

# BOROBUDUR

Jean Tee (2006)

From: *I am the soul in limbo*

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Growing up it was a tradition for us to look at our grandparents' photo-albums when we visited them. Usually we stuck to the ones that held their pictures of Indonesia. The black and white photographs told us of a time that had long since passed. They were of trees we did not recognize, houses in strange shapes, people we did not know.

One series always stood out, the one about our grandfather's visit to a temple with the exotic name of Borobudur. They were taken when my grandfather was still a young man, handsome and quite tall. In these pictures he is surrounded by his family: two sisters, his father and his mother. In the first, they sit at a large, dark table, the magnificent outline of this mysterious temple in the back. The others are of them standing on the terraces, climbing on the stupas.

Years and years later, when our grandfather has already been resting in his Dutch grave for over a decade, we also visit the temple of Borobudur. As we stand there in front of the eastern entrance, seeing this overwhelming monument for real for the first time, we think of those pictures and the people in them. Only the youngest sister is still alive, the others have long since passed on. The older sister of whom little is known to us, the mother who is said to have been a very devoted Christian, the father who was a wealthy and powerful man. He was a constructor for the Dutch, he built their roads and sold them rice. Of their grand house nothing is left but the big wall in which swallows still nest.

What were their thoughts when they stood here in this very same spot, looking at this dark and illustrious stupa rising above them, spreading so wide? Did they think of the ones before them that had come from somewhere on the southern shores of China? If perhaps they had been followers of the Buddha? How long ago had they come to the island of Java and after how many generations did they lose their language, did they convert to Christianity?

Another question comes to mind: did the people in the pictures know an era was about to end? That soon the Japanese would wage a war against the country and that soon after that the reign of the Dutch would end, depriving them of their livelihood, status and, in the end, even their future on the island? Probably not, my grandfather was still to

marry my grandmother, become headmaster of the Dutch school he was working at and father a daughter and a son, who would in turn father us.

The history of our ancestors is clouded in mystery and the quest for answers has lead us to Indonesia and, ultimately, here to the Borobudur. It exudes both peace and mystery. The shape of its outline cannot even be clearly named. You could say it is a pyramid, with its terraces stapled one on top of the other. You could say it's a stupa, because of its base, followed by the semi-spherical shape and the pinnacle on top. You could say it's a lotus, befitting the theory that a lake once surrounded it. And so very different from other places of worship, nature and the profane world are part of Borobudur. The top of the hill it stands upon is also its base, terraces were cut out from it and form the hart of the monument. The magnificent view of the green surroundings are intrinsic to the Borobudur experience. The temple and the world around it are one.

Watching its beauty, feeling its grandness, it is incomprehensible that this place was once abandoned and completely forgotten about. That no knowledge remains on who made it and on whose authority. On the ceremonies that must have taken place. It is strange to think that these Buddhas once lay dormant, covered in volcanic ashes, taken over by the abundant, even shameless growth that is so characteristic of the humid tropics. Passing the lions that guard the entrance, we climb the first stairs and through the gateway, we enter the labyrinth, the giant mandala that is Borobudur. The walls, protected by half-god creatures, shelter us from the outside world, but the building is opened to the heavens above. We follow the path into the world of desire and passion and are shown their inevitable result. It is the world of not-knowing. Not-knowing being the source of all suffering. How attached we are to all things worldly, how we crave this world! How forsaken we are by it, how harshly it banishes us! We are alone in limbo.

But above us we see Buddhas peacefully sitting in alcoves. The ones facing east touch the earth, calling it to witness. The ones facing south rest their right hand on their thigh, facing up, giving charity to the world. The ones facing west rest their open hands in their laps, meditating. The ones facing north hold up their right hand as a gesture of protection, reassuring us to refrain from fear. They console us, ask us to follow the path that is set out for us. On top of the walls we see stupas, reminding us of what is sacred, their holiness descending on us.

And we go deeper into the mandala, up the stairs into the world of forms. We are taught about the many lives of the Buddha, as a god, a king, a common man, a giant tortoise and all his other lives. In all of which he was noble and compassionate. We see the story of Sudhana, who wondered the world seeking wisdom. As we walk on and quietly study the reliefs, we too seek wisdom. All Buddhas in the alcoves above

our heads sit in the preaching position. They seem to be telling us that in time we will have to learn and accept that the ones before us are a mystery, but at the same time they are not. For they are our ancestors and through them, we came. They are inside us, we include them. What was, now is and what will come, also is now.

We leave the walled in, square terraces of the world of forms and, while the heavenly seers festively sprinkle us with flowers, enter the open, round terraces of the world of formlessness. It is a sacred world where seventy-two openwork stupas circle the great central stupa. As we step up to the first terrace, we feel exalted, catching our breath for the very first time, we feel so light, so at peace. For an instant, this world grants us deliverance.

From up here, risen above the world we have a free view to all sides. At the horizon in the east we see the top of the Merapi volcano, closer by in the south, the mighty Menoreh mountains are visible. Far away to the northwest lay the hundred tops of the Prahū mountain range, and in the north, the Tidar hill stands. These are the outermost walls of Kedu plain, which is centred by the hill of Borobudur. At the eastern foot of the temple, amidst a small forest, a single Bodhi tree stands. It stems from the original Bodhi tree under which the Buddha sat the day he received enlightenment.

Through the apertures in the stupas, the live-size Buddhas inside them are visible and invisible to us at the same time, transcending us. They sit in the position symbolizing the turning of the Wheel of the Law, the first preaching. The Javanese have named the first Buddha one the right upon entering the terraces from the eastern stairs Bima. He is said to grant wishes. Through one of the apertures we lightly touch his hand and ask his still soul for guidance.

The closed dome of the main stupa rises tall, crowning the entire monument and its surroundings. Inside are two inaccessible chambers in which a single unfinished Buddha was found. It was removed and placed at the foot of the hill. The heart of Borobudur's main stupa is empty now and somehow this saddens us a bit.

We take one last moment in the heavenly world of formlessness and even though we wish to stay, we know we do not belong here and so we descend the stairs. Back at the foot of the monument we turn around to take in the monument once more. In the endless repetition of stupas, the infinite stupa of Borobudur is formed.

We re-enter the world of confusion and resume our never-ending quest. We are both east and west, and we are neither. We long to belong, but we do not. Perhaps maybe in the land of limbo. We are the two Tee sisters, the last of our line. After us, none will follow.