

## THE SYMBOL OF THE TREE IN INDIAN SPIRITUAL LITERATURE

In the bottomless [abyss] king Varuna  
By the power of his pure will upholds aloft  
The [cosmic] tree's high crown. There stand below  
[The branches], and above the roots. Within us  
May the banners of his light be firmly set!  
--Rig Veda 1.24.7.

When Alexander the Great reached "the furthest forests of India" the inhabitants led him, in the dead of night, to an oracular tree which could answer questions in the language of any man who addressed it. The trunk was made of snakes, animal heads sprouted from the boughs, and it bore fruit like beautiful women, who sang the praises of the Sun and the Moon. According to Pseudo-Callisthenes, the tree warned Alexander of the futility of invading India with the intent to obtain dominion over it. Known as the Waqwaq Tree in Islamic tradition, it was often portrayed on Harappan seals four millenia ago as sprouting heads of a bovine unicorn, encircling a female divinity, or even growing from her body. The association of India with oracular trees bearing strange fruit derives from tales of the tree-worship which has flourished there since remote antiquity. European maps of India Ultima from the twelfth century and later show the Speaking Tree.

--Richard Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society*, xxv.

As a tree of the forest,  
Just so, surely, is man.  
His hairs are leaves,  
His skin the outer bark.

His pieces of flesh are under-layers of wood.  
The fibre is muscle-like, strong.  
The bones are the wood within.  
The marrow is made resembling pith.

If with its roots they should pull up  
The tree, it would not come into being again.  
A mortal, when cut down by death--  
From what root does he grow up?

--Brihad-Aranyaka Upanishad, "Man, a Tree Growing From Brahma," 3.9.28.

Its root is above, its branches below--  
This eternal fig-tree!  
That [root] indeed is the Pure. That is Brahma.  
That indeed is called the Immortal.  
On it all the worlds do rest,  
And no one soever goes beyond it.

--*Katha Upanishad*, the "World Tree Rooted in Brahma," 6.1.

Indian tradition, according to its earliest writings, represents the cosmos in the form of a giant tree. This idea is defined fairly formally in the Upanishads: the Universe is an inverted tree, burying its roots in the sky and spreading its branches over the whole earth .

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--Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 272.

With roots above and boughs beneath, they say, the undying fig- tree [stands]: its leaves are the Vedic hymns: who knows it knows the Veda. Below, above, its branches straggle out, well nourished by the constituents; sense-objects are the twigs. Below its roots proliferate inseparably linked with works in the world of men. No form of it can here be comprehended, no end and no beginning, no sure abiding-place: this fig-tree with its roots so fatly nourished--[take] the stout axe of detachment and cut it down!

--*Bhagavad Gita*, the "Cosmic Fig-Tree," 15.1-3.

In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the cosmic tree comes to express not only the universe, but also man's condition in the world . . . The whole universe, as well as the experience of man who lives in it and is not detached from it, are here symbolized by the cosmic tree. By everything in himself which corresponds with the cosmos or shares in its life, man merges into the same single and immense manifestation of Brahman. "To cut the tree at its roots" means to withdraw man from the cosmos, to cut him off from the things of sense and the fruits of his actions.

--Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 272-273.

Indian tradition has always visualized the human body as growing like a plant from the ground of the beyond, the Supreme Brahman, the Truth. And just as the vital juices of a plant are carried up and outwards from the root through the channels and veins, so are the creative energies in the human body. Only the root of the human plant is not below, but above, beyond the top of the skull over the spine. The nourishing and bewildering energy flows in from beyond at that point. After spreading along the through the body's channels it flows to the outermost tips of the senses, and even further out, to project the space around it which each body believes it inhabits. The pattern of veins and channels which compose this system is called the subtle body and is the basis of all Tantric worship and yoga.

--Philip Rawson, *Tantra: The Indian Cult of Ecstasy*, 20-21.

Man's life in this relative world may be compared to a tree. Tamas is the seed. Identification of the Atman with the body is its sprouting forth. The cravings are its leaves. Work is its sap. The body is its trunk. The vital forces are its branches. The sense-organs are its twigs. The sense-objects are its flowers. Its fruits are the sufferings caused by various actions. The individual man is the bird who eats the fruit of the tree of life.

--Shankara, *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination*.

Mind is the seed, pranayama the soil, dispassion [vairagya] the water. Out of these three grows the tree that fulfills all wishes.

--Swatmarama, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, 4.104.

In Kundalini yoga the tree represents the spine or nervous system, the central axis of the universe which carries the serpent, or the Kundalini, to the crown, the top chakra in the head where the mythical eagle Garuda carries the serpent off into the air.

--Arnold Mindell, *Dreambody*, 61.

When the Blessed One, in the last watch of the Night of Knowledge, had fathomed the mystery of dependent origination, the ten thousand worlds thundered with his attainment of omniscience. Then he sat cross-legged for seven days at the foot of the Bo-tree (the Bodhi tree, the "Tree of Enlightenment"), on the banks of the river Nairanjana, absorbed in the bliss of his illumination. And he revolved in his mind his new understanding of the bondage of all individualized existence; the fateful power of the inborn ignorance that casts its spell over all living beings; the irrational thirst for life with which everything consequently is pervaded; the endless round of birth, suffering, decay, death, and rebirth. Then after the lapse of those seven days, he arose and proceeded a little way to a great banyan-tree, "The Tree of the Goatherd," at the foot of which he resumed his cross-legged posture; and there for seven more days he again sat absorbed in the bliss of illumination. After the lapse of that period, he again arose, and, leaving the banyan, went to a third great tree. Again he sat and experienced for seven days his state of exalted calm. This third tree . . . was named "The Tree of the Serpent King, Muchalinda."

--Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, 66-7.

On a banyan in full fruit  
a single fruit will ripen  
and of its seeds but few will sprout.  
Yet one of these will reach such height  
that travelers will seek it as a mother  
to ease their weariness.

--Shalika.

The wind that blows  
from the sandal trees of Malabar,  
the sweet sound of cuckoos, and the bower vines  
raise waves within the hearts of men,  
raise yearning.

--Shrikantha.

The trees come up to my window like the yearning voice of the dumb earth.  
Be still, my heart, these great trees are prayers.

--Rabindranath Tagore, *Stray Birds*.

