



Story of the Bodhi Tree

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The Sacred Fig



The Sacred Fig (scientific name *Ficus religiosa*), also known as **Bodhi tree**, **Bo** or **Pipal tree**, is a species of banyan fig native to Nepal and India, southwest China and Indochina east to Vietnam.¹ It is a large semi-evergreen tree up to 30m tall and with a trunk diameter of up to 3m.

This plant is considered sacred by the followers of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism, and hence the name ‘Sacred Fig’ was given to it. The **Mahabodhi tree** in India and the **Sri Mahabodhi tree** in Sri Lanka, propagated from it, are famous specimens of the Sacred Fig. About 2600 years ago Siddhartha Gotama attained the Supreme Enlightenment, or became Buddha, while sitting under the Bo tree in Bodh Gaya, India.

Emperor Asoka, a Hindu who converted to Buddhism, had a railing built around the Mahabodhi tree to protect it. A branch was taken from this tree in 288 BC and planted in Anuradhapura, Sri Lanka. While the original Mahabodhi tree died many years ago, the Sri Mahabodhi tree is still alive, which makes it an oldest angiosperm (flowering) plant. The Mahabodhi tree now growing at the Bodh Gaya is less than 120 years old. It has been propagated from the Sri Mahabodhi tree. A sapling from that tree was brought back to the Mahabodhi Temple, where it is now growing. It is located at the same place where the original tree once stood.



The Bodhi tree leaves are heart shaped with a distinctive extended tip. They are 10-17 cm long and 8-12 cm broad, with a 6-10 cm petiole. The fruit is a small fig 1-1.5 cm diameter, green ripening purple.

Today in India, Hindu Sadhus still meditate below this tree, and in Theravada Buddhist Southeast Asia, the tree's massive trunk is often the site of Buddhist and animist shrines.





Mahabodhi Tree, Bodh Gaya 1997



Medicinal uses



All parts of the Bodhi tree have been used as a medicine for their cooling and healing properties, as part of the Aryurvedic healing system.² They have been used to treat various diseases of the skin and blood, digestive, reproductive, respiratory and other body systems. Some known medicinal uses reported in the literature are:

Leaves - to relieve diarrhoea and dysentery

Fruit - to treat asthma, digestive problems and as an antidote against venom and other poisons

Seeds - for urinary ailments

Bark - as an anti-biotic against *Staphylococcus aureus* and *Escherichia coli*

Sap (latex) - to remove warts

Roots - to heal ulcers and gum disease



“Proper use makes a good remedy even out of poison, while a good medicinal plant acts as a poison if used improperly.” (Caraka-samhita, 1000 B.C) ²

Its place in the natural ecosystems

Bodhi tree species belongs to Mulberry or *Moracea* plant family, and it has been an important part of the natural forest ecosystems of Asia.² It provides shelter, food and medicine to many animal species, ranging from elephants to tiny insects. The fruits, tender leaves and twigs provide fodder for elephants and cattle, and the fruits form a treat for many species of birds and other arboreal animals. Branches and bark provide a shelter to many birds and beetles, roots offer a natural hiding place to snakes, and the ground beneath the leafy crown a resting place to many weary travellers.

This species depends for its continued healthy survival on a symbiotic species of wasp, *Blastophaga quadraticeps*. Hence, wherever pollinator wasps are not present, the seeds are not viable and the trees must be propagated from cuttings. But like other plant species, the Bodhi tree depends for its continued survival in the wild on the survival of the forest ecosystems of which it is an integral part.

While the Bodhi tree future in the human history is secure, its future in the wild is less certain. Saving its natural habitat is an act of boundless kindness to many living species. Even saving a small piece of native forest is better than nothing.⁵



How the Mahabodhi tree was saved from an early death



Around the year 2000, the Mahabodhi tree was attacked by a millibug – an insect which slowly kills trees.^{3,4} An alarm was raised by the Mahabodhi Temple Management Committee when the leaves started turning black in 2002. Following reports in the media in Japan, organisations from the country came forward to help. Scientists soon discovered that the carbon monoxide (CO) emitted from the oil lamps lit near the tree had formed a thin layer on its leaves, making photosynthesis difficult. A study and laboratory tests warned that the tree would die if steps to protect it were not taken immediately.

Experts treated the tree for three years using various measures. To begin with, the burning of oil lamps near the tree was banned and a lamp house constructed. The water level in the roots was maintained and pesticides were used. Since then the Mahabodhi Mahavihara's management committee has also banned burning of candles or lamps around the Muchalinda Lake as an anti-pollution drive. According to the ancient story, from this lake the legendary serpent King

Muchalinda rose up to cover Lord Buddha with its hood, to save him from the violent storm raised by the Mara.



At last in 2005, after several years of sickness, the tree bore new leaves. The bark has also regained its original colour, which indicates good health. So the third generation Mahabodhi tree was successfully rehabilitated through love and right understanding.

“As a post deep-planted in the earth stands unshaken by the winds from the four quarters, so, too, I declare is the righteous man who comprehends with wisdom the Noble Truths...”

(Jewel Discourse - Ratana Sutta, 500 BC)⁶

References

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