

REPRESENTING THE SACRED SITE OF THE BUDDHA'S AWAKENING

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Fig. 1 Model of the Mahabodhi Temple; eastern India, probably Bodhgaya; ca. 11th century; stone (serpentinite); $6\frac{7}{8} \times 3\frac{1}{2} \times 4$ in. (17.5 \times 8.9 \times 10.2 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; Purchased with funds from Ann and Matt Nimetz and Rubin Museum of Art; C2019.2.2 (HAR 68417)

MAHABODHI TEMPLE MODEL

Eastern India
ca. 11th century

SUMMARY

The Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya marks the sacred site of the Buddha's enlightenment. Art historian Elena Pakhoutova examines its portable model and traces how Nepalese, Chinese, Mongols, Tibetans, and others have replicated this most important Buddhist monument. Mementos of sacred places remain an element of Buddhist pilgrimage. British archaeologists used such symbolic models to reconstruct the original temple after centuries of neglect, reviving Bodhgaya as the holiest site in Buddhism.

This small carved rendering of the Mahabodhi Temple is one of many portable objects that were produced and exchanged within the Buddhist world in relation to pilgrimage and the site of Bodhgaya. The Mahabodhi Temple marks the place known as Vajrasana, or the Adamantine Seat, in Bodhgaya, India, where Prince Siddhartha Gautama sat in unwavering contemplation under the bodhi tree until he became the Buddha, meaning the Awakened. Vajrasana, along with centers of Buddhist learning such as the nearby Nalanda Monastery, was especially significant for Tibetans during the tenth to the thirteenth century, a period of Buddhist cultural renaissance in Tibet. In this climate, during the active accumulation and assimilation of the latest Buddhist teachings, Tibetans traversed the Himalayas to India, most often via Nepal, in search of texts and to invite Indian masters to Tibetan areas to teach. They also commissioned and carried back to their temples objects that symbolized Indian sacred sites and invoked the Buddha's life, representing and literally conveying Buddhist teachings.

Material mementos of sacred places have always been an important element of Buddhist pilgrimage. Pilgrims brought models of the Mahabodhi Temple, which directly referenced the sacred site of the Buddha's awakening, or enlightenment, back to Tibet. A few models in stone and wood survive in museum collections and Lhasa's Potala Palace.¹ With varying degrees of accuracy, these models reflect the changes the temple underwent throughout its history of renovations. They date to the period

around the eleventh century, when Tibetan Buddhists ventured to India in search of teachings and on pilgrimage, through the thirteenth century,² possibly even up to 1305, when the Burmese restored the temple.³

The overall composition and decoration of the models express symbolic Buddhist meanings of the edifice, serving as faithful representations of the temple's general configuration rather than exact copies. For instance, the bodhi tree is not part of the temple's structure, but the miniature replicas include the tree within the building itself (fig. 2). Likewise, an image of the seated Buddha in a niche under the tree, with his right hand touching the ground, a gesture known as the *bhumisparsa* mudra, is prominent in the models but not part of the temple. Its inclusion references the moment of the Buddha's awakening, emphasizing the event as well as the site's significance.



Fig. 2 Model of the Mahabodhi Temple; west face; Rubin Museum of Art; Purchased with funds from Ann and Matt Nimetz and Rubin Museum of Art; C2019.2.2

The temple itself enshrines the main stone image of the seated Buddha touching the ground, and the sanctum of this model originally may have also contained such an image.⁴ Images of the Buddha displaying this mudra are found across Buddhist cultures, including at important sites in Nepal and Tibet. Some show the Buddha crowned, following tantric Buddhism's interpretation of Enlightenment, but still refer to Vajrasana Buddha, the main image at the Mahabodhi Temple and the event of the Buddha's awakening.⁵

SCENES OF THE BUDDHA'S LIFE

Representations of the Mahabodhi Temple are not uniformly decorated, but many depict scenes of the Buddha's life in relief.⁶ The most commonly featured scenes are the birth of the Buddha at Lumbini (fig. 3) and his *parinirvana*, (fig. 4, 5) or passing, at Kushinagara.⁷



Fig. 3 Model of the Mahabodhi Temple; north face; Rubin Museum of Art; Purchased with funds from Ann and Matt Nimetz and Rubin Museum of Art; C2019.2.2



Fig. 4 Model of the Mahabodhi Temple; east face; Rubin Museum of Art; Purchased with funds from Ann and Matt Nimetz and Rubin Museum of Art; C2019.2.2



Fig. 5 Model of the Mahabodhi Temple; detail of Parinirvana scene on the west face; Rubin Museum of Art; Purchased with funds from Ann and Matt Nimetz and Rubin Museum of Art; C2019.2.2

The present-day structure at Bodhgaya (fig. 6) does not contain such reliefs. These inconsistencies suggest that besides representing the temple the Mahabodhi models may have signified the major sacred sites tied to the Buddha's life. The life scenes evoke these locations, with the Buddha's enlightenment at Vajrasana being the central and most important site.



Fig. 6 Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya, India; photograph by Christian Luczanits

STRUCTURE AND SYMBOLISM

The small models of the Mahabodhi Temple embody its characteristic features: the stupa atop the central tower, which signifies it is a Buddhist temple; the sculptural images of the bodhi tree; the directional buddhas inhabiting the four corner towers; and images of buddhas and bodhisattvas in registers all around the structure. The tall central tower is of the Indian *sikhara* type—“mountain peak” in Sanskrit—a common architectural element of Indian architecture. The notable structural layout of four smaller towers placed around a central one identifies it as the sacred site of the enlightenment. According to the *Mahavairochana-Abhisambodhi-Tantra*, Buddha Shakyamuni at the moment of his great awakening is also the tantric Buddha Vairochana, who resides at the center of his mandala, or sacred realm.⁸ The five-tower structure references Buddha Vairocana’s three-dimensional mandala. This layout appears in Tibetan images, objects, and sites.

In tenth- to eleventh-century western Tibet, the famous Tibetan translator Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055) built the main temple of Toling Monastery, the so-called Red Temple (fig. 7), with four stupas marking its corners. A large five-tower stupa (fig. 8) at Alchi, Ladakh, in the western Himalayas displays a similar structural arrangement, with four stupas at the corners placed around the central, taller stupa. This particular building is not a temple but a shrine, or *chaitya*. In both buildings the structural organization follows that of Vajrasana’s symbolic representation of a Vairochana mandala. Tibetan Buddhists employed this layout as the basis for several early temples and religious edifices, seemingly reinventing the Indian architectural models known to them at the time, if not in their original materials and technologies then in their symbolism and definition of space.



Fig. 7 Red Temple (Dukhang); Toling, western Tibet; founded 996; photograph by Elena Pakhoutova



Fig. 8 The Great Stupa; Alchi, Ladakh, India; ca. 1220 or later; photograph by Elena Pakhoutova

In the late nineteenth century, British archaeologists, Buddhist scholars, and entrepreneurs used Mahabodhi models to reconstruct the actual Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya, which was in ruins, half buried and fully neglected.⁹ Their efforts may not have restored the precise historical form of the temple, but they succeeded in resurrecting the site, which resumed its status as the central, most visited pilgrimage site in the Buddhist world.

RE-CREATIONS OF THE MAHABODHI TEMPLE BEYOND INDIA

Historically, the importance of Bodhgaya and the Mahabodhi Temple for Buddhist pilgrims cannot be underestimated. Buddhists believe a visit to Vajrasana can erase negative karma and ensure future enlightenment. It is therefore not surprising that the Mahabodhi Temple was replicated as large architectural structures in locations outside of India, establishing a local sacred place that by proxy evoked the same sentiment and power as the original.

The Mahabuddha Temple (fig. 9) at Patan in Nepal, conceived and founded in 1564 by a Buddhist priest, Abhaya Raj of Uku Baha Monastery, remains a part of that monastery to this day, drawing pilgrims and tourists alike. Built over several decades, the temple was completed by Raj's descendants in 1601.¹⁰



Fig. 9 Mahabuddha Temple; Patan, Nepal; 1564–1601; photograph © Kerry Lucinda Brown

Nepal remained a destination for Tibetan Buddhists especially after Buddhist institutions in India fell into decline by the late thirteenth century. Tibetans continued to commission Nepalese artists and artisans to work on projects for new temples in Tibet. Tibetan patrons also maintained close cultural connections with local Nepalese centers of cultural production as well as with political and regional rulers. From the thirteenth century to the present day, they have engaged with the important Buddhist sites of the Kathmandu Valley. Prominent Tibetan Buddhist teachers, such as Tsangnyon Heruka (1452–1507) and Katok Rigzin Tsewang Norbu (1698–1755), among others, initiated and sponsored renovations of the famous Swayambhu and Boudhanath chaityas and worked with Newar artisans of the Kathmandu Valley and local communities on these projects.¹¹ Most recently, from 2008 to 2010 Tarthang Rinpoche organized the fifteenth renovation of Swayambhu, engaging local artisans and the communities of Patan and Kathmandu.

The Zhenjue Temple, also known as the Five Pagoda Temple (fig. 6), in Beijing, is yet one more rendering of Vajrasana outside of India. Its five pagodas represent the towers of the Mahabodhi Temple, and the outside decorations recall the reliefs. It was constructed in 1473 and fashioned after a stone model of the Mahabodhi Temple brought to the Yongle emperor (r. 1402–1424) by an eminent Indian monk.¹²

In Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, where Tibetan Buddhism was spread and supported by regional rulers, another replica (fig. 7) of the Mahabodhi Temple was built during Qing rule in 1732, this time following Beijing's Five Pagoda Temple.¹³



Fig. 6 Zhenjue Temple, the Five Pagoda Temple; Beijing, China; 1473; photograph by Isabelle Charleux



Fig. 7 Wutasi, the Five Pagoda Temple; Höhhot, Inner Mongolia; 1732; photograph by Isabelle Charleu

Representing or re-creating sacred sites remains an active practice in Buddhist cultures, including in Tibet and other Himalayan regions.¹⁴ This practice underscores important ideas inherent in Buddhist traditions, such as the accumulation of merit, in this case through pilgrimage, commissioning Buddhist objects that directly reference the most sacred site of the Buddha's awakening, and ongoing visits to the site—be it with one's mind or body.

FOOTNOTES

¹ For the sandalwood Mahabodhi Temple in the collection of the Potala Palace, Lhasa, see Ulric von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet*, 2 vols. (Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 2001), 328–30, pl. 111A, figs. 113A–C.

² Roberto Vitali, “In the Presence of the ‘Diamond Throne’: Tibetans at RDo Rje Gden (Last Quarter of the 12th Century to the Year 1300),” *Tibet Journal* 34/35, no. 3/2 (October 2009): 161–63; Tsering Gonkatsang and Michael Willis, “Tibetan, Burmese and Chinese Inscriptions from Bodhgayā in the British Museum,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 23 (2013): 434–37.

³ On the Burmese restorations of the Bodhgaya temple, see Hiram Woodward, “Burmese Sculpture and Indian Painting,” in *Chhavi-2: Rai Krishnadasa Felicitation Volume*, ed. Anand Krishna (Banaras: Bharat Kala Bhavan, 1981), 21; John Guy, “The Mahābodhi Temple: Pilgrim Souvenirs of Buddhist India,” *Burlington Magazine* 133, no. 1059 (1991): 361; Janice Leoshko, “On the Construction of a Buddhist Pilgrimage Site,” *Art History* 19 (1996): 573–97; Frederick M. Asher, *Bodh Gaya* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 24–27.

⁴ See more on this in Janice Leoshko, “Time and Time Again: Finding Perspective for Bodhgayā Buddha Imagery,” *Ars Orientalis* 50 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3998/ars.13441566.0050.013>.

⁵ Manuals of tantric visualization and rituals (*sadhana*) translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan during this period describe how to envision the Buddha at the seat of awakening, the Vajrasana, and read as descriptions of an actual image. See Rdo rje gdan gyi sgrub thabs, *BsTan 'gyur* (Pe Cing), vol. 72: 424–28; 429–31; 73: 174–78; 178–80; 180–82 (Pe cing, Beijing: Pe cing pho brang, 1724),

http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW1KG13126_4127, P 3969, Thu, fols. 210b2–212b8; P 3970, Thu, fols. 213a1–214a4; P 4223, Du, fols. 85b1–87b3; P 4224, Du, fols. 87b3–88b3; P 4225, Du, fols. 88b3–89b2; Dpal rdo rje gdan gyi sgrub thabs, *BsTan 'gyur* (Pe Cing), vol. 73, 6–11 (Pe cing, Beijing: Pe cing pho brang, 1724),

http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW1KG13126_4127, P 4127, Du, fols. 1b–4a6. Western scholars who studied these texts include Alfred Foucher, *Étude sur l'iconographie bouddhique de l'Inde après des documents nouveaux* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1900) and Marie-Thérèse de Mallmann, *Introduction à l'iconographie du tântrisme bouddhique* (Paris: Centre de recherches sur l'Asie centrale et la Haute Asie, 1975).

⁶ As also seen in the Potala Palace example. See von Ulric von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet*, 2 vols. (Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 2001), fig. 113.

⁷ See Ulric von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet*, 2 vols. (Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 2001), fig. 113 A, C. The Rubin Museum's model also includes these scenes on the north face. The standing figure with an outstretched hand could represent the Descent from the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods or the Taming of the Elephant episodes.

⁸ *The Mahā-Vairocana-Abhisambodhi-Tantra with Buddhaguhya's Commentary*, trans. Stephen Hodge, *The Mahā-Vairocana-Abhisambodhi-Tantra with Buddhaguhya's Commentary* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003), 14, 47. The Mahāvairocana Tantra was compiled in India about the seventh to eighth century.

⁹ Alexander Cunningham, *Mahābodhi, or The Great Buddhist Temple under the Bodhi Tree at Buddha-Gaya*, Reprint (London: W. H. Allen; Varanasi: Indological Book House, (1892) 1961); Alan Trevnick, "British Archaeologists, Hindu Abbots, and Burmese Buddhists:

The Mahābodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya, 1811–1877,” *Modern Asian Studies* 33 (1999): 635–56.

¹⁰ For more on connections between Bodhgaya and Nepal, see Mary Shepherd Slusser, “Bodhgaya and Nepal,” in *Bodhgaya: The Site of Enlightenment*, ed. Janice Leoshko (Bombay: Marg Publications, 1988), 125–42.

¹¹ Alexander von Rospatt, “The Past Renovations of the Svayambhūcaitya,” in *Light of the Valley: Renewing the Sacred Art and Traditions of Svayambhu*, ed. Tsering Palmo Gellek and Padma Dorje Maitland (Cazadero, CA: Dharma Publishing, 2011), 157–74, 189–206.

¹² Isabelle Charleux, “Copies de Bodhgayā en Asie orientale: Les stūpas de type Wuta à Pékin et Kökeqota (Mongolie-Intérieure),” *Arts asiatiques* 61 (2006): 120–42.

¹³ Isabelle Charleux, “Copies de Bodhgayā en Asie orientale: Les stūpas de type Wuta à Pékin et Kökeqota (Mongolie-Intérieure),” *Arts asiatiques* 61 (2006): 120–42.

¹⁴ Among the many representations of the Vajrasana Mahabodhi Temple are well-known examples in Burma, Thailand, and India, as well as one in Japan, one in Korea, and two in the United States, in Florida and Las Vegas.

FURTHER READING

Geary, David. 2017. *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya: Buddhism and the Making of a World Heritage Site*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Huber, Toni. 2008. *The Holy Land Reborn: Pilgrimage and the Tibetan Reinvention of Buddhist India*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Leoshko, Janice. 1988. *Bodhgaya: The Site of Enlightenment*. Bombay: Marg Publications.

CITATION

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<http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart/essays/mahabodhi-temple-model>.

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