

## Gautama and the Pippala Tree

I had heard that a Cherokee way of making vision quest is to find a tree and to sit under that tree, fasting, for 24 hours. As I read about Gautama's enlightenment I was struck by the fact that it was always mentioned that this happened as he sat under a Bodhi or Pippala tree. He spent a long time in close contact with that tree, yet I had not read anything suggesting that the tree itself may have played a part in his enlightenment. The implication was always that this was due to his extraordinary prowess in quieting his mind in meditation and the great merit he had accrued from his previous lifetimes. It seemed neither fair nor congruent with the insight of mutual co-arising at the heart of his enlightenment to ignore the tree in this way. I began to imagine a possible version of how Gautama and the tree were partners in his awakening:

*Gautama Siddhartha had been on the road for many years. By now he was 35 years old. During this time he learned many things, including how to calm and watch his mind. He had noticed a yearning in his heart. He did not know what this was for. He only knew what it was not for and so he continued on the road. Gradually the yearning emerged as a question, as a tree emerges from the ground. And so he sought out a tree and sat under it asking himself: "What is suffering and what can be done to relieve suffering?"*

*That evening he went into the forest alone. He wandered through the trees until he came to a Pippala tree that seemed to be waiting for him. He sat with his back to the bark of that tree as the last light of the day left the forest and all became dark. "What is suffering and what can be done to alleviate suffering?" He meditated and prayed in this way all through the night and all through the following day; and the following night and the following day; and for 45 days and nights after that, fasting all the while. During this time his mind calmed and cleared like a still pool. There was nothing to be done but listen, and notice, and wait.*

*As tree breathed out, Gautama breathed in; as Gautama breathed out, tree breathed in, the one enlivening the other. And Gautama allowed himself to be carried in this flow. Someone gently called his name. A woman from the village called Sujata was there, offering a bowl of rice. Her face was full of kindness. He allowed her kindness to nourish him. In deepening gratitude he surrendered all to the luminous, knowing flow and realized that he was being known as fully as he was knowing; that he and the tree were knowing each other into their particular, embodied otherness, from one moment to the next to the next, always moving, always changing, always flowing, and that this dance was part of the dance that was the forest, and the dance that was the neighboring village, and on, and on, flowing in and out of each other as the wind and the sound of the wind in the branches of the tree.*

*He knew that he and the tree were not separate. That to think in this way was the beginning of suffering. But healing was not as simple as thinking that he and the tree were one. No, tree was tree and not just any tree but this particular Pippala tree with its broken branch here, and the spots on that leaf there, and he was human, and not just any human, but this one here whose mouth was dry, and whose heart was moist with a rising joy. Healing was knowing that tree was tree and Gautama was Gautama but that they were not separate; they were tree and Gautama because of their interconnectedness. This tree was this tree because this human was this human in an inter-flowing becoming of togetherness. Tree had been tree all along. Now Gautama opened his eyes as Buddha. He stood and turned. With unblinking eyes he gazed at the tree. He bowed. And the forest was filled with light.*

