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Flower

# The

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The curious case of the udumbara.

# Prophetic Flower 666



In the introduction to French pilot and author Antoine de Saint-Exupery's whimsical classic *The Little Prince*, a Turkish astronomer discovers a new planet, but the scientific community doesn't believe him because he's dressed poorly. Adults are like that, explains Saint-Exupery. "When you tell them about a new friend, they never ask: 'What does his voice sound like?' 'What games does he like best?' 'Does he collect butterflies?' They ask: 'How old is he?' 'How much does he weigh?' Only then do they think they know him." Adults want numbers. Facts. A polished persona to trust. They've forgotten how much truth lies in what is invisible. When I first began mulling over the curious case of the udumbara, I was thinking much too much like an adult.

A mythical flower prophesied in Buddhist scripture, the udumbara is a tangled story-thing. After sightings of the miniscule white blooms swept across Korea in the late '90s, then again in China and Chinese diasporic communities, and even leaked into the U.S. in the late '00s, the udumbara flowers were debunked by entomologists as insect eggs. Believers claimed the scientists were part of a cover-up and that the King was coming. As a California kid weaned on conspiracy theories, I was captivated by the duality of it all. *Are they real or fake? I wondered. Who's right? The entomologists? The Buddhists?*

Of course, I was asking all the wrong questions.

Near the truce line that divides North and South Korea, in the Gyeonggi province surrounding Seoul, sits a nondescript Buddhist temple. Lesser known among the region's dramatic temples, Uri Temple was a quiet place until one mid-summer morning in 1997, when Tonbong, the temple abbot, spotted a row of spindly white flowers sprouting from the chest of a Shakyamuni Buddha statue in the main hall. Unattached to any tree or root, the flowers, with stems thin as filament, seemed to bloom from nothing. When their petals opened, the air around them filled with the spicy scent of sandalwood.

Ten years later, almost to the day, 22 of the same flowers were spotted in a rooftop garden west of Seoul, South Korea. Then 12 more on a university window in Seoul. Weeks later, two clusters sprung from a car door in Qingdao, China. During the summer of 2007, reports of white flowers, no more than a millimeter in diameter, emerged throughout China. Not confined to sacred spaces, they bloomed on doors, railings, tables, and pipes. Reports rolled in from Taiwan, Northern California, New York, and Texas, almost always from Buddhists. Then, for a while, nothing, until 2010, when a nun living in the mountains of China reported a batch of the blossoms under her washing machine. In the decade since, reported sightings have been scarce.

According to the *Lotus Sutra*, a Buddhist scripture, the udumbara blooms once every 3,000 years and signals the arrival of the King of the Golden Wheel. This golden-wheeled chakravartin, or universal monarch, is a godlike figure whose mythology is rooted in ancient India and predates the formation of Buddhism. But in the scripture, he arrives as a secular Bodhisattva to turn the golden wheel of dharma and ready the globe for the next incarnation of Buddha. The wheel reads as both real and metaphoric. As it turns, justice is doled out and balance achieved.

Like all stories that have evolved over thousands of years, it's complex, but I read the golden-wheeled king as less moralistic than a Christian messiah. This king is less concerned with binaries of heaven and hell, "good" and "bad," than on restoring the homeostasis of society through destruction or renewal to whatever degree necessary. He is not a king who wields power through force but through the turning of a wheel—a benevolent, mythical sailor cranking the helm of karma. Eventually, everything will be as it should.

This is also how nature repairs itself.

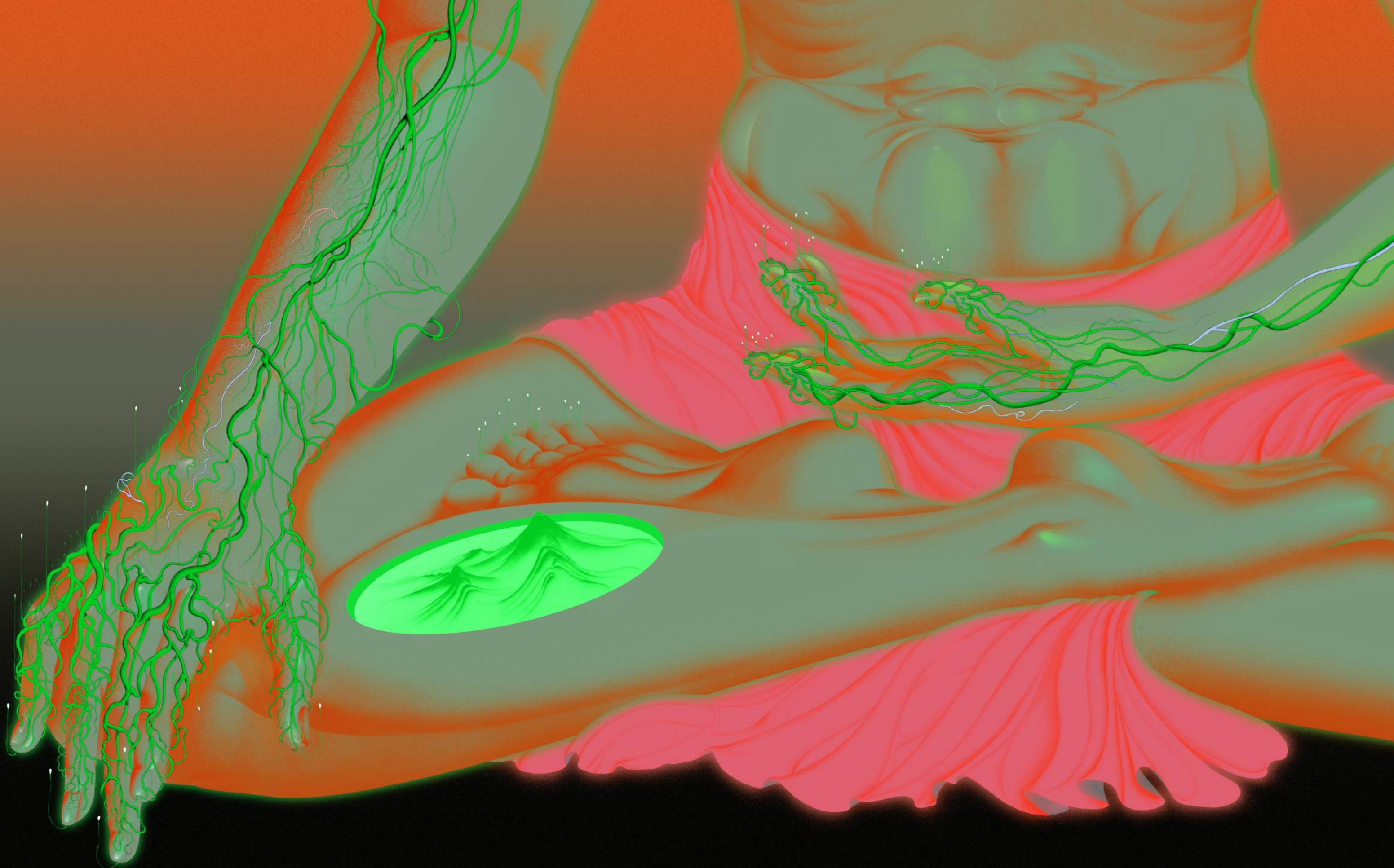
When I was a little California kid, my mother talked a lot about our state falling into the sea. She quoted Nostradamus and rattled on about the New World Order. She told me Bill Clinton was a clone. (Which, well ... ) She wasn't a religious zealot, not really, nor even a doomsday prepper, exactly. She was almost objective about THE END, an oracle of global and interdimensional prophecy. Yes, she did believe Y2K would end us. But no, she did not prepare us well. All I remember is a pallet of bottled water stacked under piles of dirty clothes in the laundry room. I sensed that she was looking for a solution to the slop of humanity and that one of these prophecies—doomsday or redemptive, secular or religious—would be our ticket out. By spreading her chips on the table, when the great wheeled king stepped in and spun, just maybe she'd hit some form of ascension, some sweet liftoff from the pain of watching humans tear each other apart.

It's a shame we don't get to cherry-pick what we inherit.

She's been dead 15 years now, but lately, I find myself in silent conversation with her about the state of the planet. So many things she said about politics, the environment, the economy, have come to fruition in the last few years. What would she say now? Would she simply nod? *Saw this coming.*

There is something soothing, if patriarchal, about prophecy. Imagining that something, someone, will eventually save us, that it's already been written, that our suffering and degradation of the earth is part of a larger cosmic plan. Sometimes, especially in a time as chaotic and uncertain as ours, with political systems that feel like bad satire and the state of the climate nearing apocalypse, I, too, see that believing can be a great salve.

Before Haemin Sunim became one of South Korea's most famous and beloved monks—a holy man-turned-inspirational leader via pithy Twitter posts and best-selling books *Love for Imperfect Things* and *The Things You Can See Only When You Slow Down*—he was an academic who published under Ryan Bongseok Joo. Harvard- and Princeton-educated, Joo taught Asian Studies for close to a decade at Hampshire College. It was there, as Joo, that he wrote the most nuanced and detailed report on the phenomenon of the udumbara that



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I could find. In *Materializing a Buddhist Symbol of Rarity*, published in the journal *Material Religion*, he recounts visiting Uri Temple, where the white blooms first appeared on a Shakyamuni Buddha statue in 1997.

Puzzled by the strange flowers that grew with no soil or water, the temple abbot Tongbong called in the counsel of a respected elder monk from a nearby temple. Recalling the prophecy, the elder monk proclaimed the white blooms as udumbara. His trusted word led an entire religious community to embrace the “flowers” as a sign that the golden-wheeled king would soon be here.

“Abstracted from its location,” wrote Joo in his 20-page investigation, “the object would not have become the udumbara flower.” Because it appeared on a sacred statue instead of in a random crack in the sidewalk, the monk deemed the “flowers” of divine origin. Unlike the astronomer from *The Little Prince*, the respected elder’s word was enough: the organism became udumbara because he said it was.

By 2007, during the second wave of “udumbara” sightings, Chinese media began to publish articles debunking the divine origin of the flowers. Entomologists—insect experts—claimed that the bloom-like organisms being called udumbara were not flowers at all, but the eggs of the lacewing, a delicate green-winged insect whose larvae are nicknamed aphid lions. Lacewings lay their eggs individually at the end of filament-like stalks to keep siblings from cannibalizing one another. And they look almost identical to the pictures of the sacred udumbara.

Herein begins the riddle.

There is another udumbara—one recognized by botanists—but it’s a tree and not a flower. *Ficus racemosa*: a cluster fig. Native to Australia, Malaysia, Indo-China, and the Indian subcontinent, the cluster fig is less known to westerners than the common fig but edible just the same. The trunks of these massive, verdant trees are tightly wound with clusters of chartreuse figs that turn to autumnal oranges and reds as they ripen. Cluster figs provided vital road-food for scholars during long journeys to Takshashila, a major hub for Vedic and Buddhist learning from 5th century BCE to the 2nd century CE, located in what is now Pakistan. To avoid the wasps that pollinated and lived inside the figs, they pulled them open and dried them in the sun for an hour before eating.

In Hindu mythology, the udumbara’s birth is poetic. Udumbara is both tree and god. More specifically, a tree born from the god Indra after he drinks a cup of soma, a ritualistic plant juice. While the exact makeup of soma is disputed, scholars agree it was a brewed psychedelic drink. As punishment for drinking soma that wasn’t his, Indra’s body was disintegrated and from his form arose many living things, including two trees. Dr. Ratna Raman, a professor at Delhi University and expert in the *Upanishads*, an ancient Hindu religious text, tells me that the udumbara tree—not a flower—represented virility, fertility, sexuality. In other words: the profane. The other tree, a *ficus religiosa*, symbolized the sacred.

In *Gods, Wasps, and Stranglers: The Secret History and Redemptive Future of Fig Trees*, British biologist Mike Shanahan says that the paradox of the udumbara lies in its designation. The flower of the actual udumbara, or cluster fig, tree blooms every year, but like all fig trees, its blooms are hidden from view. We may feast on them for breakfast, fan them onto cheese platters, eat them raw or wrap them in bacon and broil, but figs are not actually fruit. They are an inflorescence, a collection of inverted flowers that bloom in the private theater of their own belly. The actual “udumbara flower” is visible only to one creature: a wasp driven by biology to climb down into the bowl of the fig.

Female figs—the ones we eat—are pollinated by female wasps who carry pollen from the male flowers. Her wings are torn off by the narrow entrance on her way in, so that once she enters, she’s trapped and eventually dies inside. Most figs we eat contain the body of at least one female wasp whose corpse has been broken down into proteins and absorbed back into the fig.

“It’s a highly symbiotic relationship that takes place almost completely out of sight,” says Jonathan Damery, the editor of Harvard’s *Arnold Arboretum* magazine, *Arnoldia*. “I suspect that the [udumbara] mythology is connected to these out-of-sight flowers: when the syconium is at the flowering stage, it looks like an immature fruit, not a flower. So the fruits seemingly appear from nowhere.”

As a white American raised by parents invested in Vedic and Buddhist mythologies for their own spiritual purposes, I have an inkling of how difficult the scale of the stories can be for the pragmatic American psyche to grasp. The scales of time—meditating for thousands of years—and the flex and bend of meaning might feel unfathomable, if not absurd.

