expected from Xuanzang's account, but while it may appear that Sasanka's death was the climax of the story, and the solution to humiliation that Buddhists had endured, this is not the case. There is more at stake than Sasanka's failure to conquer or appropriate these symbols, because Xuanzang's account claims that "Buddha-Dharma" itself has been subverted and must be restored. From a historical perspective, it is likely that Sasanka's death was the opportunity that the rising Vardhana leader Harsha had been waiting for to fulfill his political ambitions of expanding his kingdom to the east and north. Yet, in the *Record*, Xuanzang portrays Sasanka's death not as a chance to conquer a vulnerable neighboring state, but as an opportunity for Harsha to step forward and restore Buddha-dharma. The importance of the restoration of Buddhism is particularly evident in Xuanzang's account of Harsha's ascension where the young prince supposedly consults the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, who tells him: "Since the king [Sasanka] of the country of Karnauvarna destroyed the Buddha-dharma, you should ascend the throne to work for its revival. With a mind of great compassion, and having sympathy for the people, you will soon become king of all the five parts of India."⁵³ One goal then, of portraying Sasanka's attack, therefore, is to identify how the opportunity arose for the installation of a glorious Buddhist community in India whose ideal king is compassionate and sympathetic, and to identify that king as Harsha.

Historically, Xuanzang was fortunate in his timing, as Chinese envoys to Harsha's successor in Magadha were executed. This rash action resulted in a swift retribution from the nearest Chinese army, who quickly won several victories in the area that now lies on the border between Nepal and India. If Harsha had still been in power this surely would not have happened, as the king was interested in opening diplomatic negotiations with China. According to Chinese sources, King Harsha had opened diplomatic relations with Emperor Taizong in 641 in order to

⁵² Rongxi, 246

⁵³ Rongxi, 143

send “an envoy to pay tribute [to China].”⁵⁴ Paying tribute as a means of opening diplomatic relations was common in many of the historical examples of Indian-Chinese contact, and may represent a generic political contract with the powerful Tang dynasty with which Harsha’s kingdom shared a border. Tribute could have also been an attempt to pacify a political neighbor who might have viewed Harsha’s growing empire suspiciously, or an attempt to pacify preemptively the Tang as the stronger neighbor.

Unfortunately, shortly after Xuanzang returned to China, king Harsha died. The ensuing struggle for power did not result in a clear successor to the kingdom and the empire was torn apart. The utter and swift collapse of Harsha’s empire could be seen as a testament to his effective and successful consolidation of his military gains; after all, it would be almost another four centuries before another ruler would conquer as much territory in Northern India. The collapse also indicates how difficult it was to conquer and rule such an expansive territory, as well as how fragile and fleeting these kingdoms could be. There were constant pressures from neighboring kingdoms, foreign invaders, and the internal pressures of a religiously and ethnically diverse population. Xuanzang’s fortune was to have arrived in a period when there was relative tolerance and even favor for Buddhists, but soon this would all change.

Conclusion

The Buddha’s presence drew Buddhists to India long after his *parinirvana*. In part, Buddhists continued to come to India because Indian Buddhism had been the source of their own native traditions and was still perceived as the center of the Buddhist world where the Buddha was still present, masters could explain texts, and the dharma still lived. Arriving in Bodhgaya, however, many Buddhists would have been struck by the realization that the Buddha was no longer present. Yet they acted as if they believed the Buddha were still present. Within Buddhist thought, this contradiction highlights the principle of emptiness which reinforces the understanding that there is no difference between the living Buddha and his relics.

Holding the tension between absence and presence, the relics at Bodhgaya served a valuable religious function. Not only did they prove that the Buddha was still available to assist his followers in their own Awakening, but they proved the historical reality of the Buddha’s Awakening. Like its relics, Bodhgaya was held in a kind of tension between a place where the

⁵⁴ D. Devahuti, *Harsha: A Political Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 213.

living Buddha was present and a place where the particular events of Gautama's Awakening could be seen. During this period, too, Buddhists were fortunate enough to have access to Bodhgaya and its relics, and this helped offset but could not prevent the growing evidence that Indian Buddhism was dying.

Chapter Two

Bodhgaya in the Imagination of Foreign Buddhists

Introduction

The previous chapter demonstrated the ways the Buddha could be physically present at Bodhgaya. For Buddhist pilgrims, like Xuanzang who were born after the Buddha's *parinirvana*, relics were one way to gain access to this physical presence. At the same time, Bodhgaya was a place where the Buddha's absence was evident and being there in person to respond to the presence and absence of the Buddha at Bodhgaya was a serious goal for pilgrims. Moreover, during Xuanzang's time, India was still seen as the center of the Buddhist world and as Buddhism's source. This chapter explores the changes in the relationship between Buddhists and Bodhgaya in the period after Xuanzang's pilgrimage as Buddhism declined in India.

The first section is an overview of the history of India prior to the first Islamic excursions into the territory surrounding Bodhgaya. It covers only the most essential elements of nearly 5 centuries of Indian history, concluding that the most important change during this period was not a single event, but rather a theme—the gradual decline of Buddhism. Growing religious competition and diversity, the loss of state support, and increasing syncretism all worked together to weaken the position of Buddhists across India. It was in this context that new alternatives to pilgrimage began to emerge.

In the second section, two such alternatives, the *Astamahapratiharya* image cult and souvenir Mahabodhi temples, are examined as methods which Buddhists employed to access Bodhgaya without going there themselves. In their own way, each item functioned as a bridge between the historical world of Bodhgaya and the contemporary religious lives of Buddhist communities living around Asia. Through acts of imagination, pilgrims could receive the benefits of being physically present at Bodhgaya from abroad.

The idea of connecting one's present-day religious life to the life of the historical Buddha was not a new concept, however, and the third section explores the most prominent example of creating access to and extended the Buddha's story—Sri Lanka bodhi trees. In an earlier time, when pilgrims accessed Bodhgaya with greater ease, Sri Lankans had obtained a branch of the

bodhi tree and replanted it and its saplings across their island. As living descendants of the original bodhi tree, these saplings created an indelible bond between the life of the historical Buddha and the history of Sri Lanka. Since the perception has already been established that there was no functional difference between bodhi trees and the living Buddha the effect was the literal population of Sri Lanka with living Buddhas.

The bond between Sri Lanka and the historical Buddha was also took the form of a Sri Lankan monastery at Bodhgaya. This and other strategies for preserving and maintaining Bodhgaya in the face of Indian Buddhism's decline are discussed in the fourth section of this chapter. Sri Lankans had established themselves as the guardians of the Mahabodhi temple, but their ability to protect the temple slowly faded away. By the time of the first Islamic invasion Bodhgaya was attended by few Buddhists, native or foreign. One of the few groups that had provided support from abroad during this period was the Burmese, whose actions, like the Sri Lankans before them, appear to have been motivated by a desire to connect themselves to the purer, historical Buddhism embodied in Bodhgaya. Even these last attempts at sustaining Bodhgaya did not succeed, for the account of the 13th century pilgrim Dharmasvamin is clear—Bodhgaya was feeling substantial pressure from approaching Islamic forces. In the final section of this chapter, Dharmasvamin's account of Indian Buddhism in Bodhgaya provides the last first-hand account of Bodhgaya before it is 'rediscovered' by the British in the early 19th century.

The Rise of the Palas and the Decline of Buddhism

For nearly one hundred years after the collapse of King Harsha's empire, India was without a clear successor. Regional polities battled one another for control, but no substantial kingdom emerged until the rule of Dharmapala around 775. His father Gopala, who might have even been elected by committee to rule eastern Bengal, would later come to be seen as the founder of one of the great Indian dynasties.¹ While Gopala expanded his kingdom westward, it was under Dharmapala's forty-year reign that many more lands from India would come under tributary rule. The kingdom of the Palas was first carved by conquest, but it was maintained by skilled administration and, above all, the longevity of its rulers.² Many of the Palas ruled for

¹ John Keay, *India: A History* (New York: Grove Press, 2000), 193.

² *Ibid.*

more than a quarter of a century, and the stability of their lineage was surely an asset to their power, providing steady leadership and clear expectations for their subordinated vassals.

The Palas were religious enthusiasts, supporting both Hindu and Buddhists practices. Scholars disagree about the extent of the Palas' "Buddhism," but the evidence is clear that many religions enjoyed a period of revival and growth under the Palas. John Keay, an ardent proponent of the perspective that the Palas were Buddhists, describes the 'oasis of Buddhism' in Magadha and Eastern India—prior to its conquest by the Ghurids and Dehli Sultanates in the 13th century—in this way:

For the Palas were Buddhists, indeed the last major Indian dynasty to espouse Buddhism. Their lavish endowments included the revival of Nalanda's university and a colossal building programme at Samapura, now Paharpur in Bangladesh, where sprawling ruins and foundations, all of brick, attest 'the largest Buddhist buildings south of the Himalayas'. They also founded an important new center of learning at Vikramashila, which was somewhere on the Ganga in Bihar. The fame of all these places traveled widely and suggests that Pala patronage was crucial to the future of Buddhism as a world religion. To the Pala kingdom came students from Sind, Kashmir, Nepal, Tibet, China, Burma, Cambodia, Sri Lanka and Indonesia.³

Under the Palas Magadha thrived as an international religious center, both attracting foreign Buddhists to India and exporting Indian culture to Asia. However, even the Buddhist revival in Magadha under the Palas was not enough to prevent Buddhism's decline in India as whole.

Before the Palas, as a national religious phenomenon, Buddhism was weakening in the face of growing religious competition. Xuanzang traveled all over the Indian subcontinent in the 7th century, and while he "found numerous monastic centers in the area from the Sindh east through the Gangetic Plain...the religion was already losing ground in the south and the northwest. In the south, devotional Hinduism, spread by the Tamil minstrel saints, was coming to the fore, at the same time that Sankara was revitalizing Advaita Vedanta. Hindu temples were being built, but no new Buddhist ones. In Andhra, [Xuanzang] found only 20 monasteries, with a total of 3,000 residents. Many monasteries were already deserted."⁴ As Keay points out, Nalanda and Vikramashila were international religious centers, but these institutions were expensive, and

³ *Ibid.*, 193-194.

⁴ Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction*, 4th ed. (Cincinnati: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997), 135.

“because the local population could not support all the student-monks through alms, there was a constant need to finance the students’ and professors’ material needs.”⁵

Without lessening financial support it became harder for monastic culture to compete with “the emerging cult of *bhakti* (devotion to a personal god).”⁶ *Bhakti* cults and other new, small cults which emphasized individual worship were more flexible and could survive without the extensive support that the larger Buddhist monasteries and universities needed. Placed in direct competition with these more self-reliant religious groups, Buddhism began to lose converts and lay supporters. With each successive generation the effect compounded, and since Buddhism relied on institutional forms to produce new monks, the result was a steady decline.

Another factor which may have weakened Buddhist communities was the appropriation of the Buddha by Hindus. The effect of this religious innovation was that “the demarcation between Buddhists and non-Buddhists was further blurred.”⁷ While many scholars today draw distinct lines between Hindu and Buddhist sects, there are few indications that this distinction meant as much during this period. In fact, people in India may have come “to look upon Buddhism as just another Hindu sect, the Buddha as just another—possibly inferior—deity in the very extensive Hindu pantheon.”⁸ If Buddhism was viewed as just another sect competing for patronage, then it might be possible for other groups to undermine them by co-opting their patronage opportunities. Thus, the *Puranas*, an important collection of Hindu mythology, first identified the Buddha as an avatar of Vishnu. Of this move, John Holt has claimed that it was most emblematic of the political shift from a substantially Buddhist India to a continent dominated by forms of Hinduism.⁹

The shift from a Buddhist to a Hindu India was the product of a significant period of time. Growing Hindu practices certainly played a role in Buddhism’s decline, but Buddhism’s problems may have resulted from the organization of their religious institutions. By relying of patronage, Buddhist monastic institutions relied on being favored by the current political rulers. Over the course of many years, the religious preference of these rulers shifted from an ecumenical or primarily Buddhist preference to Hinduism and later to Islam. In other countries,

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Ian Copland, “Managing Religion in Colonial India: The British Raj and the Bodh Gaya Temple Dispute,” *Journal of Church and State* 46, no. 3 (Summer 2004), 529.

⁷ Keay, 194.

⁸ Copland, 529.

⁹ John Holt, *The Buddhist Visnu: Religious Transformation, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.), 12-16

however, this system continues to work today. The brief comments above certainly do not explain the decline of Buddhism, but they may help to provide an outline of its context. Nevertheless, the result of the decline of Buddhism is most clear, and while Buddhism in India was gradually declining, the perception of Bodhgaya by foreign Buddhists began to change. The link between the two is more speculative and circumstantial than causal, but some connection between the two is certain.

The Industry of Images, Stupas, and Model Temples

Despite the changing religious climate in India, Bodhgaya continued to be a center for Buddhist pilgrimage. Inscriptional evidence suggests that Buddhists from China visited Bodhgaya as late as 1033. One of the last pilgrims was Hui-wen, who had been commissioned by the royal family to erect a stupa in honor of a former Sung dynasty emperor.¹⁰ Certainly, the Chinese were not the only pilgrims at Bodhgaya, but Hui-wen's example highlights one of the most significant devotional practices that developed there—the erection of stupas. Since most pilgrims would not have been sponsored by royalty, their individual contributions have remained overwhelmingly anonymous, erecting stupas without inscriptions that were smaller and more affordable.

One of the chief concerns of individual pilgrims was a way “through which the benefits of their visit could continue to be enjoyed and shared by those unable to make the journey in person.”¹¹ For each pilgrim who arrived safely at Bodhgaya over the centuries, there were many more who did not succeed, and even more who would never try. Moreover, as the previous chapter explored in greater detail, Bodhgaya provided an opportunity to accumulate considerable merit. For those few who were fortunate to visit personally, the merit accrued could be compassionately re-directed toward other less intrepid or less fortunate Buddhists.

Many different types of souvenirs were available to pilgrims, ranging from “low-fired and sun-dried clay miniature *stupas*,” to “clay impressions of prayer seals,” “narrative clay votive plaques,” “small stone steles,” and even “miniature models of the Mahabodhi [temple] itself.”¹² These items were produced locally, and fall into two broad categories. The first includes miniature stupas and prayer seals, objects which were employed in devotional acts which took

¹⁰ D.C. Ahir, *Buddha Gaya Through the Ages* (Delhi: Sri Sitagu Publications, 1994), 47.

¹¹ Guy, 356.

¹² *Ibid.*

place at Bodhgaya. Objects which left Bodhgaya with pilgrims fall into a second category, and included narrative plaques, stone steles, and models of the Mahabodhi temple. While on a practical level these objects were evidence of a pilgrim's journey, they were primarily devotional items.

All of these items were devotional and were used in Buddhist worship. A word or two is warranted about the central element behind the use of images of Bodhgaya (i.e., the Buddha showing the *bhumisparsa mudra*), or models of the Mahabodhi temple which was the recollection of the Buddha (*Buddhanusmrti*). *Buddhanusmrti* was a collection of practices in which devotees concentrated on the virtues of the Buddha, remembered the story of his Awakening, and visualized his physical form.¹³ The merits of this practice were similar to being in the presence of the Buddha, advancing one's level of attainment, and perhaps a better rebirth. *Astamahapratiharya* images or model temples were ideal objects with which to do this meditative practice, even though the recollection, the Buddha was a practice which became central to many Buddhists even before Xuanzang's time.¹⁴ Nevertheless, the key concept which continues on through the period at question is the importance of *seeing* the Buddha and the benefits which accrue from a state of mind which conceives of the Buddha. Since the Buddha was depicted in the *Astamahapratiharya* images and present in the models of the Mahabodhi temple, it is reasonable to conclude that these items could have been used in this way.

Returning now to those objects which were found by archaeologists at Bodhgaya, we find that the most numerous were small clay stupas. These stupas varied in sized, and were most often imprinted with seal that carried a Buddhist devotional formula. They were placed within larger stupas which were subsequently installed in close proximity to the bodhi tree. When Alexander Cunningham excavated Bodhgaya in 1864, he unearthed many examples of both the larger encasing stupas and the smaller enclosed stupas. Of the former, he described them as "thousands of monolith Stupas of all sizes from 2 feet in diameter down to 2 inches," explaining that the largest of them were most often found on raised pedestals.¹⁵ Of the latter, smaller type Cunningham found "hundreds of thousands" of examples "from 2 or 3 inches in height, to the

¹³ Paul Harrison, "Commemoration and Identification in *Buddhanusmrti*," Janet Gyatso, ed. *In the Mirror of Memory: Reflections on the Mindfulness and Remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 220.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 223.

¹⁵ Alexander Cunningham, *Mahabodhi or the Great Buddhist Temple under the Bodhi Tree at Buddha-Gaya*, (1892; reprint, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1998), 46.

size of a walnut.”¹⁶ The sheer volume of this form of devotion should have suggested that an important phenomenon had been discovered, but the great British archaeologist dismissed them. In fact, the only comment Cunningham saw fit to offer about the purpose of these monuments, especially the smaller clay stupas, was that they “appear to have been the common form of memorial for the poorer pilgrims.”¹⁷ As it was evident in the descriptions of *stupa* building in Chapter One, Buddhists have argued that the burial of one’s remains close to the bodhi tree or another relic was one way to ensure an advantageous rebirth. Here, however, Cunningham is primarily referring to stupas, which contain not remains of devotees, but dharma relics. Because of this distinction Cunningham was not wholly inaccurate in his description, as Hui-wen’s example is sufficient to validate his conclusions, but the value of these items increases further when their the inscriptions are also considered.

Those items stamped with the most common inscription became known to early archaeologists as “creed sealings” because “they always bore the same portion of Buddhist scripture known as the Buddhist creed.”¹⁸ One of foundations of Buddhism, the creed inscribed was most often the Four Noble Truths: “All things (dharma) arise from a cause. The Tathagata has explained the cause. This cause of things has been fully destroyed. Such is the teaching of the Great Sramana.”¹⁹ To prepare these clay objects, the creed “was carefully incised on a seal and the seal was impressed on clay... The resultant sealing was either put in a model stupa or used as a votive offering in its own right.”²⁰ As objects impressed with the dharma, they became “dharma relics” or “textual bodies” which were perceived to be equal to the corporeal relics of the Buddha.²¹ Even the smallest creed sealing was thus an offering of great merit, and as a group they formed an important element in worship at Bodhgaya.

Judging from the number of dharma relics recovered by modern excavations, pilgrims who desired to bring home a devotional item more often turned to items which were more visually oriented and specific to Bodhgaya. In these objects “it is the Victory over Mara (*maravijaya*)—which occurred under the *Bodhi* tree at Bodhgaya immediately prior to

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 46-47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 47

¹⁸ Simon Lawson, “Votive Objects from Bodhgaya,” in *Bodhgaya: the Site of Enlightenment*, ed. by Janice Leoshko (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1988), 97.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 98.

²¹ Strong, 10.

Sakyamuni’s enlightenment—that is most frequently represented as the central subject...²² By the eighth century this moment, most often portrayed through the symbolic *bhumisparsa mudra*, had become “the most prevalent sculptural depiction of Sakyamuni throughout northeastern India.”²³ More importantly, this image, in Jacob Kinnard’s opinion had come to be “intimately associated with *prajna*,” the wisdom of the Buddha that Kinnard identifies as the central element in the Buddha’s *maravijaya* and the goal of Buddhists seeking Enlightenment.²⁴ This stands in partial agreement with John Huntington’s argument, explained in Chapter One, that the *maravijaya* “is the culmination of the *dharma*.”²⁵ However, Kinnard is arguing here about the way Buddhists interpreted a depiction of Bodhgaya, not how they actually acted at Bodhgaya. Thus, Huntington’s argument, which alone was insufficient to explain Buddhist practices at Bodhgaya, remains an important perspective on how one can interpret images of Bodhgaya. The conclusion is that through the efforts of artists near Bodhgaya, anywhere that Pilgrims went they could carry not only a souvenir of Bodhgaya, but the Buddha’s presence embodied in the depiction of the *maravijaya*.

It was often the case that the *bhumisparsa mudra* was the central element in a relief containing depictions of other sites that Buddhists commonly visited as a circuit. Among hundreds of places associated with the life of the Buddha, “eight sites became codified into a discrete grouping,” that were “a kind of epitome of the life of Sakyamuni.”²⁶ This practice may have emerged after Ashoka’s pilgrimage discussed in Chapter One, but by the time of Xuanzang’s pilgrimage the eight sites were a well-established pilgrimage route, and “possibly even the primary form of devotional worship by the lay Buddhist community” in northern India.²⁷ Completing a circuit of the eight sites was seen as “an assured method” by which the laity could acquire “sufficient merit to ascend to one of the Buddhist heavens, or assist a monk on the path to *nirvana*.”²⁸ As images became more common, the eight sites were often depicted together in a practice known as *Astamahapratiharya*. As pilgrimage became an option employed

²² Guy, 357-8.

²³ Jacob Kinnard, *Imaging Wisdom: Seeing and Knowing in the Art of Indian Buddhism* (Great Britain: Curzon Press, 1999), 109.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁶ John Huntington, “Pilgrimage as Image: The Cult of Astamahapratiharya,” Part I, *Orientalism* 18, no. 4 (April 1987), 55.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Guy, 357-8.

by fewer Buddhists, this image cult emerged as “a much more inviting way to make the ‘trip,’” and facilitated by these images many Buddhists began to conceptualize the religious landscape of India instead of visiting it personally.²⁹

The portability of souvenir icons was surely part of their appeal, but unlike dharma relics those items produced for the *Astamahapratihayra* cult were individualized to address the spiritual needs of a single user. While the basic construction of the stele or tablet would possess the basic form of the eight sites, they would often be supplemented by “details of certain ‘elective’ sub-units... entirely different from one practitioner to the next.”³⁰ Thus, while other devotional items were identically mass-produced, images intended for *Astamahapratihayra* cult could be intensely personal. Their individualization should not be construed as a suggestion that these images were wildly inventive or innovative, for they were also closely regulated by an “iconographic authority” who would be “consulted to discuss the appropriate image type.”³¹ This consultation would have identified for the practitioner which images and scenes were the most efficacious for their needs. Huntington speculates that this process might have produced “over nine-tenths of a design,” all before an artist could have even begun the commissioned piece.³²

An important element of the *Astamahapratihayra* images was their connection to the central Mahayana text, the *Astasahasrika-prajnaparamitra*. While the creed sealings explored above possessed a basic formulation of the dharma, one which remains at the heart of Buddhism, the *prajnaparamitra* or Perfection of Wisdom literature represented a later, more complex articulation of the dharma. It is worth revisiting this literature, which was briefly discussed above in Chapter One. We may recall that this literature calls into question the value of physical relics, concluding that “the perfection of wisdom scripture is preferable for the relics are subordinate to it,” and that “they are worshiped only because ‘they are pervaded by the perfection of wisdom.’”³³ The value of both relics and texts are said to be the way they demonstrate and embody *prajna*. Since the *bhumisparsamudra* was most often at the center of the *Astamahapratihayra* images and was identified as a pure representation of *prajna*, the

²⁹ Huntington, “Pilgrimage as Image,” Part I, 55.

³⁰ John Huntington, “Pilgrimage as Image: The Cult of Astamahapratihayra,” Part II, *Orientalism* 18, no. 8 (August 1987), 65.

³¹ Huntington, “Pilgrimage as Image,” Part I, 59.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Strong, 9.

Atsamahapratihayra cult was the intersection of relics, texts, and images, the connection between the physical world of Bodhgaya and ways that Buddhists have discovered to access the Buddha's teachings. This led Huntington to conclude that "there is virtually no doubt that some sort of interpenetration of the text, the icon, and the practitioner was in practice during the Pala period eastern Mahayana Buddhism."³⁴ Inscribed with the eight most important Buddhist sites and thus the full transformation of Sakyamuni into the Buddha, these narrative images and the Perfection of Wisdom literature both functioned as condensed representations of the "whole of Buddhism," and each outlined the entire process of attaining Buddhahood.³⁵ The image of the Buddha at Bodhgaya played the central role in this practice, offering Buddhists across Asia a chance to access the event which occurred under the Bodhi tree that had secured the possibility of their own Enlightenment and a chance to access the Buddha's presence.

Another devotion item which served the same purpose could be purchased at Bodhgaya—models of the Mahabodhi temple. Today, more than 25 examples exist of this intriguing type of devotional souvenir. One of the first to be recovered was found at Bodhgaya during British excavations, and Cunningham relied heavily on this model to inform his reconstruction of the temple in the late nineteenth century. This model, less than fifteen centimeters in height, showed only the largest of the temples at Bodhgaya, the famous Mahabodhi temple. As a group of souvenirs, however, the models average twenty centimeters in height and are most often carved in "grey schist or graphitic phyllite," both native to the region.³⁶ Most of the models are carved with considerable detail, highlighting the sculptural relief of the actual temple, complete with images of the Buddha, bodhisattvas, and other architectural details, most importantly the Maitreya image inside the temple. The bodhi tree is almost universally placed on the terrace of the temple models, highlighting one of the most significant changes to the actual temple after its restoration for when Cunningham restored the temple the tree was so badly injured that it was dug up and replanted.³⁷

The models are one of the most striking examples of pilgrimage souvenirs from Bodhgaya, not because of their portable size or complex design, but because they represent a primarily historical connection to Bodhgaya. John Guy, judging "from the models' [wide

³⁴ Huntington, "Pilgrimage as Image," Part II, 68.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Guy, 361-2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

geographic] distribution,” has concluded “that they were produced expressly for selling to pilgrims, and that they served not only as souvenirs but as proof of the journey successfully completed.”³⁸ For those who had never been to India, a model of the temple honoring the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment would connect the well-known historical narrative of the Buddha’s Enlightenment with their own religious history, which intersects in the pilgrim’s encounter at Bodhgaya. The model is tangible evidence of that link, and on a pragmatic level it also provides a visual framework for the pilgrim’s story.

Bodhgaya, including its relics and the Buddha’s presence, was condensed in these souvenir models and transported all across Asia. In Nepal, Tibet, Burma, Thailand and even China, these models found new and eager audiences. Their popularity may be explained by the “growing demand from Buddhist rulers and devotees abroad to establish contact with the pure source of the faith, the essence of which was considered to reside at Bodhgaya.”³⁹ Despite the changes in Indian Buddhism and its steady decline, Bodhgaya remained, in the imaginations of foreign Buddhists concerned about their heritage, very much the source to which they should return for a pure Buddhist tradition. The idea of Bodhgaya, its lineage connecting it to the historical Buddha was far more important than the reality of life in India, for these models, like the objects produced for use in the *Astamahapratiharya* cult, were clearly intended to be used away from Bodhgaya. In both cases these devotional objects were a framework for the Buddhist imagination to superimpose the Buddha’s living presence onto images of Bodhgaya, and to connect the devotee to the historical past which remains in the present.

Planting the Center at the Periphery

One of the most successful strategies that early Buddhists employed to connect themselves with the historical Buddha was to transport seeds from or cuttings of the bodhi tree from Bodhgaya to their native lands. The clearest and perhaps the first example of this practice was the Sri Lankan transportation of a bodhi tree branch in the 3rd century BCE, long before the height of Buddhism in India. This mission forever linked the historical Buddha with the emerging religious landscape of Sri Lanka. In the previous section pilgrims’ transportation of model Mahabodhi temples and images of the *Astamahapratiharya* were offered as examples of a

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 362.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 364.

bridge between the historical past and the pilgrim's contemporary religious history, which made the Buddha present by recognizing in the devotional object, the *prajna* which the Buddha Awakening embodies. The relationship between Sri Lanka's bodhi tree and the presence of the Buddha operated on a different principle, that the bodhi trees on Sri Lanka had been directly and organically produced by the original bodhi tree. Thus, the essence of their presence was generated by direct descent, and not through a form of perceptual or intellectual imagination.

The story of the bodhi tree's journey to and distribution on Sri Lanka is worth telling because it provides further contextual background for the souvenir activities of Buddhists at Bodhgaya during the Pala period, but also because Buddhists after the Palas would follow the Sri Lankan's example for replicating Bodhgaya and the Buddha's presence outside of India. John Strong offers this reading of the Pali chronicles which document this important event:

It is not a seed of the original Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya but its whole southern branch that is cut and taken to the Sri Lankan capital, Anuradhapura. The story is as follows: Princess Anula, the sister-in-law of the Sri Lankan king Devanampiya Tissa, forms the wish to be ordained. However, this is not possible for there are, as yet, no nuns in Sri Lanka, and it takes a quorum of ten nuns legitimately to carry out new ordinations. The elder Mahinda (King Ashoka's son) therefore recommends that his sister, Sanghamitta, who is a fully ordained *bhiksuni*, be invited to come from India to the island along with a quorum of nuns. At the same time, he specifies that she should bring with her a branch of the Bodhi tree, since the Bodhi trees of the three previous buddhas of this aeon were also transplanted to Sri Lanka... Soon after it takes root in Anuradhapura, it produces five fruits. These are given to the king, who is told to plant them. From them grow Bodhi tree saplings—eight from the first fruit, and then a total of thirty-two more from the other four. The first eight saplings are planted at eight different places all over Sri Lanka, all of them connected to the saga of the tree's coming to the island... The thirty-two Bodhi tree saplings are likewise planted all over the island, but with a slightly different scheme in mind. They are evenly spread out at locations said to be correlated with the so-called “yojana stupas”—the reliquaries built “at every league” [yojana] by King Devanampiya Tissa.⁴⁰

This version highlights an importance difference “between the bodhi tree saplings and the [yojana] relics” which are encased in stupas, but the relics “have all been brought about by a process of *division*, an apportionment of relics, carried out by men. In the case of the spread of the Bodhi tree, the process is one of growth and *multiplication*.”⁴¹ This “new metaphor” for the distribution of relics “emphasizes reproduction and spread and descent (i.e., lineage) over

⁴⁰ Strong, 153-155.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 156.

division and controlled distribution.”⁴² As living byproducts of the original bodhi tree, sapling bodhi trees share in the lineage of their parent, creating a vibrant connection to the Buddha’s Enlightenment experience at Bodhgaya. Moreover, the bodhi tree seems willing to reproduce repeatedly without coercion or at the urging of any human. The bodhi tree can act in its own for the best interests of the Sri Lanka people, and also to confirm their right to its presence.

It is clear that for Sri Lankan Buddhists the bodhi tree is the agent of its own history. For not only does the original tree branch have its own adventures crossing the sea to reach Sri Lanka—it ventures to the realm of the nagas underneath the ocean for seven days—but its miraculous multiplication and distribution indelibly ties each new sapling to the very tree which the Buddha sat beneath and honored in thanks after his Enlightenment. Sri Lanka was included in a new chapter in that long history, and as “living” relics outside of India, the new bodhi trees would continue to act as “expressions and extensions of the Buddha’s biographical process.”⁴³

Strategies for Preserving Bodhgaya’s Mahabodhi Temple

By the eleventh century, it was clear that the loss of patronage that accompanied the success of Buddhism’s religious competitors had resulted in direct and unfortunate consequences for Bodhgaya. Without a clear source of income, the Mahabodhi temple was not being adequately cared for, and foreign Buddhists felt obligated to provide the maintenance that the temple desperately required. This support came primarily through restoration projects sponsored by Burma and Sri Lanka, who both sent missions to Bodhgaya between the seventh and twelfth centuries. Even though the Sri Lankans remained one of the only foreign Buddhist groups with any significant numbers of permanent residents in India, they could not weather the growing political and religious transformations. It was surely a matter of pride for both countries to care for the temple, but by the time the Palas gave way to the rising power of Islam, the issue was moot. It was all the Burmese and Sri Lankans seemed able to do to send missions from abroad to care for Bodhgaya and its decaying temple.

Sri Lankans had seen themselves as the guardians and heirs to Bodhgaya since they had first populated their own soil with bodhi saplings. As Bodhgaya became a thriving pilgrimage destination for Sri Lankan Buddhists, the Sri Lankan king had built a permanent monastery there.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 5.

Xuanzang described the Sri Lankan monastery, which had come to administer the affairs of the temple complex which contained the Bodhi tree and vajrasana, during his visit in 637:

Outside the north gate of [the enclosure of] the Bodhi Tree is Mahabodhi Monastery, built by a former king of the country of Simhala [Sri Lanka]. The buildings consist of six courtyards and three storied pavilions, surrounded by walls thirty or forty feet high. The workmanship is most wonderful, and the decorative paintings are exquisitely done. The Buddha's image is made of gold and silver, and all the ornaments are embedded with gems and jewels. The stupas are lofty and spacious with wonderful adornments and contain relics of the Tathagata... There are fewer than one thousand monks, who study the teachings of both the Mahayana and the Sthavira schools; they are strict in observing the Vinaya rules and pure in conduct and have moral integrity.⁴⁴

The King of Simhala had provided for the monks in exquisite fashion, and it is lamentable that more scholarly research has not been done on this interesting subject, for the Sri Lankan presence at Bodhgaya was surely the most permanent and intimate of any Buddhist group in history. Their presence also gave them unique access to the temple and its day-to-day operation. Indeed, they were often quite discriminating about who could enter the temple complex and when. Apparently more than one pilgrim was verbally harassed over the years, and for those who came to Bodhgaya, Sri Lankan oversight of their activities at the temple and bodhi tree was unavoidable and their privilege in this matter unchallenged.⁴⁵

Perhaps very few records of Sri Lankan activities exist because they ran the temple as an extension of their own monastery. In the many centuries that Sri Lankans remained at Bodhgaya, only a handful of inscriptions inform scholars about their activities to keep the temple in good condition. Of those that survive, one of the few “tells us only of three important monk-pilgrims from Sri Lanka during the next three hundred years [after Xuanzang].”⁴⁶ The first and second pilgrims both built small shrines during their pilgrimage—meaning they most likely constructed one of the medium-sized encasing stupas discussed above. The third, Prakhyatakirti, who came near the end of the seventh century, made repairs to the temple. His inscription reads “the temple has been adorned with a new coating of plaster and paint at the cost of 250 dinars.”⁴⁷ Such

⁴⁴ Xuanzang, 258.

⁴⁵ George Roerich, *Biography of Dharmasvamin (Chag lo tsa-ba Chos-rje-dpal): A Tibetan Monk Pilgrim* (Delhi: Shri Jainendra Press, 1959), xvi.

⁴⁶ Ahir, 27.

⁴⁷ Ahir, 30.

simple restorative efforts were needed regularly because, unlike other temples that had been made of stone and mortar, the temple at Bodhgaya was made of brick covered with stucco.⁴⁸ This medium was highly susceptible to the elements, and it was apparently rather simple for reasonably endowed foreign Buddhists to hire local labor to complete repairs.

While Sri Lankans may have been disinclined to celebrate the continuous upkeep of the temple, when Burmese missions arrived to repair the temple, it was an event they did not hesitate to record. Eventually, the Burmese would authorize a number of missions to repair the temple at Bodhgaya. In the eleventh century two Burmese missions came to Bodhgaya. The first arrived in roughly 1035, and the second in 1086. About the first mission very little is known apart from the rather unspecific fact that “repairs” were done. The dated inscription better serves as evidence that shortly after start of the eleventh century the Burmese had begun what would be a long affair with the Mahabodhi temple.⁴⁹ The second mission, however, was convened by the important Burmese king, Kyanzittha, who in a more substantial inscription explained that the mission was necessary because “the temple of Sri Vajrasana had been destroyed by other kings.”⁵⁰ It is unclear which kings are being cited. It was certainly not any Islamic ruler, for it precedes by a number of years the first documented Muslim incursion in the region. The Pala dynasty had just been overthrown and replaced by a king who did not support Buddhists, but there do not appear to be any records indicating that this ruler attacked Bodhgaya. Nevertheless, the Burmese repair efforts are believed to have been considerable, for the king provided a small fortune in hard currency, mostly jewels, to fund the temple’s repair.⁵¹ Alexander Cunningham, the foremost authority on the condition of the temple prior to its modern restoration (which effectively prevented many additional archaeological questions from being answered), believed “the work done by the Burmese in the 11th century...to have been a complete repair and restoration of the whole building, from the floor to the top of the pinnacle.”⁵² Such a restoration did take a great many years and it seems, that despite Kyanzittha’s long rule, he did not survive to hear that the work had been completed.

⁴⁸ Robert L. Brown, “Bodhgaya and South-East Asia,” in *Bodhgaya: the Site of Enlightenment*, ed. by Janice Leoshko (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1988), 112.

⁴⁹ Geri H. Malandra, “The Mahabodhi Temple,” in *Bodhgaya: the Site of Enlightenment*, ed. by Janice Leoshko (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1988), 21.

⁵⁰ Ahir, 73.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Cunningham, 27.

In 1305, the Burmese would send another mission to Bodhgaya, which had become a valuable source of information about Bodhgaya's history. Here we are less concerned with the actual reality of the history which the Burmese present in the inscription found at Bodhgaya, but rather the perception of Bodhgaya's history that is evident in the inscription. This perception was that the Burmese were the heirs to Bodhgaya and could trace their lineage all the way back to Ashoka, the ruler who first constructed any monument there. A summary of the awkward wording of the inscription reads:

1. Ashoka built the temple.
2. The temple was rebuilt by Naik Mahanta.
3. The temple was restored by Raja Sado-Meng.
4. Raja Sempyu-Shaken-tra-Mengi sent his guru Sri Dharmaraja Guna to superintend restoration of the temple, but the work was not completed [during his reign].
5. Varadasi Naik Thera petitioned the king to undertake the work, which was then started in AD 1305 and completed in AD 1306.⁵³

What is most important about the inscription is the sense of the history of the Mahabodhi temple from the Burmese perspective. Like all Buddhists of the time, the Burmese believed that Ashoka built the first significant structure at Bodhgaya. Later, perhaps just after the fifth century pilgrimage of Faxian, the temple was considerably expanded and this event is commonly attributed to Naik Mahanta despite the lack of any corroborating evidence. In item three, King Sado-Meng refers to the mission of 1035 mentioned above, while item four references king Kyanzittha's unfortunate death, which temporarily left the work unfinished until it was refinanced by a local Indian ruler.⁵⁴ The last item documents the mission which left the inscription in two languages on "a copper-gilt umbrella" for the pinnacle of the temple which "was found carefully buried 8 feet under the modern ground level, to the west of the temple" during 19th century excavations.⁵⁵ The list identifies a series of Burmese rulers for their special contributions in the construction of the temple, negligent or ignorant of the considerable contributions of many other religious communities. If one were to judge by this inscription, all the most important events in the recent history of the temple had been initiated by the Burmese (items two and three being separated by approximately 500 years). Placing their restorations on

⁵³ Malandra, 23.

⁵⁴ Ahir, 72.

⁵⁵ Cunningham, 27.

equal footing with the paradigmatic Indian ruler Ashoka, too, suggests that their historical claim searches for a way to establish themselves as the true inheritors of Ashoka's monument. Like the Sri Lankans who settled in the shadow of the Mahabodhi temple, the Burmese may have believed that by restoring and providing for the temple they could claim its nobly endowed and merit-producing lineage as their own connection to Gautama Buddha.

Dharmasvamin and the State of Bodhgaya after the Palas

Despite the best intentions of the Burmese, the Sri Lankans, and others to protect the Mahabodhi temple, it simply became too dangerous to venture into the Buddhist heartland. This fact is confirmed by the travel account of the Tibetan pilgrim Dharmasvamin.⁵⁶ Arriving in Bodhgaya in 1234, he visited many of the same places as Xuanzang had 600 years earlier. His experiences identify Turkish Muslims as the primary obstacle to safe pilgrimage. As Dharmasvamin informed his readers about narrowly escaping militia forces, we can imagine how alternatives such as the *Astamahapratiharya* cult could easily be perceived as the only safe option. Nalanda, just a short distance from Bodhgaya, had partially recovered after it had been invaded in 1197, but it was a shadow of its former self. In the seventh century Xuanzang had described Nalanda as a remarkable and grand monastery, containing 10,000 students of the Mahayana and other schools, but by the thirteenth century Dharmasvamin could find no teachers at Nalanda to instruct him and no texts to copy.⁵⁷ There were also “no traces” of Vikramasila, the international school established by the Palas, because it had been “razed to the ground” by “Turushka” who had “thrown the foundation stones into the Ganga.”⁵⁸ This destruction was so thorough that modern excavations have still not been able to identify the exact location of this famous institution.

There is no direct evidence that Muslims were administrating this area of Bihar, but the territory had certainly been “conquered” by the middle of the thirteenth century, and the effects of the first stages of this conquest were palpable.⁵⁹ Even the scene at the Bodhgaya was unnerving to the pilgrim who said “the place was deserted and only four monks were found staying (in the [Sri Lankan] Vihara). One (of them) said, ‘It is not good! All have fled from fear

⁵⁶ George Roerich, *Biography of Dharmasvamin (Chag lo tsa-ba Chos-rje-dpal): A Tibetan Monk Pilgrim* (Delhi: Shri Jainendra Press, 1959).

⁵⁷ Hwui Li, 112; Roerich, xxii.

⁵⁸ Roerich, 64.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, xvi

of the Turushka soldiery.”⁶⁰ The monastery which greeted Xuanzang with nearly one thousand monks had all but died, leaving Bodhgaya largely unprotected and unsupported. Facing the threat that the Buddha image inside the Mahabodhi temple might be destroyed, the few remaining Sri Lankan monks took action. In one of the most striking parallels between the accounts of Dharmasvamin and Xuanzang, the Tibetan explains that because of the soldiers, the four monks had:

Blocked up the door in front of the Mahabodhi image with bricks and plastered it [over]. Near it they placed another image as a substitute. They also plastered the outside door (of the temple). On its surface they drew the image of Mahesvara in order to protect it from non-Buddhists. The monks said [to Dharmasvamin], ‘We five do not dare to remain here and shall have to flee... At daybreak they fled towards the North following the rut of a cart, and for seventeen days the Dharmasvamin did not see the face of the image (i.e. the Mahabodhi image.) At that time also a woman appeared, who brought the welcome news that the Turushka soldiery had gone far away. Then the Dharmasvamin returned to the Vajrasana and stayed there worshipping and circumnambulating [sic] the image of Mahabodhi.’⁶¹

It is unclear from this account whether he was actually present as the icon was hidden or had arrived after the work had been completed. While he describes the process of its concealment clearly, he does not claim to have been personally involved, yet when he returns he is able to worship the concealed image with no reference to its removal from hiding. While this could simply be an oversight, the entire incident is suspect because it so closely resembles the incident described by Xuanzang almost 600 years earlier. In Xuanzang’s version, cited here again for clarity, it is Sasanka’s inability to overcome “the compassionate features of the image” which causes him to tell “his attendant minister, ‘You had better remove this image of the Buddha and replace it with that of Mahesvara [Siva].’”⁶² The minister is placed in an awkward situation, which he articulates: “If I destroy the Buddha’s image, I shall suffer disaster for many kalpas, but if I disobey the king’s order, I shall not only lose my own life but also incur the extermination of my entire family.”⁶³ His solution is to hire Buddhists to build a “brick wall built horizontally in front of the Buddha’s image... On the front of the brick wall he drew a picture of Mahesvara.”⁶⁴

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁶² Xuanzang, 249.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

The similarities between the two accounts could suggest a common legend that both pilgrims accessed, but the intimate nature of Dharmasvamin's account could also mean that this type of concealment was repeated at several different moments in Bodhgaya's history. The accounts' differences, however, indicate that there had been, not unexpectedly, a change in Bodhgaya's status over the last 600 years. In Dharmasvamin's account concealment is a way for the image to escape destruction from an immediate, non-Buddhist threat. It is unlikely that any local religious person would have been fooled by this type of deception, and this suggests, as Dharmasvamin claims, that the threat is from foreigners who are unfamiliar with the finer distinctions between Buddhism and other devotional cults who might worship Siva. On the other hand, Xuanzang is narrating what he believes to be a historical event, whose moral is that the Buddha's image can lighten the hearts of those who might do it harm. Xuanzang's story ends with Sasanka's death and the rise of the ruler who will avenge the image's disgrace, but the entire tone of the account suggests the foreknowledge that the Buddha image has survived and that Buddhism has triumphed.

The motif of the hidden icon is not exclusive to Buddhists. In a similar event during the fourteenth century the people of Sri Rangam, a temple community near Delhi, were threatened by a Muslim army. Alerted to the impending catastrophe, "One Rangaraja, evidently a local headman, bricks in the main sanctum, then constructs a false altar in front of the closed entrance and places some lesser images there. The iconoclasts destroy them, little suspecting that the central deity of the temple is relaxing peacefully on the other side of the wall."⁶⁵ Richard Davis explains that these types of narratives rely on "imagery of continuity" to confront "significant historical changes" and that the concealment of important images "recognizes a real threat: images are vulnerable to destruction."⁶⁶ Stories about the fate of images often follow "the rhetorical form of peristrophe. An initial setting of stability is disturbed by an outside force. Invasion leads to the apparent loss of a significant icon...At a critical moment, however, the image-deity acts, to overturn the opponent's view and to reassure the audience of the continuing power of icons."⁶⁷ Xuanzang's account most certainly follows this model, relying on the power of the image to influence Sasanka and casting his minister in the role of the 'subversive collaborator'. In these stories it was just as important to "produce conviction in the audience of

⁶⁵ Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 130.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

authenticity” as it was to narrate the resistance and miraculous recovery of images. Thus in Dharmasvamin’s account he is careful to mention that he sees the image afterward, assuring his audience that the image has survived the danger intact.⁶⁸

Because images had become a central component of the devotional lives of Indian people, they also became a weakness when Islamic power spread across the continent. Images were most often housed in temples, and therefore rulers could gain political support by commissioning images or constructing temples. These temples then “acted to represent and embody political accomplishments” which could be subverted by conquest.⁶⁹ Davis explains that by the time the Turkish empires began to conquer territory near Magadha:

The Indian landscape...was covered with myriad temples, each filled with what must have seemed an astonishing and bewildering host of divine images. For Muslims, who worshipped a god they considered unique, absolute, transcendent, and exclusive, these Hindu [and Buddhist] practices appeared as ‘idolatry’ and ‘polytheism’ (*shirk*), anathema to the True Faith. Moreover, as Muslim warriors correctly surmised, the Indian temple cult was closely tied to the political order, with kings and ruling groups sponsoring and participating ostentatiously in the building and grand festivities of royal temples and images. So it was important for Muslim conquerors not only to denounce Hindu [and Buddhist] images for theological reasons, but also to act against them as a statement of conquest.⁷⁰

The attacks on Nalanda and Vikramasila suggest that these schools were still seen as powerful religious entities, centers of idolatry and political opposition to be extinguished. There are several possibilities for Bodhgaya’s unlikely escape from these strategic attacks. One possibility is that Bodhgaya was simply in a state of disrepair that disinclined the armies to bother with it. The restoration closest to the time of the Islamic entry into Bihar had been 80 years earlier, and scholars have not yet found any evidence to suggest that any efforts to repair the temple were made in the interim. Another explanation might be that the temple, without a major icon (hidden or already destroyed), was ignored as a potential target. Dharmasvamin is less than forthcoming about the details of the image he saw at Bodhgaya, and it is possible that it could have been newly commissioned after the initial invasion of Bihar resulted in the loss of an older image. It might have also been the case that because the monastery at Bodhgaya was already so weak and unpopulated that there was no need to waste resources destroying an abandoned monastery or a

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 88.

temple on the verge of ruin. Furthermore, it could be the case that the conquerors did damage the temple and destroy its image. Any one of these possibilities could have occurred; for now, the evidence remains thin and, above all, inconclusive.

One of the few pieces of evidence which indicates that there might have been a perceived threat to Bodhgaya was discovered by Cunningham excavation—the copper-gilt umbrella from the Burmese mission in 1305. The British archaeologist believed that it had purposefully been buried as an attempt to preserve it from theft or destruction.⁷¹ Richard Davis notes that “defensive burial was one common practice,” especially “under pressure of iconoclasm,” and thus “concealment and flight became important means of preservation for [relatively] portable icons. Images might find refuge underground, or they might abandon their wealthy and vulnerable temples for more out-of-the-way sanctuaries. The assumption, or at the least hope, behind these evacuations was that, when the danger had passed, the images would return to their accustomed homes.”⁷² This certainly offers one reasonable explanation for the careful burial of the gilt umbrella; however, there is no specific evidence that Bodhgaya was harmed during this period. That Buddhists perceived themselves to be under attack is certain. The result, too, of the Islamic conquest of Bihar was that after the Burmese mission of 1305-6 more than one hundred and fifty years passed before the Mahabodhi temple would be restored again, and more than five hundred years would pass before substantial numbers of Buddhists would return to Bodhgaya.

Conclusion

Even if none of these specific scenarios came to fruition, if Dharmasvamin portrayed his experiences in India accurately, then his journey lies on the cusp of the triumph of the foreign Mughal dynasty. Bihar would be soon become, in the opinion of at least one scholar, “overrun” by Islamic forces.⁷³ Whereas Xuanzang had to travel to India as a pilgrim seeking pure tradition and to be in the presence of the living Buddha through his traces in the centuries that followed these goals were no longer realistic. The traces were still in India, and presumably the Buddha’s presence as well, but visiting them was difficult and dangerous. As the image cult of the eight sites suggests, a safer and easier pilgrimage was available to everyone who was unable or unwilling to journey to India. Buddhism and pilgrimage in India never completely stopped, but

⁷¹ Cunningham, 75.

⁷² Davis, 127.

⁷³ Ahir, 72

the radical transformation of the Indian landscape resulted in religious innovations which were just as valid and effective. Yet, these methods still relied on an intimate relationship with the Indian continent. India was in the imagination of the worshiper who employed a stele depicting the eight sites or worshipped a model of the Mahabodhi temple. Even the Sri Lankan transportation of the Bodhi tree served to establish a permanent link to India, a tie that would firmly establish the presence of the Buddha on their soil. Whereas in Xuanzang's time Bodhgaya and India had been the center to which Buddhists flow and where the Buddha's presence was most visible, in the period after Xuanzang's time Bodhgaya has steadily become less and less of a center for Buddhists. As devotional attitudes toward and devotional practices using Bodhgaya became free of the confines of the Indian landscape, Buddhists outside of India had become their own Buddhist centers and they could fully develop the Buddha's presence in their own countries.

Chapter Three

Building Enlightenment Abroad

Introduction

While Buddhism had nearly vanished from much of northern India by the end of the thirteenth century, it was flourishing elsewhere in Asia. As the previous chapter showed, the decline of Buddhism in India had a significant effect on the nature of the relationship between Buddhists outside of India and Bodhgaya. When Xuanzang made his pilgrimage in the seventh century, Bodhgaya was the preeminent destination for Buddhists and was located in the geographic center of the Buddhist world. By the time of Dharmasvamin's pilgrimage in the thirteenth century, Bodhgaya was attended by a handful of monks, visited by few foreign pilgrims, and the condition of the temple was so poor that rulers from Burma and Sri Lanka felt obligated to repair it because there were no local patrons to attend to it. Bodhgaya was no longer at the center of the Buddhist world, and perhaps there was no such center in Asia by this period. As Buddhism spread across Asia it diversified, the native traditions of each country developing in their own particular fashion. Yet Bodhgaya continued to exert considerable influence on the Buddhist world—even if it was from the periphery of that world—and Buddhists outside of India continued to derive political and religious power from Bodhgaya in their own countries.

The continuing influence of Bodhgaya is most clearly demonstrated by the pattern of construction that extended beyond the borders of a single kingdom—the replication of the Mahabodhi temple abroad. This final chapter examines seven such replicas built across Asia in Burma, Thailand, Nepal and China between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries and argues that their construction demonstrates the persistence of the symbolic power of Bodhgaya, as well the creative ways in which this power was appropriated and redeployed by foreign Buddhists as an element of their own native forms of Buddhism. If the decline of Buddhism in India meant Bodhgaya was displaced from the center of the Buddhist world, Buddhism's growth abroad resulted in new kind of life for Bodhgaya among individual communities of foreign Buddhists. Each of these communities recognized the power which Bodhgaya held to mediate the Buddha's

absence and presence, and each ultimately sought to reproduce that power in their own native lands.

While the discussion below primarily focuses on the history of the construction of replica Mahabodhi temples, it should not be forgotten that the function of all replicas was devotional. The models which were discussed in chapter two share this characteristic, and it is necessary to understand the significance of depicting the Mahabodhi temple rather than the bodhi tree or the Diamond Seat exclusively. For Xuanzang and Dharmasvamin the image of the Buddha showing the *bhumisparsa mudra* inside the Mahabodhi temple at Bodhgaya had been created by the future Buddha Maitreya. Images showing this *mudra* have already been established as representing and indicating the Buddha's Enlightenment at Bodhgaya, but it is worth repeating the fact that this type of image became the most common Buddha image during the Pala period. As the Mahabodhi replicas, both miniature and full-scale, attempt to recreate the form of Bodhgaya, they have also attempted to recreate the images present at Bodhgaya. Thus, all of the miniatures discussed in the previous chapter were not only likely to carry a dharma relic, but also to portray the Maitreya image inside the temple.

The larger temples which will be discussed shortly presumably followed this pattern, too, but this aspect of their design has been overlooked by the few scholars who have studied Mahabodhi replicas. This is most unfortunate because the presence of the Maitreya inside the larger temples would conclusively link their function to the function of the miniatures. The miniatures have already been identified as valuable devotional items, most useful for visualization practices and forms of meditation where one recollects the Buddha (see chapter two). While building a temple was considered highly meritorious, there is no doubt that the temples also played a devotional function after their construction, even if this function cannot only be said to resemble the function of the miniatures. If the connection between replica Mahabodhi temples and the Mahabodhi temple in India operates on a principle of transference, then we can assume that all of the devotional strategies arising from being in the presence of the living Buddha should apply equally here. It is likely, too, that the temples not only provided access to the Buddha's presence, but also provided a clear way to mediate the sense of the Buddha's absence that must have been present in Buddhist communities that only fully developed hundreds of years after the Buddha's *parinirvana*. The solution of Buddhists in the

Pal period was eventually not enough by itself, and Buddhists throughout Asia exercised a more direct and immediate alternative which resulted in the Buddha's presence in their own countries.

Burma

Burma was foremost among foreign communities constructing replicas of the Mahabodhi temple from Bodhgaya. The single most important explanation for this relationship was Burma's reliance on Sri Lanka to restore a "pure" form of Buddhism to the Burmese *sangha*. Yet the motivation for constructing buildings, as opposed to some other form of religious expression, was rooted in the relationship which Michael Aung-Thwin has described between political legitimation and the merit produced by supporting the Buddhist community.¹ In Burma building temples was seen as the highest form of patronage and the most effective means for rulers to maintain their authority. The broadest sketch of Burma's history between the ninth and sixteenth centuries is straight forward, with a kingdom based in northern Burma composed of ethnically Burmese peoples ruling from the late ninth century until the fourteenth century when a different ethnic group, the Mon, rose to power in southern Burma. For the purposes of this final chapter the many differences between these two kingdoms are ignored because of the striking similarities of their relationship with Bodhgaya: both participated in the building of Mahabodhi replicas, and both are believed to have done so because their rulers desired a way to connect the religious lives of their subjects with the historical Buddha who was present at Bodhgaya.

The relationship between Buddhism and the legitimation of Burmese rulers is seen most clearly during the kingdom of Pagan, which lasted from the tenth to the fourteenth century. Buddhism became the official state religion of the kingdom of Pagan in central Burma during the rise of the eleventh century ruler Aniruddha. Aniruddha's kingdom consolidated many smaller, local rulers into a significant empire, and his successful conquest was celebrated by the building of many pagodas in his capital, Pagan. Soon thereafter he began to increase the level of patronage received by the Buddhist monastic communities. Judging by epigraphic and archaeological evidence, Aniruddha's patronage of Buddhism was extensive and he is credited with building one of the most important Buddhist shrines in Burma.² In the twentieth century many terracotta molds of the Buddha flanked by Avalokitesvara and Maitreya were discovered

¹ Michael Aung-Thwin, *Pagan: The Origins of Modern Burma* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985

² *Ibid.*, 35.

in Pagan, most often inscribed with: “By me, King Aniruddha, this mould of Sugata (Buddha) has been made; through this (good deed) may I obtain the path to Nirvana when Maitreya is (fully) enlightened.”³ The institutionalization of state-supported Buddhism by Aniruddha meant that subsequent rulers found Buddhism “essential to political, social, economic—indeed total—legitimation of the state.”⁴ A ruler’s right to rule became directly correlated with his generosity towards the Buddhist community, and for historian Michael Aung-Thwin the escalation of this model ultimately resulted in a collapse of the Burmese kingdom at Pagan. As the obligations of each successive ruler to Buddhist communities became greater, the political machine was left unable to disengage from the cycle of patronage without undermining its own authority, leading Aung-Thwin to conclude that “the Kingdom of Pagan declined because the factors that had nurtured it in the first place became, *in time*, the forces that contradicted and destroyed it.”⁵

The cycle of patronage which was found in the early kingdom of Pagan centered on the idea of merit. Desiring to be reborn in circumstances where salvation could be attained, devotees in Pagan believed that the ability to construct temples was evidence of an elevated birth and produced additional merit to permit an even more auspicious rebirth. This model of merit-based construction saw the accumulation of merit as a stepping-stone on the path to nirvana, and is clearly demonstrated in Aniruddha’s inscription above. By the thirteenth century, however, this model had become a lesser alternative for Burmese devotees, who believed that “the *method* to achieve salvation, that is, acquiring merit, was now equated with salvation itself.”⁶ The most efficacious method of acquiring merit was donating directly to the monastic community, but “the quantity of merit received was equivalent to the quality of the gift rendered.”⁷ Merit was, in essence a spiritual currency, whose value was set and which could ultimately be transferred from one person to another. A devotee’s “spiritual status was commensurate with the degree to which one shared one’s merit.”⁸ Therefore, the king’s legitimacy was not merely a function of his support of the religious establishment, but because as its most generous patron he had the most

³ Than Tun, *Essays on the History of Buddhism in Burma* (Scotland: Kiscadale Publishers, 1988), 7.

⁴ Michael Aung-Thwin, 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

spiritual currency to transfer to his people. Since this merit was considered salvific, in essence, the construction of temples and the cycle of merit meant that he was the peoples' "savior."⁹

While the importance of the merit-based spiritual economy of the kingdom of Pagan is vital to understanding the repercussions of the construction of a Mahabodhi temple in Burma, the importance of the connection between Burma and Sri Lanka should not be overlooked. This connection likely began prior to the kingdom of Pagan, too, as the Mon peoples who lived in southern Burma believed that they had been converted by a missionary sent by the famous King Ashoka. The Mon peoples were responsible for the conversion of many Burmese people to their style of Theravada Buddhism, perhaps simply through cultural interchange as their Mon kingdom neighbored (and was subdued by) the rising power of Pagan. While the birth and rise to power of the Kingdom of Pagan may have been assisted by the Buddhism brought by the Mon, the allure of Mon culture would recede for the Burmese in the eleventh century as "both Burmese and Mon went to Ceylon to worship the holy places and be re-ordained with the most orthodox rites."¹⁰ While Buddhists in India were few, the community in Sri Lanka was strong and, as chapter two demonstrated, they had extensive ties to Bodhgaya. Art historian Robert Brown believes that the connection between Sri Lanka and Bodhgaya was ultimately responsible for the strong interest which Burma also had toward Bodhgaya.¹¹

One of the most notable influxes of Sri Lanka Theravada into Burmese culture occurred during King Aniruddha's reign when he captured the city of Thaton, a stronghold of Mon (i.e., Sri Lankan) Buddhism. Aniruddha claimed that he attacked the city from his desire to obtain Buddhist relics and texts, and indeed, "he returned with a great part of the population, including Buddhist monks."¹² The Buddhism which he brought with him represented, at least to Aniruddha, an older Buddhism which was still linked to "primary texts, correctly ordained monks and Buddha relics."¹³ This became one of the dominant characteristics of both Burmese and Thai Buddhism during this period, and since one of Sri Lanka's most prominent connections to this "older" and "historical" Buddhism was through the cuttings of the original Bodhi tree,

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ A.B. Griswold, "The Holy Land Transported: Replicas of the Mahabodhi Shrine in Siam and Elsewhere," N.A. Jayawickrama, ed., *Paranavitana Felicitation Volume*, (Sri Lanka: M.D. Gunasena, 1965), 175.

¹¹ Brown, 104.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

discussed above in Chapter Two, the search for a pure Buddhism in Sri Lanka inevitably led to Bodhgaya.

Burma's connection with Bodhgaya would be established first through missions sent to India in the eleventh century. The most notable mission of this period, still during the reign of the Palas in India, was explored in Chapter Two and was authorized by king Kyanzittha. However, for at least two subsequent Burmese rulers, the interest in Bodhgaya extended far beyond funding more restorations of the Mahabodhi temple (which they did do in the thirteenth and perhaps in the fourteenth or fifteenth century) and was directed instead at recreating the Indian temple in Burma. The first of two replicas that would eventually be constructed was built in Pagan sometime in the first half of the thirteenth century (perhaps in 1215) and is usually attributed to king Htilominlo (although it may have been king Nadaungmya or Natorimya).¹⁴ Even though this temple today stands as one of the best preserved replicas of Bodhgaya, there is a surprising dearth of historical information about this ambitious project. It is possible that another Burmese mission was sent to India specifically to draft plans of the temple, but Alexander Griswold believes this is unlikely because "the first mission [Kyanzittha's, circa 1100] had very likely kept detailed records of the Bodhgaya temple, either in writing or in the form of models, and their successors would only need to refer to them."¹⁵ The incentive for creating such a replica may be straightforward: Bodhgaya was becoming more difficult and dangerous to access, and so a locally accessible version was built as a substitute. John Huntington claimed nearly an identical motive for pilgrims' using model Mahabodhi temples and *Astamahapratiharya* images.¹⁶ Moreover, Griswold believes that the process of copying architectural items in Burma is akin to the "planting of a descendant of... the original Mahabodhi tree: the sapling, though far smaller, and possessed of far fewer branches and leaves, is no less a *ficus religiosa*; and while it can never resemble its ancestor exactly in configuration, it will be able to exercise the same power over men's minds."¹⁷ Griswold's argument matches the physical evidence that Mahabodhi replicas were built abroad with the motivations of earlier devotional objects. Like bodhi trees, recreating the Mahabodhi temple was a way to recollect not only the Buddha, but to make his living body present. Since the merit produced in making a replica was

¹⁴ Griswold, 201

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Huntington, "Pilgrimage as Image," Part II, 68.

¹⁷ Griswold, 181.

equal to the merit produced in the construction of the original temple, it is obvious why rulers outside of India would wish to replicate the Mahabodhi temple.

The Mahabodhi replica at Pagan would not be the only large-scale effort by the Burmese to reproduce the style and form of the temple at Bodhgaya. Perhaps the most significant replica outside of India was built during the fifteenth century. By this time the kingdom of Pagan had given way to a new kingdom comprised of ethnic Mons (as opposed to the Burmans in Pagan) whose capital was Pegu in southern Burma. King Dhammaceti, who ruled from 1462 until 1492, dedicated the replica of the Mahabodhi temple he built at Pegu in 1479. The replica not only reproduced the famous central temple at Bodhgaya, but also included replicas of all of the monuments dedicated to the actions, such as walking meditation, which the Buddha performed in the seven weeks after his Awakening, commonly called the stations. The stations had become an important element in Burmese art in Pagan between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, and the Mon had “an elaborate mythology establishing a direct link between Lower Burma and the historical Buddha,” and they were most especially concerned with physical relics of the Buddha.

¹⁸ Art historian D.M. Stadtner argues that “the selection of the stations as a theme [at the Pegu replica] has been universally explained as a effort by Dhammaceti to emulate the sacred site of Bodh Gaya...”¹⁹ Since Bodhgaya was, by the fifteenth century, located in territory firmly controlled by Islamic rulers, and the temple complex was likely controlled by group of Hindus, “the Buddhist kingdoms in Burma and Thailand had turned to Sri Lanka for religious guidance.”²⁰ Again, Sri Lanka was elevated as the source of a purer, more historically-grounded Buddhism, and this led to the re-ordination of Burmese monks in Sri Lanka to restore the lineage to Burma. This desire to cleanse Burmese Buddhism of its impurities led to a “celebration of relics that were uniquely tied to the establishment of Buddhism in Lower Burma. The foremost were the strands of hair presented to the merchants shortly after the Enlightenment.”²¹ Legend recalls that during the seventh week after his enlightenment, two Burmese merchants who happened to be in Magadha came upon the Buddha and offered him some food. Thankful for the nourishment, the Buddha gave the merchants two strands of hair from his head, which they dutifully carried back to lower Burma and enshrined in a small temple. Later the hairs were taken

¹⁸ D.M. Stadtner, “A Fifteenth-century Royal Monument in Burma and the Seven Stations in Buddhist Art,” *Art Bulletin* 73, no. 1 (March 1991), 41.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 40.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

from Thaton where they had been originally enshrined and moved (by force) to Pagan to be placed in a temple built for them by King Aniruddha.²² Like the construction of temples in the kingdom of Pagan, the effect of the reaffirmation of Burma's traditional connections to Buddhism through its most cherished relics was the creation of another location within Burma which provided access to the Buddha's presence and strengthened Dhammaceti's political status.

While the reinvigorated Buddhism of Dhammaceti's reign resulted in an increased awareness of the historical links between Bodhgaya and Burma, the carefully planned construction of the stations themselves suggests that the replica's efficacy was also dependent on how accurately it reproduced the original. A number of textual sources were used to identify the correct locations of stations at the Indian Bodhgaya and "the plan adopted at Pegu was probably based on a combination of sources drawn from the Nidana Katha and records compiled during the Pala period by Buddhism pilgrims from abroad."²³ Not all of these sources agreed on the location of the stations, and thus, it is difficult to tell whether the changes in the textual sources are the result of physical changes at Bodhgaya, the differences between sources preserved by different traditions, and so on. The search for authoritative textual sources to identify the locations was extremely important this replica's construction. In the sole inscription found documenting the replica's construction the sources for the site's monuments is carefully outlined. This led Stadtner to conclude that builders believed that "the efficacy of the site was enhanced by its resemblance to the original in India."²⁴ Certainly, the construction of any monument would have been a merit-producing enterprise, but given Dhammaceti's inclination to restore a historically based Buddhism, the accuracy of his Mahabodhi replica was likely crucial element this program. The replica did establish a clear connection between the fifteenth century landscape of Burma and the religious landscape of Bodhgaya, and could easily have been seen as connecting modern Burma with the very event of the enlightenment itself. Unfortunately, with so few textual sources on the construction of this temple, it will remain speculative whether the Burmese Buddhists of the period also believed they were accessing and reproducing Bodhgaya's power or building a metaphorical bridge that linked the lineage of the modern Burmese tradition to the historical Buddha.

²² *Ibid.*, 40.

²³ *Ibid.*, 44.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

Even if the exact ramifications of the construction of Mahabodhi replicas are imprecise or unresolved, the continuing influence of the site of the Buddha's enlightenment on Burma should not be disregarded. Not only had early kings in the kingdom of Pagan taken it upon themselves to finance significant repairs to the Indian Mahabodhi, but they also recreated the visual landscape of Bodhgaya not once, but twice. In both cases, the replicas were located in the seats of government and authorized by the rulers of the time. A link, however circumstantial, seems evident between the construction of the Mahabodhi and the legitimation of rulers who wished to restore "pure" Buddhism to their lands. In some ways, then, the Burmese interest in Bodhgaya is a direct consequence of the source of their conservative revivalism, Sri Lanka. If the Burmese also took the typical attitude expressed by Sri Lankan Buddhists toward the transportation of the Bodhi trees, then Burma was indeed attempting to create a link between their religious history and the ongoing religious narrative of the Buddha. The revival of Burma's historical connections to the Buddha then serves to position this move as a return to their Buddhist roots, and not a radical rethinking or restructuring of Burmese Buddhism. By replicating Bodhgaya in Burma, the Buddha's presence was available for the Burmese to access, and the link between the historical landscape of India and Burma was solidified.

Thailand

Much of what was true for Burma was also true for Thailand. Each country found itself seeking to revitalize and reform its religious institutions, and both turned to Sri Lanka to do so.²⁵ According to Alexander Griswold, when the Thai "settled in Siam they drew their religious inspirations from the chief surviving centers of Mon culture—Thaton and Pegu in Lower Burma...Presently they too turned more and more toward Ceylon as the fountainhead of the Doctrine."²⁶ Almost a century before any Mahabodhi replica would be built in Thailand, a Thai king named Lo Tai "installed replicas of the Buddha's Footprint on several hilltops in his realm."²⁷ The stage was set for Bodhgaya to be introduced (and reproduced) on Thai soil, especially since other members of Lo Tai's royal family were wealthy enough to make sustained foreign pilgrimages in the fourteenth century, possibly even to Magadha when that territory was

²⁵ Brown, 104.

²⁶ Griswold, 177.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 177.

under the administration of Hindus and controlled by Muslims.²⁸ An inscription from the period in Thailand records that the result of this or another similar pilgrimage was a “shoot of the holy bodhi tree,” and goes on to explain that “whoever salutes, reveres and worships this Great Relic [an unspecified physical relic] and the holy bodhi tree will acquire as much merit as if he had paid homage to the Lord in person.”²⁹

This period resulted not only in the restoration of a direct link to the historical Buddha through his relics but also to the “purer” Sri Lanka lineage. It may have begun in the years after a king named Sam Fang Gen came to the throne in 1401 and “renounced the Doctrine and transferred his allegiance to the cult of spirits,” because his rejection of Buddhism caused a number of monks to leave Thailand for Sri Lanka.³⁰ These monks were re-ordained in Sri Lanka, and when they returned in 1430 they began to ordain many Thais in their tradition, and this new religious group may have had much to do with the abdication of Sam Fang Gen. As Griswold concludes about the rise of his successor, Tiloka, “the stage was set for a religious revival, and a flowering of Buddhist art and letters.”³¹

King Tiloka, who ruled from 1441 until 1487, is most commonly credited with the building of the best surviving Thai Mahabodhi replica.³² Tilokaraja ruled the kingdom of Lan Na, whose primary city and capital was Chiangmai. The Mahabodhi that was built there is reliably dated to 1479, and according to Richard Guy, Tilokaraja’s inspiration was several “Thai monks returning from Sri Lanka with a cutting for the *bodhi* tree at Anuradhapura (a direct descendant of the original *bodhi* tree).”³³ While Guy offers no source for this evidence, Robert Brown explains that “the Pali *Jinakalamali*, written at Chiangmai in 1516-1517, says Tiloka began work on the monastery in 1455 by planting a bodhi tree, a sapling from a tree already growing in the Chiangmai area but one cultivated from a seed of the Anuradhapura bodhi tree in Sri Lanka.”³⁴ More importantly, however, the *Jinakalamali* goes on to say that after planting the bodhi tree in the monastery the King “issued a royal command to embellish that place and make it like the place where the Lord Buddha attained omniscience long ago, and to establish the Sattamahathana, the complete Seven Stations, in exactly the same manner as at the site of the

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 179.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 180.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 181.

³² Brown, 110; Guy, 366.

³³ Guy, 366.

³⁴ Brown, 110.

Enlightenment, where the Lord Buddha struggled against the mighty Lord Mara long ago in the Majjhimadesa.”³⁵ The motivation for the king’s royal order was, apparently, a particularly stirring religious sermon, which extolled the considerable merit which would be acquired by anyone who plants a bodhi tree.³⁶ The king hoped to accrue merit to donate to his father, and this may partially account for why the king did so much more than planting one bodhi tree.

Tiloka surely relied on some source for the construction of his replica, but no record has definitely established this source. There is a strong possibility that King Tiloka sent a mission to India, but it is also possible that his builders relied on a model of the Mahabodhi brought from Sri Lanka or India, or that he had relied on the temple at Pagan which had been constructed several hundred years earlier. Of these possibilities, Alexander Griswold believes the mission to India is the most likely, although he does not offer the possibility that the Thai, much like King Dhammaceti in Pegu, used textual references as a primary source of information about the stations, as this information would have been difficult to obtain from the Pagan temple which had no such memorial. Moreover, since the date of the beginning of construction of the monastery at Chiangmai where the bodhi tree was planted was 1455, and it is possible that the construction of the stations did not start immediately or took a great many years, it may be that King Tiloka, who reigned concurrently with Dhammaceti for a number of years, exchanged information with or otherwise relied upon information collected by the Burmese king. Griswold argues that the two may have “joined forces for the purpose, embarking both their missions on the same vessels,” but he also warns that “it would have been belittling for a man of Tiloka’s character to send to Pagan for plans when his neighbor was sending to the original source.” Thus engaged in the same enterprise and not to be outdone by their rivals across the peninsula, it is likely that the Thai, like the Burmese, also reconnoitered Bodhgaya first-hand.

Far less is known about the second Thai replica which was built at Chiengrai (not to be confused with Chiangmai). As the temple stands in ruins today, its dating remains a contested issue. D.C. Ahir, without citing any particular source, places the temple’s construction in the fifteenth century, roughly the time of the Chiangmai’s construction.³⁷ In contrast, Alexander Griswold places its construction “during the Burmese occupation of northern Siam (mid-sixteenth to late eighteenth century,” because “during the early eighteenth century, when the

³⁵ Griswold, 184.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Ahir, 178.

town shared with Chieng Sen the distinction of being the seat of a Burmese governor, there was a considerable outburst of building activity—the precarious position of the occupying forces seems to have inspired a rather panicky program of merit-making.”³⁸ Robert Brown, also weighs in on this issue, noting that “we know that the temple was built before 1500 as an inscription dated 1500 from [Chiengrai] mentions [Chiengmai’s] existence.”³⁹ Brown also believes that it is likely that the communities at each place were aware each other and dialogue between them could have been a source for the idea of another replica. It is also a possibility that Chiengrai was simply a later regional version of the earlier replica built in the capital. Unlike the reasonably well documented history of the royal replica, the history of this second copy and its benefactor has not survived. If Brown’s reading of the inscription is incorrect, then one might conclude that little is known about this temple at Chiengrai in Thai history because it is in fact a product of the Burmese occupation, as Griswold suggests. In either case, the production of a second Mahabodhi temple in Thailand yet again marks the strong relationship between this country and Bodhgaya’s Mahabodhi temple.

Nepal

While the relationship among Burma and Thailand and Bodhgaya can be clearly attributed to Sri Lanka, replicas were constructed elsewhere in Asia, too. While the information discussing their historical origins is scant, they are worth discussing because they demonstrate that Sri Lankan Buddhism need not have been the portal by which Buddhists in Asia accessed Bodhgaya. A single temple was built in Nepal during the sixteenth century, but elsewhere, too, the form of the Mahabodhi temple was being recreated. Indeed, after the tenth century and before the year 1800, no fewer than seven replicas of the Mahabodhi were constructed, throughout Asia.

The replica built in Nepal, named Mahabauddha, seems to have been constructed because of the pilgrimage of a single monk. In the only full-length article about the Nepalese replica, Mary Shepherd Slusser reports the following about the origins of the temple:

According to a Nepalese Buddhist chronicle, a *vajracharya* (Buddhist priest) from Patan named Abhayaraj went to reside for several years at Bodhgaya and on his return constructed the copy—a feat simultaneously assigned to a grandson, Jivaraj, a few pages further along. The one is said to have lived during the reign of

³⁸ Griswold, 211.

³⁹ Brown, 111

the Kathmandu king, Amara Malla, whose dates may be fixed at *c.* 1529-1560, the other during the time of a successor, Sadasiva, who ruled *c.* 1575-1581. In an unpublished essay, a resident Sakya of the Mahabauddha community avers that construction was begun by Abhayaraj in 1564 and completed by his descedents.⁴⁰

However, while the identity of the pilgrim who actually ventured to Bodhgaya remains unclear, according to the same chronicle, the construction of the temple employed a souvenir model of the Mahabodhi temple or an impressed plaque of Bodhgaya which had been brought back from India.⁴¹ Since the chronicle is vague about the character of the item and its specific origin, it is also a mystery whether this item was a current (sixteenth century) product of Bodhgaya. In the late sixteenth century the temple supposedly crossed into Hindu control because the Buddhists had abandoned the site, and it therefore becomes unclear who might have created such a souvenir for the unknown Nepalese pilgrim.⁴²

The existence of souvenir models confirms the relationship between Bodhgaya and Nepalese Buddhists in the past (some of the finest models that exist today were found in Nepal), but the Nepalese chronicles leave much to the imagination about their relationship during the time immediately surrounding the construction of the replica.⁴³ The proximity of Nepal and Bodhgaya meant that the connection between the two was in less jeopardy than the connection between Bodhgaya and Buddhists who lived in Burma or Thailand or even in Sri Lanka. However, in the period following the fall of the Pala, as a cultural group, “the Nepalis would construct in the Kathmandu valley, a copy of the famous temple...in keeping with their tradition of creating substitutes for renowned sacred sites. Believed to incorporate the virtues of the original, such substitutes are eminently more convenient geographically. There is scarcely a sacred site in India that does not have such a substitute in Nepal.”⁴⁴ Slusser does not explain, however, if the replication of the Indian sacred landscape onto the Kathmandu valley was so common, *why* the Nepalese waited until the late sixteenth century to do so for Bodhgaya. If, as she suggests, “for the Buddhist communities in Patan and nearby Kathmandu a ‘pilgrimage’ to the Patan Mahabauddha would confer the same rewards as the more arduous one to distant

⁴⁰ Mary Shepherd Slusser, “Bodhgaya and Nepal,” in *Bodhgaya: the Site of Enlightenment*, edited by Janice Leoshko (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1988), 125.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Alan Trevithick, “British Archaeologists, Hindu Abbots, and Burmese Buddhists: The Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya, 1811-1877,” *Modern Asian Studies* 33, no. 3 (1999), 635-656.

⁴³ Guy, 362.

⁴⁴ Slusser, 127.

Bodhgaya,” then wouldn’t they have attempted to ease this journey at an earlier point in their history?

Certainly under the Palas, Buddhists from Nepal could have easily journeyed to Bodhgaya, but in the period after the Pala dynasty fell, that is, after the thirteenth century, the situation in northwestern India was politically unstable and this may have reversed the pattern of migration and pilgrimage. The solidification of Islamic power in Delhi placed great pressure on the regional rulers bordering Nepal, and many were unable to keep their kingdoms as autonomous sovereignties. Some of the Buddhists who lived in India during this period actually fled the country, and the most popular destination for Buddhists living in northern India was Nepal. There are no statistical records of the number of migrants from India to Nepal during this period, but according to historian Rajendra Ram, the influx of monks and skilled crafters, such as artists and sculptures, resulted in Nepal becoming a kind of custodian of Indian Buddhist culture.⁴⁵ In this climate, one can imagine how the desire to preserve Indian Buddhism might arise and displaced pilgrims might choose to adapt to and accommodate their situations by replicating Indian sites. As a hypothesis this awaits specific evidence, but it is noteworthy that Buddhists, linked by their very lineages in India to the historical Buddha, should arrive in Nepal and in approximately the same period the interest arises to replicate Indian Buddhist sites. Most of all, this calls to mind the Burmese and Thai motivations for constructing replicas, as all three societies desired to connect themselves to India’s geography and to those places and things most identified with the historical Buddha, and in all cases, understanding few differences or distinctions between worshiping at Bodhgaya and worshiping at their own native replicas.

China

China’s place in the building of replicas of the Mahabodhi temple is unique. While the Burmese, Thai, and Nepalese constructions all share the common characteristic of a journey to Bodhgaya to recover directly plans for the replicas, China’s replicas apparently only relied on models, most likely obtained through the military victories in northern Burma in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. If the Chinese had not relied on such models, then the building of the two replicas in Beijing, one in 1473 and another in 1748, would have required far greater effort than the construction of replicas in any country previously mentioned. This is not to place a Chinese

⁴⁵ Rajendra Ram, *A History of Buddhism in Nepal: A.D. 704-1396* (Delhi: Motilal Barnarsidass, 1978), 162-164.

mission to Bodhgaya in the fourteenth or fifteenth century out of the realm of possibility, only to suggest that as Chinese records make no mention of such a significant undertaking (and likely a highly auspicious one worth recording), it seems unlikely. It was also not the case that the Chinese relationship with Bodhgaya was new, for they were among the first foreign countries from which substantial numbers of pilgrims came to India; beginning with Faxian's fifth century journey, and reaching a high point with the pilgrimage of Xuanzang in the seventh century, small numbers of Chinese pilgrims continued to arrive in India until the tenth century or perhaps later. It was clear that Bodhgaya had certainly not been forgotten by Chinese Buddhists.

In his brief account of the two Chinese replicas, Wu-t'a-ssu, Alexander Griswold recorded the following:

It is curious that this monument should have been erected at so nearly the same time as the Chieng Mai and Pegu monuments. One might almost suspect some particular movement that had wide repercussions in the Buddhist world. But in fact the plans had been brought to Peking quite a long time before, in the reign of the Emperor Ch'eng-tsu of Ming (1403-1425). They were brought, according to one account, by a pandit from Tibet; according to another, by an Indian monk, who brought them in the form of a gold model enriched with diamonds."⁴⁶ Similarly, the later replica, Pi-Yun-ssu, built in 1748 was designed "on the basis of a small model supplied by a Tibetan monk."⁴⁷

It is unfortunate that Griswold's attention to these sites is so short, because his comments remain among the only references to these replicas in Western literature.

Like all the countries where the Mahabodhi was replicated, there was a direct connection, however fragile, to Bodhgaya. Given the diversity of these connections, Griswold's dismissal of an international event in the Buddhist world seems understandable. It does appear unlikely that a single event could create repercussions all across Asia; however, in his brevity Griswold has neglected to investigate adequately the period of Chinese history in which the plans were obtained. Most significantly, during the fourteenth century and early fifteenth century, the Kingdom of Pagan was being attacked from the North by Chinese forces. The success of the Chinese resulted in the acquisition of territory in Northern Burma, and greatly aided the collapse of the already weakened Pagan Empire.⁴⁸ While little is known about this conflict, it is likely that the Chinese presence in Burma was sufficient to alert them to the presence of Buddha relics,

⁴⁶ Griswold, 209.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁴⁸ Ahir, 74.

which they may have taken, and the replica of Bodhgaya in the capital of Pagan, which they may have studied.

The presence of Indian or Tibetan monks in China during this same period raises interesting questions about the intercultural mobility of Buddhists during the early fifteenth century. Griswold's sources indicate that Chinese Buddhists had a strong relationship with the Buddhists in Tibet (and perhaps India as well), but his evidence fails to account for such a new innovation and for the inspiration that caused the Chinese to replicate suddenly the temple from Bodhgaya. Without any evidence for this sudden innovation, the nature of the Mahabodhi replicas in China will remain somewhat obscure. Ultimately, Griswold's prediction of a pan-Asian event (which he dismisses) is not wildly inaccurate and with revision serves to adequately describe the situation. While there was no one event that can be claimed as the source of the sudden and widespread construction of Mahabodhi, and especially no evidence for them in the Chinese context, the physical evidence of Mahabodhi replicas across Asia (especially in the fifteenth century) suggests that there was a common activity—replicating the Mahabodhi temple. This “event” transcended international boundaries and formed a peculiar and intriguing pan-Asian phenomenon, even if the factors which produced it were diverse.

Conclusion

In many of the replicas discussed above, the primary object that was replicated was the Mahabodhi temple. This indicates that for some Buddhists who lived in Burma, Thailand, Nepal or China, the Mahabodhi temple was one of the most prominent and recognizable elements of the Buddhist geography of India, despite the fact that nearly all had never been to India. During earlier pilgrimage periods, it was clear that there was much attention being drawn to the famous image inside the Mahabodhi temple, the Diamond Seat, or the bodhi tree itself. While these important Buddhist symbols continued to be worshipped often and in multiplicity of ways, when Buddhist communities outside of India chose to show their connections to the historical Buddha and the sacred geography of India, the image of the Mahabodhi temple served that purpose. No doubt this was especially aided through the distribution and popularity of souvenir models, and texts which described Bodhgaya, such as pilgrimage manuals or travel accounts, and also by the gradual preference for the *bhumisparsa mudra* to represent the Buddha. Since the Mahabodhi temple was built to enshrine the *bhumisparsa mudra* Buddha built by Maitreya, it is also

understandable that this temple would become a prominent symbol to identify that particular Buddhist image. Yet, these countries have gone beyond the construction of an imaginary landscape using visual tools or symbolic measures. Functionally, the two have much in common, but the construction of replicas to reproduce India's sacred geography integrates foreign geographies with Bodhgaya in a way that models or images do not.

The motivation for rulers like Kyanzittha and Tiloka to construct replicas was surely influenced by the wishes of their Buddhist population; however, the location of the temples suggests that their political value was also a factor. The construction of any temple was a religiously significant political event. When these kings chose to construct replicas in the centers of their political power, they were able to establish a firm connection between their ability to lay claims to India's religious landscape and their authority as rulers. However, the most crucial motivation for the building of replicas of Mahabodhi was the idea that there was little difference between worshipping at Bodhgaya in India or at its replicas throughout Asia. In some senses, the construction of so many replicas democratized the sacred landscape of Asia, giving religious power to landscapes which had only acquired Buddhism after the time of the historical Buddha. The desire to authorize and validate one's history and religious tradition was certainly not impeded by religious doctrines which suggested that the merit accrued at a bodhi tree in Sri Lanka or Thailand or Burma equaled that from the tree in Bodhgaya. Furthermore, the accessibility of these monuments meant that visiting Bodhgaya need not have been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for foreign Buddhists. Even those with the most meager of funds could find a regional replica to worship and thus have personal access to the Buddha's presence.

Conclusion

Bodhgaya's story did not end with the replication of Mahabodhi temples throughout Asia between the thirteenth and eighteenth century. In 1590, the temple complex became part of a Hindu monastery devoted to Siva.¹ By the time the British "discovered" Bodhgaya early in the nineteenth century, the Mahabodhi temple was in ruins and many of the monuments which Buddhist pilgrims had described centuries earlier were buried under years of silt deposited annually by the nearby river. The factors which resulted in the archaeological excavation and restoration of Bodhgaya and the Mahabodhi temple have been the focus of a number of articles in recent years.² The central issue became whether Bodhgaya was a "Buddhist" site or a "Hindu" site or both. The British authorities in India might have preferred to remain neutral in the politically charged struggle which emerged as Buddhists began to return Bodhgaya, but the issue of who "owned" Bodhgaya and therefore had the authority to regulate religious activities there ultimately turned into a complex legal struggle between interested foreign parties and local Hindu leaders. In the end, a compromise was reached which left both side unsatisfied. Eventually certain Hindu practices, such as decorating the Buddha, were sternly discouraged, but the site was administered by a council whose deciding vote was always a Hindu.

In one sense, Bodhgaya's contested status in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries verifies that it continued to be a powerful place for Buddhists despite the lack of direct, physical attention it had received from them over the previous four hundred or so years. David Chidester and Edward Linenthal have argued that one way of defining sacred space is to ask, Can it be defiled?³ Both Hindus and Buddhists argued in the legal struggle over Bodhgaya that the religious activities of the other party had deeply offended them and desecrated the site. Yet, as Jacob Kinnard has pointed out, "Bodhgaya is not, and never has been, *only* a Buddhist site."⁴ This statement is most certainly correct, yet most, if not all, histories of Bodhgaya have not

¹ Ahir, 75.

² Ian Copland, "Managing Religion in Colonial India: The British Raj and the Bodh Gaya Temple Dispute," *Journal of Church and State* 46, no. 3 (Summer 2004):527-560; Jacob N. Kinnard, "When is the Buddha not the Buddha? The Hindu/Buddhist Battle over Bodhgaya and its Buddha Image," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 66, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 817-839; Alan Trevithick, "British Archaeologists, Hindu Abbots, and Burmese Buddhists: The Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya, 1811-1877," *Modern Asian Studies* 33, no. 3 (1999): 635-656.

³ David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal, eds. *American Sacred Space* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 2.

⁴ Kinnard, "When is the Buddha," 817.

acknowledged it. This thesis has been careful not to challenge Kinnard's contention, and its inclusion here reminds us that the scope of this project has been single-minded by only asking how Bodhgaya has been important to Buddhists. Another perspective, a non-Buddhist history, of Bodhgaya deserves to be written, and surely the academy would gain much from its presence. The inverse of this project, how the Hindu relationship with Bodhgaya changed after Buddhism began to decline in India, would be a fascinating and innovative counterpoint. However, even though a number of works have traced Bodhgaya's history from its inception to the present day, it is the exception that they clearly articulate the Buddhists relationship with Bodhgaya and the ways it changed over time.

The contribution of this thesis, then, is the first steps towards expressing the full value of Bodhgaya from a religious and not a historical or architectural or art historical perspective. In this framework, the distinctive appeal of Bodhgaya for Buddhists is its fosters recognition of a tension between the Buddha's presence and absence. This tension is a function not only of history but of the very concepts and ideas that form the core of the Buddhist worldview such as emptiness and *prajna*. In the relics of the Buddha at Bodhgaya, Buddhists did not only access the continuing living presence of the Buddha, but actively participated themselves in the continuation of the story of the Buddha's Awakening. By condensing Bodhgaya's relics and the tension of the Buddha's presence and absence into portable, devotional objects, Buddhists throughout Asia were able to participate in the unique merit producing qualities of the site of the Buddha's Awakening. Eventually Buddhists outside of India found that reproducing the relics and monuments of Bodhgaya in their native lands was a way to supplement practices where one conceptualized and imagined the sacred geography of India by providing physical access to a replica of "Bodhgaya" which was thought to be every bit as efficacious as the being physically present at the original Indian site.

When the political climate in India which had encouraged these innovations was overcome by the political and technological advancements of the twentieth century, the appeal of the original Bodhgaya became clear. Even the Buddhists who had built replicas in their own countries returned to India and built monasteries around the newly restored Bodhgaya. Today, Bodhgaya has a sustained international Buddhist presence that is more diverse than it ever was in the past. Like Xuanzang in the seventh century, the many Buddhists who now go to Bodhgaya can become overwhelmed by the evidence of the Buddha's absence, and, by standing in the spot

where the Buddha became Awakened more than 2,500 years ago, also receive the benefits of his presence.

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