Essay cluster: Ecologies of things and texts

Disappearing acts: What Buddhist tree-icons might tell us

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Abstract

Arboglobys, dendrognys, treefitti... Humans have cut into trees for all human time and for many reasons. Tree cutting is often violent to trees, labourers, and larger ecological communities—think of colonial rubber plantations and quinine, turpentine, and even maple syrup production. Other cases, unrelated to ‘factory forests,’ still involve the ‘hard politics’ of human actions, the worlds of representation and living trees as they come into contact at blade’s edge. I focus here on the carving of Buddhist icons into living trees in Japan, a practice evident in medieval to early modern icons as well as modern examples. How, I ask, might we (re-)entangle tree cut icons into the relationship of human image-making and arboreal physiology and being?

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The symbolic register of a work of art involving plants will always be the easiest handle we can pull to open hermeneutical doors. We have been programed by art history professors, books, curators, and institutions to reach for it. It’s part of a game of affirmation in which we can easily find the keys to knowledge. But the symbolic register always brings us back to us, our presumed exceptionalism, our fictitious finitude.

— Giovanni Aloi (2021)
1. A Buddhist icon is disappearing. Not right before our eyes. Nothing so rapid as that. We glimpse only its waning. With passing years, we may see a progression, feel a premonition of final absence. But no question about it: the icon is on its way out, becoming something else, as will all beings and things. This is a fact, simply put if complex. But witness this as well: The icon slips away not because of human neglect or iconoclasm or inevitable material decay. And a philosophy of impermanence, however profound, feels out of place—this place. For here right now, a rooted tree—not a tree as image, not a tree in theory—is going about its extraordinary living, sensing and ‘knowing’ the icon, and causing it to disappear.

2. We’re looking at an icon of the deity Fudō myōō (Skt. Acalanātha-Vidyārāja) enshrined at the Japanese temple Zenganji (Figure 1). No icon is ordinary by definition, but Zenganji’s Fudō has the distinction of being a tachikibutsu, a ‘standing-tree buddha.’ It was carved in 1957 into a hulking, 400 year-old Japanese Nutmeg Yew (J. Kaya; Torreya nucifera) by the sculptor-monk Nishimura Köchō (1915–2003), Fudō myōō. 1957. Zenganji. Photograph: Inoue Takao.
Nishimura Kōchō (1915–2003). An old-growth tree with a young image. Each different in agency and time, but the same in place and material.

There’s nothing unusual about wood-carved Buddhist icons, and art historians and conservators have done fine work studying tree species, wood grain, and olfactory properties—taking the ‘material turn’ to better understand sculpture. Even so, this is often a turn towards ourselves in terms of where intrinsic value is placed. And standing before this tree-cut icon, I wonder where this gets us. What values do we accord ‘living matter’? One may also wonder where the icon begins and ends. Who is making whom, with what consequences for each and for different histories and futures. These are not questions that interest most historians of Buddhist sculpture, but I ask them nonetheless. The ‘object’ discloses, if not demands them.

Tachikibutsu constitute a tiny fraction of extant Buddhist statuary. They fail aesthetically, in terms of the suave forms that interest many scholars. They don’t appear in the canon, though their trees are sometimes designated important biological specimens. They do appear in art spaces, but only when cut down and out. Usually, one travels to temples and forests. Even so: an icon cut into a living tree, an arboreal elder no less? This seems curious, conspicuous, and uncanny. Instead of an icon carved from felled, limbed, skinned, sectioned, and planed wood—tree turned into ‘material,’ however sacred it may be—tachikibutsu are divine bodies carved into living arboreal bodies, rooted in place and ecology. Between the two—felled wood and living tree—there is a chasm of difference.

So what are we looking at? A network of actors and actions, perhaps, an assemblage or entanglement, a conjuncture. Before we reach for terms of theoretical endearment, we might opt for the more literal ‘tree-icon.’ One and the other, and the latter in the former, which requires us to grant each agency, potency, and intrinsic and asymmetrical value (Brown 2001, 7; Korsgaard 2018). This need not exclude artist and patron, iconicity, and institutional and social history. But it swerves the tree as material source towards the tree as individual, its own maker in an ecological collective. A tree is never alone, even if it’s the last one standing. Perhaps we should be asking: what are we looking for?

One might choose to ignore the tree, crop it out perceptually and analytically, since it extends outside the icon’s immediate field. One might view the tree as ‘sculptural,’ human-like in form and emotion, a metaphorical–metaphysical reflection of ourselves (see Young 1927). The tree may be theologically and ritually animate, even sentient. Or, perhaps the tree prompts us to ‘wit(h)ness’ difference in an iconic meeting (see Boscacci 2018). Perhaps the tree is more insistent than we realise in its living challenge to symbol, self and selves, and worlds. One might ask in turn: what do we believe to be true when we sense, think, and act with others, grant them value, livability, and grievability? (see Butler 2016). If tree-icons provoke questions not only about who we are and
what we do but who we think the tree is and does, they may matter more than we realise.

3.

Message trees and culturally modified trees. Arboroglyphs and vivifacts. The cousins of geoglyphs. Indigenous communities, ethnobotanists, and others know them well, as does anyone who carves initials into a tree. These arboreal bodies function as wayfairing signs, burial sites, markers of resources, identity, and history. They may be vegetal-visual kin, with particular ontologies and ‘presence-effects’ (Gumbrecht 2004, 2).

Buddhist monks and carvers in Japan began cutting icons into trees from the seventh or eighth century CE, not long after Buddhism’s introduction to the archipelago. The practice may be home-grown, but its origin seems less interesting than where the practice leads us. Clearly there’s no chicken-and-egg problem: tree-icons begin as trees, Camphor, Nutmeg Yew, Cypress, and so on. Trees perceived to be numinous (J. reiboku), animating the landscape, whose discovery is recounted in miracle tales in which they give off light, emit the sounds of chanting, and fill forests with extraordinary fragrances. Who wouldn’t feel humbled encountering such a tree? But who cuts into their sun-drinking, respiring, soil-feeding, and community sharing lives to make visible the divine, altering tree material and tree awareness?

It’s a familiar story. Extraordinary presences that prompt human incisions into the land. Consider as well Buddhist ‘litho-texts’ carved into cliffs and smaller rock faces (see Harrist 2008). And it’s no surprise that tree-icons become cultic centers. Miraculous images do this all the time, of course, but being rooted, tree-icons may have unusual sway over construction and ritual space. Rather than enshrining an icon within a temple, a community assembles around a standing tree-icon, in the same way that the carver went to the miraculous tree. Posts and beams may converge around the tree, but an area of flooring will be left open for the trunk, which must pierce the roof to spread its canopy into sunlight for the tree to live. In turn, two modalities of wood converge in one place: architecture to shelter an icon carved into the standing tree in its own ‘built environment.’

Within a broader icono-scape, which includes the carving of free-standing icons from numinous logs, tree-icons are customarily attributed to medieval Buddhist patriarchs whose wisdom and charisma enabled them to perceive and mediate supernatural presences and forces. Few medieval tree-icons survive or remain rooted, however, for over time age, insect damage and disease, windstorms and lightning strikes, slipping hillsides, and other actions of sky and land will end a tree’s standing ontology, shift it towards enlivening death and decay as a ‘nurse log.’ This may be the impermanent end of all living things, but a tree-icon’s ultimate bio-material fate led certain communities to preemptively cut down the tree to salvage its icon, creating truncated images that were movable and free-standing. Iconic still, but ‘un-treed,’ and preserved...
for a time, rooted now only in origin stories and art history. For verdant tree-icons, one must be content with those of early modern and modern date standing in temple precincts and along forest paths. Many were carved by Enkū (1632–1695) and Mokujiki (1718–1810), itinerant monks famous for icons made on-the-go, quick and rough cut (J. arabori). Today, a Buddhist leader or a community may still identify an arboreal-sacred presence and envision a tree-icon. A sculptor is called and carving begins. The start of another bio-iconic cycle.

4.

Where do tree-icons fit in Buddhism? It’s a thorny question because a singular, eternal ‘Buddhism’ is a fiction. And despite belief in Buddhism’s inherent eco-harmony, premodern Buddhisms do not present ‘ready-made ecological ethics’ (Schmithausen 2000, 57; Elverskog 2020, ix–xiii, 1–8; Sørensen 2013; Blum 2009). Even so, we might think of a ‘dharma of trees,’ for there is hardly a moment in the Buddhist tradition when trees do not figure as numinous plant beings, places of retreat, agents in and witnesses to the Buddha’s previous lives, his awakening, sermons, and miracles. Trees are cosmic symbols and objects of karmically significant deeds, virtuous or unwholesome. They get under the doctrinal skin and prompt debate over their status as beings as they become buildings, images, utensils, furnishings, foodstuff, and fuel. None of which is surprising, and being Buddhist in Asia often meant knowing something, perhaps a great deal, about trees and acting accordingly. Buddhists too live in the ‘age of wood’ (Ennos 2020).

Forests, groves, and trees have starring roles in the Buddha’s life-story: at his birth in the Lumbini Garden, his awakening beneath the Great Bodhi Tree and contemplation at the foot of other ‘mother trees,’ during his sermons and miracles, and his passing into final nirvana beneath Sal (Sharea robutsa) trees. Trees pay homage to the Buddha and substitute for his presence. They signify renunciation and transcendence. The arboreal is place, praxis, and cosmos.

Not surprisingly, Buddhist tree-knowledge and practice includes the veneration of tree-dwelling spirits (S. rukkhadevatā). In the ancient Jātaka, accounts of the Buddha Śākyamuni’s past lives, the Buddha-to-be was sometimes reborn as a tree spirit (Schmithausen 1991). Needless to say, harming a tree spirit’s arboreal home risked their anger and a dose of ‘bad karma’ (Walshe 1987, 316–320; Schmithausen 2000, 55–56; Sørensen 2013, 87–90). In Japan, arboreal-dwelling spirits are often associated with indigenous deities known as kami. Kami-trees—the tree a deity body (J. goshintai)—are often encircled with ropes to differentiate them from any old tree in any old place, not to be injured or cut down (Rambelli 2001, 41–67). Buddhist tree-icons grew up with or through this indigenous tradition, but pedigree aside, such practices imply selective preservation of the arboreal sacred alongside logging of the arboreal mundane.

Buddhists have long walked the borders between human and nonhuman, spirit and material, living and non-living, and matter and mind. Pondering the

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1 See, for instance, the ‘Miracle at Sāvatthi’ in Strong (2001, 107–112).
2 The minimal monastic resources in early Buddhism included ‘lodging at the root of a tree.’ See Findly (2003, 111, 114, 142, 146).
nature of animals, plants, and geological and riverine worlds prompted questions about sentience (S. sattva) and Buddha-nature (S. Buddhadhātu), the potentiality for awakening. Do the lithic and vegetal have Buddha-nature, and what does the answer mean for monastics and the laity? If I see the tree, does the tree see me, and does one notice such nonhuman gazes only if one has opened one’s ‘Buddha eye’ (S. buddhacaksus)? (Ziporyn 2009, 81).

These questions sometimes elicit reference to monastic precepts against violence and the intentional injury and killing of living beings (S. ahimsā). First do no harm. Simultaneously, there is the ‘karma of extraction’ that arises from the inevitable consumption of other beings, and in the social realm, doctrinal principles prove to be pliant. They may even be partly a matter of ‘ascetic decorum’ (Schmithausen 1991, 17, 43; see Aono 2021). A monk seen cutting down, killing a tree looked bad to the laity, who, more deeply caught in suffering and rebirth, received dispensation for such actions.

Ultimately, the question of plant and tree sentience—do they have it or not, who says so, and who has the ability to tell one way or another?—is unresolved in early Buddhism. Trees may have been credited with attributes of sentience but not the whole package. They constitute a ‘borderline’ case of the sentient (Findlay 2002, 252–253; see Schmithausen 2009; Sueki 2015, 209–238). In medieval Chinese Buddhism, meanwhile, scholastics argued that plants and landforms have Buddha-nature (C. wuqing foxing), even if lacking sentience, and ‘preach the Dharma’ (C. wuqing shuofa). In Japan, the monk Kūkai (774–835), to whom many tachikibutsu are attributed, came down on the side of plant sentience and consciousness. Another patriarch, Dōgen (1200–1253), refused the dualism of sentience and non-sentience; plants, trees, stone, and so forth are Buddha-nature itself, though the unawakened are oblivious to this such-ness (Sørensen 2013; Sharf 2007, 210–225; Chen 2014, 209).

Rather than equating medieval discourse with Deep Ecology or tracing it straight to modern eco-Buddhism, we might consider the significance of a longue durée Mahāyāna Buddhist debate over the universality of inherent Buddha-nature in relation to the nonduality and emptiness of the ultimate ‘truth body’ (S. dharmaṃkāya). And it wasn’t only a matter of philosophical discourse, for trees were put to use in choreographed material rituals with soteriological and social significance. Japanese sources, for instance, suggest that felling trees for icon material was not simply cutting but sacralisation, in which offerings, empowerment prayers, and delineations of divine form made wood ‘Buddhist’ (Pradel 2018, 100–101; Rambelli 2002, 285). Icon production was not merely about tools, labour, and artistry, then, but actions that map a path from the nonhuman to sacred material and into visual form, arriving at icon consecration and all that ensued.

Tree-focused ritual also suggests the performance of power over resources—Buddhist power. At stake for the Buddhist institution historically was not merely the acquisition of the minimum materials and foodstuffs necessary for daily and
ritual needs but institutional security and expansion. This did not preclude ‘anti-
materialism’ and the recognition of life-taking, ecosystem degradation, and
conservation, but as Henrik Sørensen argues, Buddhist institutional ‘protect[i]
on of] nature and its resources was simply seen as ways to protect oneself, one’s
livelihood and one’s community.’ As economic actors, premodern Buddhists
were not concerned first-and-foremost with conservation and sustainability.
They were engaged in wealth accumulation from the land and biotic resources
with little ‘love for the environment for the sake of the environment’ (Sørensen
2013, 87, 90; Elvin 1993; Totman 1989, 179; Elverskog 2020, 56). Like other
religious systems, therefore, Buddhism didn’t get as big as it did without
resource command and control in a growth model with ecological impact. In
Marxist terms, Buddhist institutions helped create the ‘metabolic rift’ between
human societies and the more-than-human planet (see Foster 2000). Indeed,
despite tree-honouring rules, discourses, and rituals, we find references to
deforestation from the medieval to early modern eras (Elvin 2004; Totman
1989; Roetz 2013, 34–37).

The Buddhist dharma of trees thus existed in tension with a dilemma of trees.
A premodern patron wishing to construct a monastic complex would need a
whopping number of cubic meters of timber from specific tree species and
individual trees of large diameter. Still more wood was required to fire kilns for
ceramic roof tiles, for carved statuary, and for the charcoal used to cast bronze
icons and implements (Totman 1989, 17–26; Elverskog 2020, 56, 104–105,
110, 113). Thousands upon thousands of acres of forest were cut to build and
outfit thousands of temples. By the eighth century in Japan, timber demand for
imperial and religious construction projects had stripped large areas of the main
island of Honshū. In turn, the ‘quest for good forests’ became intense, requiring
ever more distant logging and transport, and making re/afforestation imperative
(Totman 1989, 40).

Buddhism did not spread in an endless forest; there may be infinite Buddhas
and bodhisattvas but only so much wood. Scarcity and environmental
deterioration no doubt caused concern in Buddhist communities, but modern
inclinations to see Buddhism as inherently eco-friendly, or to believe that more
Buddhism simply meant more liberation for more beings, ignores the ecological
suffering that bigger Buddhism may inflict. It is thus to be blind to the dialectic
between cosmological/eschatological ideals and the utilitarian and ideological
values of material in the negotiation between Dharma and deed.

If we agree that ‘the cosmos of cosmological thinking is not in itself
coeextensive with the biosphere in ecological terms,’ as Heiner Roetz writes,
premodern Buddhists, patrons, carpenters, and carvers no doubt understood this
in their own way and deliberated on the demands of the Dharma’s materiality
(Roetz 2013, 31). Buddhist teachers may have urged their communities to realise
that the natural world is an illusion and awaken to nonduality, but they also
lived on the land. Between these realities, and before awakening is achieved,
nonhuman ontology and intrinsic value seem to have hung in the balance (Sørensen 2013, 96, 98, 104). For even if a plant sees you, and you see it, you may need or want to harvest and consume it. In turn, one may need to negotiate the ground between material and doctrine to avoid offense, bending the rules as permitted (have laity do the harvesting; permit cuttings to be taken from the Great Bodhi Tree to spread the Dharma), and undertaking expiation (Aono 2021). All in order to live and awaken in the triad of bios, violence, and Buddha-nature.

5.

Often, we sidle up to other species to catch a reflection of ourselves, even one not entirely flattering. We may look ever more keenly at them but avoid them biologically and ecologically, as individuals and communities. We put them to work explaining religion and visual culture. Nothing is categorically wrong with self-understanding gained from the nonhuman, but what happens when we practice what Eviatar Zerubavel refers to as ‘attentional deviance’ by attending more directly and vulnerably to the intrinsic values and agencies of nonhuman others (see Clark 2020, 492–495)? For after all a tree does not ‘understand’ its encounter with an icon carver in terms of Buddhist discourse. It ignores the carver as it pays attention to the carving.

The Zenganji tree-icon’s tree is difficult to ignore given its girth and tower, the years that count up to its mass and scale in coevolutionary, ecological being. The tree is not merely big but enveloping, with its draping, emerald branchlets, feathering layers of grey-brown bark, and halo of caramel needles fallen around its base. Largely unseen are its canopy abodes and root network homes for other species, the invisible oxygen it exhales to the atmosphere, the sugars it sends to other plants and the seeds consumed by animals. The human-carved icon, theologically and ritually animate, followed all this; it is tree-dependent. It beckons and awes, all the more because of multiple bodies: biotic, divine, and visual. Fudō seems not merely to sit within the exposed-wood niche but swell from the trunk. Ghost-grey, like weathered bone, and bare to wind and rain, the icon is mottled with mold and fungus, bird droppings, and air pollution. Life flows on, around, under, and over the icon, runs up and down, trunk-to-canopy, through stomata and a Glomus mycorrhisal network. Allegedly planted by the 9th-century poet Ono no Komachi, this is a myth- and seed-bearing tree.

It won’t do, then, to ignore the tree for the sake of the icon. What an ontologepistemological deletion that would be a refusal of agencies and relationships and a failure of imagination. It’s easier to ignore a tree-as-tree in the case of icons carved from felled, sectioned ‘dead’ wood. But tree-icons force the living issue. They provoke awareness of an embodied image in which agencies and forms merge, though not in simple symbiosis or parasitism. Should we not ask: who is this tree, what does it sense, know, and communicate in its relationship with the icon and otherwise?
Tree-icons, being trees cut into, but not down and apart, suggest something other than simple extraction and commodification. They are incised rather than felled, though the two actions are not unrelated: cutting down begins with cutting into then leaves incision behind in the totalised act of logging. An incised tree remains in place, living and growing, though not unmarked, until it dies, potentially from its incision. As a practice, then, tree-icon carving would appear to harm less and add human value through iconic presence. The icon sets off the tree as more-than-tree, disrupting its perception as timber through visual sacralisation. As an icono-protection of the tree, this brings to mind modern Thai eco-Buddhist rituals of tree ‘ordination’ to oppose deforestation in which trees are ‘robed’ with fabric, welcomed into the sangha, and cordoned off from logging (see Darlington 2012). Still, there’s a telling distinction between the two. The tree-icon carver cuts and the tree-ordainer wraps—worlds apart that matter to trees. For make no mistake, in the case of the tree-icon, the image is cut into a living tree. Vivisection: a living specimen subjected to incision by another to expose the interior body, in this case to shape an image for the human world. To point to the biopower involved in tree-carving is not to categorically condemn such Buddhist image practices but to acknowledge the triad of bios, violence, and Buddha-nature.

And so, if we respect the tree’s stand-out biotic charisma and human perception of the arboreal sacred and its iconic intensification, we should also consider that the tree, intrinsically valuable to itself (whatever miraculous signs humans perceive) neither wants nor needs an image cut into it. Unconcerned with human interests, it is selfish, for the icon is a wound (Lee 2020, 108). With each cut through bark epidermis and cortex, into phloem, cambium, and xylem tissues, and then into woody skeleton, the tree bleeds the liquid of its vascular transport system (comparison with human blood is not casual anthropomorphism). The cuts produce enzyme-regulated chemical responses and perhaps warning signals to other trees. The incisions are traumatic to the tree, just as a cut is to ourselves, and they leave a scar. The tree doesn’t cry out as we and other animals may. It doesn’t see the wound. But it senses this disturbance with neural-like physiology. Even though the tree will not remember being wounded in the manner we may, the icon creates cellular reaction zones in an area of the tree’s growth-ring autobiography, its arboreal history. And even though we are unable to know and feel as a tree, we can perceive that the tree ‘makes sense of’ the icon-wound through its healing response to our action—a non-human representation (see Kohn 2013).

The tree-icon’s image is not solely a figural presence of human cosmological envisioning but a bio-visual presence in a living arboreal body. Its visuality is human- and living-tree-made. A carver reshapes the material and presence of a tree for human viewers, but the tree’s species, wood grain, growth, and place shape the carver, carving, and carved. Unlike certain styles of carving in logged wood that retain visible wood grain, the icon’s immanence in the living tree...
enacts a particular differential agency (Kuno and Taeda 1976). For when a tree is wounded, it knows what to do. It addresses the wound as a fact requiring defense through the creation of woundwood, one of the tree’s inborn evolutionary ‘chops.’ ‘Live wood just won’t quit,’ as William Bryant Logan writes, and the tree responds defractively by healing the image-wound as best it can, growing new tissue from the cambium over the wound from its margin (we do this with red blood cells, scabbing, macrophages, and collagen) (Logan 2021, 25; Chano et al. 2017). Were the tree not to do so, or at least not to try, its vulnerability to pathogens, insects, and insect-boring birds would increase, perhaps fatally.

The tree’s healing process works against the image by slowly verging over it, seeking to turn the icon back into tree—an arboreal retort, one might say, to Ovid’s myth of Daphne, who transformed into a tree (and image) to resist Apollo’s sexual assault (Humphries and Reed 2018, 19–20). The tree resists the carver, image, and human belief, doing so with/in its own body. New cells become microsites of growth, expressing arboreal biopower. The tree will disrupt image time with its own ‘time-based media,’ reshape iconography into arboreo-graphy, creating in Paul Rabinow’s words, a ‘polyphemonality of display’ (Lestel et al. 2014, 129). Carvers were no doubt aware of such arboreal response, albeit in other terms, but eventually, the tree will close the doors of the icon’s ‘shrine,’ grow it out of sight, a bio-visual disappearance of the icon meaningful firstly to the tree itself, and then to ourselves.

An old tree is a path to an older earth and a future in which we might wish to live. Perhaps this is particularly true of tree-icons, for the actions and reactions they embody make a direct ecological point: our ideas and behaviors matter to others who respond to us on their own terms as much as they can. Tree-icon carving sutures subject with subject, different and co-constituting, though not with symmetry, mutual consent, or metabolic unity. The ontological ‘stitches’ produce a wound and then a site of other-than-human healing against human representation.6

Humans arrived hundreds of millions of evolutionary years after trees, and perhaps it is our inheritance (of a particular consciousness) that leads some of us to intrude an image into a living tree. A tree’s icon-occluding action, meanwhile, is not intrinsically ‘nature’s revenge’ against the human, for the tree acts not in direct intersubjective resistance against our invasion and our ideas, green-and-mean, as it were. It acts in self-preservation and preservation of its ecosystem kin against any wound, human-made or otherwise. The ‘world of the image’ is not its primary concern, and we might pause before we apply to trees notions such as ‘inscription’ or ‘mutual inscription,’ since this is a healing response that cares nothing about theories concerned with human signs. And to think of the tree as a singular actor, in some sort of symmetry with the carver, is to forget that it is ‘treed’ in place.

6 On cutting, see Barad (2007).
This is therefore an art historical space distinct from ‘trees as art’ and art made of tree material, and such arboreal agency, once noticed, is hard to ignore—it insinuates into more than just a carver’s work. It crowds the image, materially, perceptually, and interpretatively, and it may encroach upon our sense of ourselves as individuals of a different species. Lest one suspect arboreal determinism here or mechanistic plant behavior end-of-story, a tree’s healing growth over an icon is sometimes cut away by a human agent, an act of image preservation—a “repair”—through recursive vivisection of living matter, the latter term a tad too abstract for a tree as a biotic individual. And because the tree itself will threaten the divine tree one way or another, tree-icon trees have been cut down and their icons extracted from embodied-grounded place and the cycle of life, death, and life-generative decay.

Such preservation actions—further turns in a tree-icon’s ontological history—undermine the idea that a tree-icon is a perfect reflection of Buddhist teachings of impermanence. Were that the case, we would let the tree grow, grow over the icon, grow old, and collapse. We’d ‘just let it go.’ All things are impermanent, but many of us fear losing our images (losing ourselves). Indeed, tree-icons both display human image-making pasts and disclose those pasts disappearing. An icon’s waning may cause us to time-slip ahead in imagination to the overgrowth of the image and the collapse of the tree and perhaps even ourselves.

What tree-icons may be telling us, then, is that we should study not just the ‘Buddha-nature of trees’—how trees have figured in Buddhist doctrine, miracle, and visualisation—but the biotic nature of trees in the field of human-made images. For a tree-icon is not a wholly compliant thing. We cannot assimilate it entirely into cosmology, iconicity, and human agency and society. And if images slip out of our control all the time, it is not strictly because of shifting, diverging human response. As arboreal actors in a field of images, tree-icons invite us, through their making and re-making, to see and think ecologically, and while they won’t resolve the question of human and more-than-human being or “save the planet,” they disclose the vital negotiations of bios, material, agency, and consciousness. If they alert us to our relationships with others in this time of ecocidal emergency, perhaps they may help prefigure an expanded subjectivity and imagination, offer us ‘grace that crosses one body to another,’ as Terese Mailhot writes (2021, 163). They may prompt action, an ‘emergency art history’ of and for multiple species, that seeks an inter-reliant and just ecological future grown from the past (Zabala 2017).

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7 The Zenganji tree-icon’s carver, Nishimura Kochō, observed that the most reliable way to ensure the icon’s preservation was to cut down the tree ahead of its demise and enshrine the image in the temple (Nishimura, 2005, 40–41).

8 For an extracted and exhibited icon, see Mokujiki, Koyasu Kannon, collection of the temple Kōmyō-ji, Aichi.
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