

## SBULT Study Class May 2024 Readings on “Theosophical Symbols”

### May 22<sup>nd</sup>. **The Symbology of the Tree**

“The Aswattha Tree” from *The Secret Doctrine* by H.P. Blavatsky

“The Sacred Tree of Kum Bum” by H.P. Blavatsky

Theosophical Glossary entries for “Acacia”, “Ash Yggdrasil”, “Ask or Ash”, “Aswattha”, “Bodhi Druma”, “Koun Boun”, “Mundane Egg”, “Oak”, “Trees of Life”, “Udambara” and “Yggdrasil”.

p. 52 (In S.D. Pamphlet: *The Great Sacrifice*)

### The Aswattha Tree

To the follower of the true Eastern archaic Wisdom, to him who worships in spirit nought outside the Absolute Unity, that ever-pulsating great *Heart* that beats throughout, as in every atom of nature, each such atom contains the germ from which he may raise the Tree of Knowledge, whose fruits give life eternal and not physical life alone. For him the Cross and Circle, the Tree or the Tau, are, after every symbol relating to these has been applied to, and read one after another, still a profound mystery in their Past, and it is to that Past alone that he directs his eager gaze. He cares little whether it be the seed from which grows the genealogical *Tree of Being*, called the Universe. Nor is it the Three in One, the triple aspect of the seed — its form, colour, and substance — that interest him, but rather the FORCE which directs its growth, the ever mysterious, as the ever unknown. For this vital Force, that makes the seed germinate, burst open and throw out shoots, then form the trunk and branches, which, in their turn, bend down like the boughs of the *Aswattha*, the holy Tree of Bodhi, throw their seed out, take root and procreate other trees — this is the only FORCE that has reality for him, as it is the never-dying breath of life. The pagan philosopher sought for the Cause, the modern is content with only the effects and seeks the former in the latter. What is beyond, he does not know, nor does the modern *A-gnostic* care: thus rejecting the only knowledge upon which he can with full security base his Science. Yet this manifested Force has an answer for him who seeks to fathom it. He who sees in the cross, the decussated circle of Plato, the *Pagan*, not the antitype of circumcision, as *Christian* (St.) Augustine did,\* is forthwith regarded by the Church as a heathen: by Science, as a lunatic. This because, while refusing to worship the god of physical generation, he confesses that he can know nothing of the Cause which underlies the so-called *First Cause*, the causeless Cause of this Vital Cause. Tacitly admitting the All-Presence of the boundless Circle and making of it the universal Postulate upon which the whole of the manifested universe is based, the Sage keeps a reverential silence concerning that upon which no mortal men should dare to speculate. “The Logos of God is the revealer of man, and the logos (the verb) of man is the revealer of God,” says Eliphas Levi in one of his paradoxes. To this, the Eastern Occultist would reply: — “On this condition, however, that man should be dumb on the CAUSE that produced both God and its logos. Otherwise, he becomes invariably the *reviler*, not the ‘revealer,’ of the incognizable Deity.”

H.P. Blavatsky

*The Secret Doctrine*, ii, 588-589

p. 352 (In *H.P. Blavatsky, Theosophical Articles, Vol III*)

## Sacred Tree of Kum Bum

Thirty-seven years ago, two daring Lazarist Missionaries who were attached to the Roman Catholic Mission establishment at Peking, undertook the desperate feat of penetrating as far as L'hassa, to preach Christianity among the benighted Buddhists. Their names were Huc and Gabet; the narrative of their journeys shows them to have been courageous and enthusiastic to a fault. This most interesting volume of travel appeared at Paris more than thirty years ago, and has since been translated twice into English and, we believe, other languages as well. As to its general merits we are not now concerned, but will confine our self to that portion – vol. ii, p. 84, of the American edition of 1852 – where the author, M. Huc, describes the wonderful "Tree of ten thousand Images" which they saw at the Lamaserai, or Monastery, of Kum Bum, or Koun Boum, as they spell it. M. Huc tells us that the Tibetan legend affirms that when the mother of Tsong-Ka-pa, the renowned Buddhist reformer, devoted him to the religious life, and, according to custom she "cut off his hair and threw it away, a tree sprang up from it, which bore on every one of its leaves a Tibetan character." In Hazlitt's translation (London, 1856) is a more literal (though, still, not exact) rendering of the original, and from it – pp. 324-6 – we quote the following interesting particulars:

There were upon each of the leaves well-formed Thibetan characters, all of a green colour, some darker, some lighter than the leaf itself. Our first impression was a suspicion of fraud on the part of the Lamas, but, after a minute-examination of every detail, we could not discover the least deception. The characters all appeared to us portions of the leaf itself, equally with its veins and nerves; the position was not the same in all; in one leaf they would be at the top of the leaf, in another in the middle, in a third at the base, or at the side, the younger leaves represented the characters only in a partial state of formation. The bark of the tree and its branches, which resemble that of a plane-tree, are also covered with these characters. When you remove a piece of old bark, the young bark under it exhibits the individual outlines of characters in a germinating state, and what is very singular, these new characters are not unfrequently different from those which they replace.

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The tree of the Ten thousand Images seemed to us of great age. Its trunk, which three men could scarcely embrace with outstretched arms, is not more than eight feet high; the branches, instead of shooting up, spread out in the shape of a plume of feathers and are extremely bushy; few of them are dead. The leaves are always green, and the wood, which is of a reddish tint, has an exquisite odour something like cinnamon. The Lamas informed us that in summer towards the eighth moon, the tree produces huge red flowers of an extremely beautiful character.

The Abbé Huc himself puts the evidence with much more ardor. "These letters," he says, "are of their kind, of *such a perfection that the type-foundries of Didot contain nothing to excel them.*" Let the reader mark this, as we shall have occasion to recur to it. And he saw on – or rather in – the leaves, not merely letters but "religious sentences," self-printed by nature in the chlorophyll, starchy cells, and woody fibre! Leaves, twigs, branches, trunk – all bore the wonderful writings on their surfaces, outer and inner,

layer upon layer, and no two superposed characters identical. "For do not fancy that these superposed layers repeat the same printing. No, quite the contrary; for each lamina you lift presents to view its distinct type. How, then, can you suspect jugglery? *I have done my best in that direction to discover the slightest trace of human trick, and my baffled mind could not retain the slightest suspicion.*" Who says this? A devoted Christian missionary, who went to Tibet expressly to prove Buddhism false and his own creed true, and who would have eagerly seized upon the smallest bit of evidence that he could have paraded before the natives in support of his case. He saw and describes other wonders in Tibet – which are carefully suppressed in the American edition, but which by some of his rabidly orthodox critics are ascribed to the devil. Readers of *Isis Unveiled*, will find some of these wonders described and discussed, especially in the first volume; where we have tried to show their reconciliation with natural law.

The subject of the Kum Bum tree has been brought back to our recollection by a review, in *Nature*, vol. xxvii, p. 171, by Mr. A. H. Keane, of Herr Kreitner's just published Report of the Expedition to Tibet under Count Szechenyi, a Hungarian nobleman, in 1877-80. The party made an excursion from Sining-fu to the monastery of Kum Bum "for the purpose of testing Huc's extraordinary account of the famous tree of Buddha." They found

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"neither image {of Buddha on the leaves}, nor letters, but a waggish smile playing around the corner of the mouth of the elderly priest escorting us. In answer to our enquiries he informed us that a long time ago, the *tree really produced* leaves with Buddha's image, but that at present the miracle *was of rare occurrence. A few God-favoured men* alone were privileged to discover such leaves." That is quite enough for this witness: a Buddhist priest, whose religion teaches that there are no persons favoured by any God, that there is no such being as a God who dispenses favours, and that every man reaps what he has sown, nothing less and nothing more – made to say such nonsense: this shows what this explorer's testimony is worth to his adored sceptical science! But it seems that even the waggishly-smiling priest did tell them that good men can and do see the marvellous leaf-letters, and so, in spite of himself, Herr Kreitner rather strengthens than weakens the Abbé Huc's narrative. Had we never personally been able to verify the truth of the story, we should have to admit that the probabilities favor its acceptance, since the leaves of the Kum Bum tree have been carried by pilgrims to every corner of the Chinese Empire (even Herr Kreitner admits this), and if the thing were a cheat, it would have been exposed without mercy by the Chinese opponents of Buddhism, whose name is Legion. Besides, nature offers many corroborative analogies. Certain shells of the waters of the Red Sea (?) are said to have imprinted upon them the letters of the Hebrew alphabet; upon certain locusts are to be seen certain of the English alphabet; and in the *Theosophist*, vol. ii, p. 91, an English correspondent translates from *Licht Mehr Licht* an account by Sheffer, of the strangely distinct marking of some German butterflies (*Vanissa Atalanta*) with the numerals of the year 1881. Then again, the cabinets of our modern Entomologists teem with specimens which show that nature is continually producing among animals examples of the strangest mimicry of vegetable growths – as, for instance, caterpillars which look like tree-bark, mosses and dead twigs, insects that cannot be distinguished from green leaves, &c. Even the stripes of the tiger are mimics of the stalks of the jungle grasses in which he makes his lair. All these separate instances go to form a case of probable fact as to the Huc story of the Kum Bum tree, since they show that it is quite possible for nature herself without miracle to produce vegetable growths in the form of legible characters. This is also the view of another correspondent of *Nature*, a

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Mr. W. T. Thiselton Dyer, who, in the number of that solid periodical for January 4th, after summing up the evidence, comes to the conclusion that "there really was in Huc's time a tree with markings on the leaves, which the imagination of the pious assimilated to Tibetan characters." Pious what? He should remember that we have the testimony, not from some pious and credulous Tibetan Buddhist, but from an avowed enemy of that faith, M. Huc, who went to Kum Bum to show up the humbug, who did "his best in that direction to discover the slightest trace of human trick" but whose "baffled mind could not retain the slightest suspicion." So until Herr Kreitner and Mr. Dyer can show the candid Abbé's motive to lie to the disadvantage of his own religion, we must dismiss him from the stand as an unimpeached and weighty witness. Yes, the letter-tree of Tibet is a fact; and moreover, the inscriptions in its leaf-cells and fibres are in the SENSAR, or sacred language used by the Adepts, and in their totality comprise the whole Dharma of Buddhism and the history of the world. As for any fanciful resemblance to actual alphabetical characters, the confession of Huc that they are so beautifully perfect "that the type foundries of Didot {a famous typographic establishment of Paris} contain nothing to excel them," settles that question most completely. And as for Kreitner's assertion that the tree is of the lilac species, Huc's description of the colour and cinnamon-like fragrance of its wood, and shape of its leaves, show it to be without probability. Perhaps that waggish old monk knew common mesmerism and "biologized" Count Szechenyi's party into seeing and not seeing whatever he pleased, as the late Prof. Bushell made his Indian subjects imagine whatever he wished them to see. Now and again one meets with such "wags."

*The Theosophist*, March, 1883  
H. P. Blavatsky

## Selections from the *Theosophical Glossary*

**Acacia** (*Gr.*). Innocence; and also a plant used in Freemasonry as a symbol of initiation, immortality, and purity; the tree furnished the sacred Shittim wood of the Hebrews. [w.w.w.]

**Ash Yggdrasil** (*Scand.*). The "Mundane Tree", the Symbol of the World with the old Norsemen, the "tree of the universe, of time and of life". It is ever green, for the Norns of Fate sprinkle it daily with the water of life from the fountain of Urd, which flows in Midgard. The dragon Nidhogg gnaws its roots incessantly, the dragon of Evil and Sin; but the Ash Yggdrasil cannot wither, until the Last Battle (the Seventh Race in the Seventh Round) is fought, when life, time, and the world will all vanish and disappear.

**Ask** (*Scand.*). or Ash tree. The "tree of Knowledge". Together with the *Embla* (alder) the *Ask* was the tree from which the gods of Asgard created the first man.

**Aswattha** (*Sk.*). The *Bo-tree*, the tree of knowledge, *ficus religiosa*.

**Bodhi Druma** (*Sk.*). The Bo or Bodhi tree; the tree of “knowledge”, the *Pippala* or *ficus religiosa* in botany. It is the tree under which Sâkymuni meditated for seven years and then reached Buddhahood. It was originally 400 feet high, it is claimed; but when Hiouen-Tsang saw it, about the year 640 of our era, it was only 50 feet high. Its cuttings have been carried all over the Buddhist world and are planted in front of almost every Vihâra or temple of fame in China, Siam, Ceylon, and Tibet.

**Kounboun** (*Tib.*). The sacred Tree of Tibet, the “tree of the 10,000 images” as Huc gives it. It grows in an enclosure on the Monastery lands of the Lamasery of the same name, and is well cared for. Tradition has it that it grew out of the hair of Tson-ka-pa, who was buried on that spot. This “Lama” was the great Reformer of the Buddhism of Tibet, and is regarded as an incarnation of Amita Buddha. In the words of the Abbé Huc, who lived several months with another missionary named Gabet near this phenomenal tree: “Each of its leaves, in opening, bears either a letter or a religious sentence, written in sacred characters, and these letters are, of their kind, of such a perfection that the type-foundries of Didot contain nothing to excel them. Open the leaves, which vegetation is about to unroll, and you will there discover, on the point of appearing, the letters or the distinct words which are the marvel of this unique tree! Turn your attention from the leaves of the plant to the bark of its branches, and new characters will meet your eyes! Do not allow your interest to flag; raise the layers of this bark, and still OTHER CHARACTERS will show themselves below those whose beauty had surprised you. For, do not fancy that these super posed layers repeat the same *printing*. No, quite the contrary; for each lamina you lift presents to view its distinct type. How, then, can we suspect jugglery? I have done my best in that direction to discover the slightest trace of human trick, and my baffled mind could not retain the slightest suspicion.” Yet promptly the kind French Abbé suspects—the Devil.

**Mundane Egg or Tree**, or any other such symbolical object in the world Mythologies. *Meru* is a “Mundane Mountain”; the Bodhi Tree, or *Ficus religiosa*, is the Mundane Tree of the Buddhists; just as the Yggdrasil is the “Mundane Tree” of the Scandinavians or Norsemen.

**Oak**, *sacred*. With the Druids the oak was a most holy tree, and so also with the ancient Greeks, if we can believe Pherecydes and his cosmogony, who tells us of the sacred oak “in whose luxuriant branches a serpent (*i.e.*, wisdom) dwelleth, and cannot be dislodged”. Every nation had its own sacred trees, preeminently the Hindus.

**Trees of Life**. From the highest antiquity trees were connected with the gods and mystical forces in nature. Every nation had its sacred tree, with its peculiar characteristics and attributes based on natural, and also occasionally on occult properties, as expounded in the esoteric teachings. Thus the peepul or *Âshvattha* of India, the abode of Pitris (elementals in fact) of a lower order, became the Bo-tree or *ficus religiosa* of the Buddhists the world over, since Gautama Buddha reached the highest knowledge and Nirvâna under such a tree. The ash tree, Yggdrasil, is the world-tree of the Norsemen or Scandinavians. The banyan tree is the symbol of spirit and matter, descending to the earth, striking root, and then re-ascending heavenward again. The triple-leaved *palâsa* is a symbol of the triple essence in the Universe—Spirit, Soul, Matter. The dark cypress was the world-tree of Mexico, and is now with the Christians and Mahomedans the emblem of death, of peace and rest. The fir was held sacred in Egypt, and its cone was carried in religious processions, though now it has almost disappeared from the land of the mummies; so also was the sycamore, the tamarisk, the palm and the vine. The sycamore was *the* Tree of Life in Egypt, and also in Assyria. It was sacred to Hathor at Heliopolis; and is now sacred in the same place to the Virgin Mary. Its juice was precious by virtue of

its occult powers, as the Soma is with Brahmans, and Haoma with the Parsis. "The fruit and sap of the Tree of Life bestow immortality." A large volume might be written upon these sacred trees of antiquity, the reverence for some of which has survived to this day, without exhausting the subject.

**Udumbara** (*Sk.*). A lotus of gigantic size, sacred to Buddha: the *Nila Udumbara* or "blue lotus", regarded as a supernatural omen whenever it blossoms, for it flowers but once every three thousand years. One such, it is said, burst forth before the birth of Gautama, another, near a lake at the foot of the Himalayas, in the fourteenth century, just before the birth of Tsong- kha-pa, etc., etc. The same is said of the Udumbara tree (*ficus glomerata*) because it flowers at intervals of long centuries, as does also a kind of cactus, which blossoms only at extraordinary altitudes and opens at midnight.

**Yggdrasil** (*Scand.*). The "World Tree of the Norse Cosmogony; the ash Yggdrasil; the tree of the Universe, of time and of life". It has three roots, which reach down to cold Hel, and spread thence to Jotunheim, the land of the Hrimthurses, or "Frost Giants", and to Midgard, the earth and dwelling of the children of men. Its upper boughs stretch out into heaven, and its highest branch overshadows Walhalla, the Devachan of the fallen heroes. The Yggdrasil is ever fresh and green, as it is daily sprinkled by the Norns, the three fateful sisters, the Past, the Present, and the Future, with the waters of life from the fountain of Urd that flows on our earth. It will wither and disappear only on the day when the last battle between good and evil is fought; when, the former prevailing, life, time and space pass out of life and space and time.

Every ancient people had their world-tree. The Babylonians had their "tree of life", which was the world-tree, whose roots penetrated into the great lower deep or Hades, whose trunk was on the earth, and whose upper boughs reached *Zikum*, the highest heaven above. Instead of in Walhalla, they placed its upper foliage in the holy house of Davkina, the "great mother" of Tammuz, the Saviour of the world—the Sun-god put to death by the enemies of light.