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Talk by Asha Pillai-Balsara on the Bodhi Tree

I pay homage to the Buddha, to the beloved guru, to the dharma and the sangha. It is indeed a very rare and precious occasion, where one gets to sit under a tree and actually elucidate its magical qualities.

For this sharing to make any sort of sense, one of the questions that we need to address is to generate the right aspiration, or the motivation; since this is not a botany class, nor is it a class on environmental education, and it is definitely not a tree-huggers conference.

So, what kind of aspiration do we need to generate so that this interaction becomes meaningful? Though we have travelled, crossing mountains and seas and planes to be here under the tree, believe me, Nirvana or any such thought is the last thing crossing my mind right now. In the past few days, what was happening was simply numerous checklists getting ticked, and even though I have the opportunity to sit under this tree – a series of rather mundane thoughts pass by in my head.

It is so important for us to just surrender to the aspect of *samantabhadra*, which Deepa just recited now. If it were left to my aspirations, it would be like ticking off checklists and figuring out what I am to do next from here.

Okay, so one of the things that we think of is, “Is it enough?” **Aspirations are nice, they’re a very good idea, but, what’s the benefit of making such an aspiration?** Of course, there’s an answer – many teachers have been sharing merit – **That’s also nice, it’s nice to have *punya*** and merit, but **‘benefit’** is very important because our worldview is so defined by the advertising industry. Thus, benefit is as important as aspirations for us.

So here also, *Samantabhadra*, very beautifully, and in the context of the Bodhi tree, lists the benefit of actually making such an aspiration. This benefit we can trust, because it is *Samantabhadra’s* prayer, and what does he say? Those who makes this aspiration – they will go quickly beneath the Bodhi tree. For those of us who are Mahayana practitioners, the word **‘quickly’** means a lot, especially since we’re always talking in terms of eons. So this first sentence as a benefit was very encouraging for me.

“They will go quickly beneath the Bodhi tree and there they will sit, to benefit all sentient beings. There they will awaken into enlightenment, turn the wheel of dharma, and tame *mara* with all its hoards.” Now, that is something worth aspiring for. Not only that, but we get an idea as to what actually happened under this tree.

I would like you to see the sharing in this light, with this aspiration, and definitely keep this benefit in mind.

The Bodhi Tree. What is so special about this Bodhi tree? I think, most of the Indians sitting here will agree with me, that this is a question we get for ‘fill in the blanks’, or ‘true and false’ in

the books, and we all have the answer to this. **“Yes, Siddhartha sat under this Bodhi tree, and he attained Nirvana.” That was surely 2 marks.** And believe me that took what, like one minute, so when I saw the topic, and next to it marked 30 minutes, I was wondering what I was going to say for the rest of the 28 minutes? I was thinking that **this is so obvious, it’s right here, and everybody knows this.**

However beloved Rinpoche granted me the access to see this tree through so many **perspectives. In so many ways, like someone who is excited about a new story, I’ve taken these small anecdotes and stories to share with you. Now, you may have heard some of this before, but maybe you’d like to hear a few different perspectives of this tree.**

So when I was thinking ‘Bodhi tree’, there is the tree, which has a very concrete, clear and defined form. It is something that our senses can reach very clearly. We can feel it with our skin, the breeze, the smell, we can see the tree, we can taste it through medicines (which I’ll share with you) but, all our senses can engage and the tree seems so very real. It has a lot of scientific research done on it, so the tree gives us a concrete aspect, an aspect that is reachable – an aspect that seems more real.

The Bodhi aspect is the exact opposite. The tree seems more like something that we can know, and the Bodhi seems completely unknowable. The abstract. That which we find so difficult to define – **the magical aspect. So, when I’m going to share these stories, I’d like you to know that both these aspects are what I’m trying to bring together in these anecdotes.** There is the definite, the obvious, and there is the magical, the legends in the story. True or false, I don’t know. **The tree has a certain function, a workability, ‘Bodhi’, we don’t know. But together, they can be a very powerful symbol for us to reach what the Buddha attained.**

So, I would like to start with the *namarupa* of the tree. The form. The description of this tree **that you are seeing. In most Indian states, there’s a name for this tree. Peepul, Pimpal (In Marathi), aal (in Malayalam).** There are so many names indicating that this tree does grow in most parts of India. The thing about this wonderful tree is, it happily grows in nooks and crevices, without any drama. It grows without too much care. It is easy to grow, with a branch or a seed.

As an object of reverence, the oldest reference of this tree is seen in the Indus Valley civilization of Mohen-jo-Daro, on a seal. This is not only in the Buddhist tradition; it is venerated in most Indian traditions. Many a times, it is an abode of many Gods, deities and as a tree which creates appropriate causes and conditions for meditative practice. So it is a very revered tree in India. It is also called *ashvata* in Sanskrit. There are also stories behind that.

In Ayurveda and Unani medicine, this tree, and in fact every part of this tree is used in some sort of medicinal preparation. **It’s known to have a lot of anti-inflammatory properties. When I was going through this extensive list (Actually this is not a very exhaustive list I’m giving you), but just to give you this glimpse: every part of this tree is used in some way, in some medicinal preparation.**

The juice of its leaves – **please don’t try it without some sort of guidance** – if it is traditionally done it is fine – is used as an eardrop, and it also has digestive properties. The fruit of this tree

– the fig fruit – **when it is powdered, I'm told**, is good for asthma. It keeps the tract clear and allows you to breathe more (this will also make sense to you towards the end), facilitates deep ingestion in the tract. It also has a component called serotonin, which is very good for humans, to promote memory.

This tree (and most of us perhaps 'maybe we learnt this in school, photosynthesis) and now we've kind of forgotten, so it absorbs CO₂ in the day and gives out O₂, yes? At night it gets reversed. But this particular tree under certain conditions absorbs CO₂ by very a very unique system of photosynthesis called CAM and gives out small quantities of O₂ even at night. When you add this all up, you can see that the choice of this tree may not really be a coincidence. Together, you can see, maybe it's not just like a random tree which the Buddha just picked up. There were good reasons for this choice. There may be more descriptions in medicine, and maybe – a lot of people have done scientific research on whether it really works.

So this is a small introduction to this beautiful tree, from the point of view of its form and name.

Now, I thought, let's look at the Gautama Buddha and the tree. It seems like trees had a very important role to play in the Buddha's life. You might say, 'Come on Asha, there were only trees at that time, everything was just forest, so, what else could he do?'

He could have built a small hut! It's not really that obvious. Of course, the tree cover helped, but when you look at his life: Siddhartha was born under a *sal* tree. When he was a baby he was taken to *Uruvella*, to seek the blessings of a tree deity, who was also his protector deity. **When he grew slightly older, his father King Suddhodana** took him to a farm festival in the village once. After the ceremony was over, like many eight year olds – he ran away from his attendants. When they went searching for him, he was sitting under a *jambul* tree, and he was in padmasana, meditating. The *jambul* tree bears a purple berry. When we were children we'd keep eating them and trying to make our tongues as purple as possible. Then we'd actually compare as to whose tongue was more purple. So he was sitting under the *jambul* tree, meditating in padmasana – and well, many say that this may well be the first Bodhi tree!

As soon as he grew older and set off for his quest of freedom, after intense penance and realization of the whole pointlessness of extremes, when Sujata offers him the kheer – this too, happened under a tree!

Then, of course, the Buddha attained – it was under this tree – maybe not exactly the same one, but it was under the Bodhi tree that he actually attained Nirvana. He could see his past lives, understand the cause of suffering, and realize the truth – all under the Bodhi tree. It is also said that he was in deep contemplation for 7 whole days. For seven days, he sat staring without blinking and contemplating about the Bodhi tree.

Over there, it has a small board where this is elaborated upon. This is where he stood and contemplated, so if you walk up there you can see that. This is very interesting – that he stood there for seven whole days, not blinking. I wondered, 'So what? What about the part that he was not blinking?' Clearly, it wasn't a staring down competition.

Here, I would like to bring this in – What was the relationship between the Buddha and the Bodhi tree? I would definitely like to mention a mystic from my own city, who is an excellent storyteller – who is also a great admirer of the Buddha. In fact, everything about him spoke about his love for the Buddha. His name is Osho. But what was happening when he was looking at the Bodhi tree? That I will tell you a little later, in the story.

So after this, did Buddha forget all about trees? No. It is said that, many a times when the Buddha was travelling with the sangha, the lay people complained to the Buddha – saying, many of your Sangha members are chopping off trees to make arrangements for their own stay. When the Buddha heard about this, he was concerned – how can they be cutting down trees, they're harming life! It is said that there are certain rules put in the *Vinaya Pitaka*, perhaps the first set of environmental laws in the world, but it was put down then, as to how we should conduct ourselves with trees. It was between two sal trees that the Buddha attained *Parinivana*. You can see that the Buddha had a very close connection to trees.

Till now, we can see that the Bodhi and the tree are still very separate. In the *Kalinga Bodhi Jataka*, (I think it is Volume 4) I'm not very good with details and numbers, I think it is Volume 4, there is a story. This is significant, because now we can see how it is that the Bodhi and the Tree are coming closer. The Buddha and the tree are no longer two separate objects.

It is said that when Buddha was in *jethvana* (he would go away for long periods of time, being absent from *jethvana*) he would travel on pilgrimages and meet people who actually wanted to listen to the dharma. This is something we would all really relate to. So when he was away from *jethvana*, he would be travelling and would be away for a lot of time – people from around would come with flowers, garlands and wreaths to meet him, and he would not be there. There was no schedule he followed, so people would not know where to keep these offerings, and they would leave it at the door.

This was greatly rejoiced. When Anathapindika, who was a lay follower got to know about it, he went to Ananda and said, "Venerable, would you please pass this request and concern of mine to the Buddha? When he is not there and people come with these flowers and wreaths, they don't know where to place these things and actually express their love and veneration for you, so would you please pass this on?"

So when the Buddha came, Ananda asked the Buddha, "Is there any way that we could have some sort of a shrine, or something – that when you're not there, so that the people can express their love and veneration for you?"

The Buddha said, "Yes, there are three kinds of shrines. A shrine for the relic of the body. A shrine with something that is used or worn. Or a memorial."

Immediately Ananda was very happy. Here was a possibility. He said, "Can we really make a shrine when you're alive?" The Tathagatha said, "No, no Ananda. Not a body shrine! That kind is made when a Buddha attains Nirvana. A shrine or memorial is improper because the connection to that depends totally on one's imagination. However, the great Bodhi tree used by the Buddhas is fit for a shrine, be they alive, or dead." This is what the Buddha shared.

Ananda immediately grabbed this opportunity and said, “Can we plant a tree, can we immediately do that? While you’re away on pilgrimage, the great monastery of *Jethvanais* unprotected and people need a place to show their reverence. Shall I plant the seed of the great Bodhi tree at the gateway?”

The Tathagatha replied, “By all means do so Ananda! And that shall be, as it were, an abiding place for me.”

So for many of us who seek inspiration when the teachers are absent – sometimes it can be an object that seems not so alive – but a Bodhi tree which is alive, in living form, can be such a big memory – can be such a good representation for the Buddha himself. The separation of the Buddha and the Bodhi tree can slowly merge more, especially in the context of the live Bodhi tree, when we see it as alive.

One story that comes to my mind of somebody who saw no difference between the Bodhi tree and the Buddha, saw them both as almost the same, is the story of Ashoka. In the *Mahavamsa*, chapter 18, and the *Dipavamsa*, chapter 16, there is this beautiful story which talks about how King Ashoka sends the Bodhi tree as a gift to Sri Lanka. This is the only time – at least I don’t know, in history, when a king gifts another king the gift of a tree, and both sides actually revere it.

The story of course, requires great time – but I shall tell it to you in short, because I was so moved myself when I was reading this story. There were many nuns waiting to get ordained in Sri Lanka and King Ashoka’s daughter, Bhikkuni Sangamitta was supposed to go to Sri Lanka and ordain them. It was with her that this Bodhi tree – a sapling of it was being carried to Sri Lanka. It is said that for King Ashoka, the tree was so like Buddha himself that he didn’t want to use any sharp object to even cut it or to even touch it!

Then the question was if you don’t cut it, then how do you put it into a vessel and send it? So the whole tree was decorated with – there are 2 paragraphs just on the decorations, describing everything that was done: diamonds and precious stones, music was playing, garlands – he did everything he could possibly do to show his love for this tree. Then he took his army, put a curtain around the tree and sat there with this intent in his heart – ‘I don’t want to even hurt you, even a bit’.

Suddenly, only this branch was remaining, called a ‘*dakshina shakha*’ or the southern branch – apart from this branch, the entire tree just disappeared. I mean, imagine – this doesn’t fit in our head – but he was so moved by what had happened, that he just knelt down and cried. He said, “I venerate you oh tree, and please take my entire kingdom, I offer it to you.”

Most of us, when we go to a tree, it’s mostly to receive something – either a fruit or a medicine, and here was the king who was giving up everything he possibly had to a tree. That I don’t think is a very normal thing. Especially for an emperor – just remember what he had! He had....Lots. He was willing to give all that to a tree. He then said, “If, my faith and my love are genuine” he then placed a golden bowl in front of it (I’m not going to describe this – the bowl also has a story of its own) “if my faith and my love are genuine, then please fall on your own and place yourself in this bowl.” That is exactly what happened.

Then began the journey from here up to the border (it must have been somewhere between Tamil Nadu and Kerala, the border). It was carried with great joy, there was music, and people passing through the Vindhya – **I'd actually like you to picture this in mind. Where else can this happen? There's a tree-bark going and people going with it!**

When he reached the shore, he had to let go and he had to place this in the boat. He had these mixed emotions, as if on one hand there was the great joy of having (mind you this is not a tree for him – this was the Buddha going) – the joy of the Buddha going to a land and the dharma going there – **at the same time a tiny bit of 'Oh, the Buddha is going there'** – both mixed emotions – about sending the tree off.

This whole thing is mentioned in great detail and it'd be nice for you to read this. The current tree that you see right now is actually a direct descendant of the tree that went to Sri Lanka. It is Anuradhapura, where the tree is kept – and in fact most of the trees you see, little saplings of the Bodhi tree are all bought from the one in Anuradhapura and this is one of them.

It was planted in the *Meghavana*, in the royal gardens of Anuradhapura where it survives till the present day, making it the oldest recorded historical tree in the world. Since the Bodhi tree symbolizes the Buddha, the qualities of the Buddha are attributed to the tree as well. As you can see from this story, the Bodhi tree and the Buddha are not so separate.

In the beginning I started with, **'what would I say for another 28 minutes?'** It was quite the opposite as I started exploring. One thing that I wish to share with you is that – the question I had in mind was, given the theme of the festival – an Indian remembering an Indian from the past, I want you to know that there are a few people who still remember this connection – even in the modern day, between the Bodhi tree and the Buddha. While scanning through newspapers and archives, there are a few of them that I thought I could mention to you. But before that, the unfinished story of Osho – as to what he had to say about the relationship between the Buddha and the tree.

If any of you know anything about him, you know that he is a great storyteller. This is all Osho I am going to quote, him narrating this tale.

One of the experiments that was conducted in America, with a commission that was set up to find out, **"How does telepathy really work? And does it really work?"**

The commission really studied, they studied it all over the world, and they made a report. They made a report, and the report said – **"Yes, telepathy does work!"** But they didn't know how. Nobody could tell them, all the people who were able to do this, how it actually worked.

So one of the tribes with many villages (this is particularly interesting, since it has the context of the tree which is perhaps why he mentions it here), a tribe in every village had a tree, a sacred tree which they used to communicate from one village to another village. The people in the commission were very curious as to how it was happening, and they decided to stay in the village with them and see it in operation.

They found that – for example – If a lady forgot something, and she wanted to communicate with her husband in another village, she would use this tree (there was a similar tree in the **other village**) and when he came in the evening, he'd have that! Of course, they were baffled as to how it was actually working.

In today's age, what with SMS and radio and all that – we know how the tech works. So the point was, somehow, this tree was being used to communicate for generations in this particular tribe. They venerated this tree. They cared for it, and maintained its continuity, replanting it and ensuring that it was healthy.

And so, Osho says that, **“Perhaps this is why the Buddhists revere it so much.”**

Then he goes on to say (this is something I have to read in his own words), he says, **“When the Buddha became enlightened, the tree must have deeply absorbed something of Buddha's mind stream.** It was an unprecedented and extraordinary event, that experience of enlightenment happening to the Buddha. If lightning strikes the tree, the tree gets burnt. So it is not difficult to imagine that when the Buddha got enlightened, the tree too, became enlightened in some way. When the Buddha must've become tired in meditation, he would have walked by that tree for hours on end.”

The next sentence is typically Osho. **“Buddha did not live with anyone as much as he did with that tree, he could not have lived with any human being with as much ease and innocence as he did with that tree. He slept under it, sat under it, walked under it, he must've talked to it – the whole life energy of the tree was filled, saturated and charged by the Buddha.”**

In ancient times, punch-marked coins are the very first coins of India. The Sattvahana kings, **who were Buddhist kings, had taken out a coin called 'tree with a railing' which had an image of what you see exactly right here – with a tree and a railing there.** This was used as a currency and this was their way of remembering the Buddha. What a lovely way to remember, especially with currency.

Another story which is much more recent, from Kerela. This was in one of these newspapers. One Mr. Kuttikrishna Nair, in the 1950s, was on a pilgrimage to this part of the world. He took a small seed of the Bodhi tree, and when he went back, he planted it on his own paddy field. He built a small shrine under the tree. What is interesting is, there is no Buddhist in this village. He built the shrine, he got the statue (he requested it from the Tamil Mahabodhi Sangha and he got it from Sri Lanka) – and the shrine was placed right under the Bodhi tree. This was all done with his personal resources – and even if there is no Buddhist in the village, every villager, every householder takes turns to light the lamp every day in this shrine. Not only that – On Buddha Purnima, there is actually a whole celebration put up by the villagers and now, many people join in on this festival. This is still being done in the village – now of course, there is more active support.

Just two or three quick references of the Bodhi tree being remembered even today. Whether it is in Nagpur, beside the vihara, there is a Bodhi Tree. This Bodhi tree was planted at Dakshinbhoomi, from the branches of the Bodhi tree at Anuradhapura again. In Madhya Pradesh, in Vidisha – this story is from just two months ago. This was in a high school – they

actually planted the Bodhi tree, from yet another sapling brought from Anuradhapura. They made sure it was planted with a small temple, a small shrine.

Being a little curious, I wanted to know if people in other parts of India remember this tree. So, I wrote to a friend from Kashmir.

When I spoke to this Sufi Master, he very happily agreed to write for me a story of his remembrance of the Bodhi tree and the Buddha. Unfortunately, I couldn't get the story in time, but what I would like to share is that – yes, there were people even there who did remember the Buddha in today's times. Thanks to some of my friends from Gujarat, who brought this connection to me from the Jataka story which I narrated earlier – many professors and narrative story-tellers were telling me, 'Look at this!' in excitement.

What I'm trying to see is that it's heartening to know that there are people who remember the Bodhi tree, and the Buddha, and the connection that they both have.

Thank you for this, and thank you for patiently listening. Thank you.