

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***The Buddha Bhaishajayaguru ("Teacher of Healing") with Amitabha, Shadakshari, Padmasambhava, and Two Protectors*** ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

Cotton support with opaque mineral pigments in waterbased (collagen) binder 14.0 x 18.5 inches

Eastern Tibet (Kham region)

Ca. 17th century

Museum #: 93.013

By Chad Sawyer

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"Full rare and seldom are the wakened seen.

Of those rare men, seen seldom in the world,

Lo! I am one, physician without peer..."

So said the Buddha Shakyamuni himself who established the rich buddhist tradition of drawing comparisons with, and, to a certain extent, equating buddhist practice and realization with the process of healing. In such a conception, a life of delusion is seen as a condition of illness, and the Dharma is thought of as the "king of all remedies" leading one to freedom from suffering in all its forms. In later centuries, this pattern of juxtaposing would become embodied in the Mahayana tradition in the being of Bhaishajyaguru, the Master of Healing.

Bhaishajayaguru, also known as the Medicine Buddha, is first described in the Scripture on the Merits and Original vows of the Master of Healing, the Lapis Lazuli Radiance Tathagata, of which, the earliest transcript is in Chinese and dates from the early fourth century C.E. In this sutra, Bhaishajyaguru is revealed by the Buddha Shakyamuni to the attending hosts as a celestial buddha residing in his own paradise in the remote east known as Vaiduryavati or "Land of Pure Lapis Lazuli". It is told that when the Medicine Buddha set out on the bodhisattva path he made twelve vows, they are:

1. May light blaze from my body...and may all beings have perfect physical form, identical to my own.
2. May my body be like pure and radiant lapis lazuli.... illuminating all who travel in darkness, enabling them to tread upon their paths.
3. May I enable all beings to obtain the necessities of life.
4. May all beings be shown the path of enlightenment.
5. May all beings be aided to follow the precepts of moral conduct. After hearing my name, those who have broken the precepts will be aided to regain their purity and prevented from sinking to a woesome path of existence.

6. May all who are deformed or handicapped in any way have their deformities removed upon hearing my name.
7. May all who are ill be cured upon hearing my name.
8. May women who, beset by woes, seek to become men be reborn as men in their next life.
9. May all who are caught in Mara's net, entangled in negative views, be caused to gain correct views and thus practice the Bodhisattva Way.
10. May all who are to be punished by the king be freed of their trouble.
11. May those who are desperately famished be given food. May they ultimately taste the sublime Teachings.
12. May all who are destitute of clothes obtain attractive garments and various adornments upon concentrating on my name.

As the Medicine Buddha, it is the sixth and seventh vows which are the most widely known.

The means of invoking the power of Bhaishajyaguru are also outlined in the sutra and include: sincere recitation or concentration on his name, performing puja or offerings to the sutra itself, as well as, reciting and disseminating it, and performing puja before an image of the Master of Healing. A fourth method describes a way of aiding a person who is unconscious and on the "brink of death". It is described that when in such a state a person is led by the hosts of Yama to the King of the Law and judgement is passed on the person's karma. However, if those attending him or her pray to the Medicine Buddha with greatest sincerity then the Master of Healing himself will intercede on the ill person's behalf and bring them back to consciousness. The actual practice involves offering puja six times a day and reading the sutra forty-nine times. It also involves burning seven lamps in front of seven images of the Master of Healing for forty-nine days, making a five-colored banner forty-nine hands in height, and freeing forty-nine different species of animals. The repeated use of seven and forty-nine probably makes reference to the "inbetween state" described in Tibetan Buddhism as the Bardo. The person, upon recovering, will remember the entire episode and will be inspired to change their ways so as not to accrue any more negative karma. This speaks to the buddhist notion of *bodhicitta*, that auspicious moment in a person's life where the direction of one's existence changes from endless wandering in samsara to the desire for enlightenment.

In the work pictured here Bhaishajyaguru is shown seated in the center with a variety of other beings surrounding him. On one level the piece can be seen as a means of invoking a variety of powers to offer assistance in the pursuit of personal well-being. On another and possibly more esoteric level, the piece may serve as an instructive device or reminder of the analogy between healing on the one hand, and buddhist practice and realization on the other.

Bhaishajyaguru, as the largest figure pictured and seated in the center, is the focal concern of this painting and shows his predominate and linking role as the Master of Healing. His right hand is in the *varada* or "bestowal" mudra and offers a myrobalan plant. The fruit of the myrobalan is used for a number of medicinal purposes; aiding in digestion, mental attentiveness, longevity, and increased sensory awareness. (It is notable that the myrobalan affects both the mind and body with its healing properties, indicating the comprehensive nature of Bhaishajyaguru's healing.) His left hand is in the *dhyana* or "meditative" mudra and holds a bowl containing *amrita*, the "nectar of enlightenment".

In the top left of the painting is an image of Amitabha who, together with Bhaishajyaguru, fulfill the roles of "consoler" and "healer". Whereas one appeals to Amitabha with concerns for the next life, one appeals to Bhaishajyaguru for healing in this one. In the Chinese Buddhist canon it is also said that those who have practiced the Dharma, but, at the time of death are not yet established in it, on hearing the name of the Medicine Buddha, will be sent eight great bodhisattvas to show them the way to the Western Paradise.

The top center contains an image of Shadakshari Avalokiteshvara. Avalokiteshvara is a savior figure who offers his power to aid one in dealing with the eight dangers; lions and pride, snakes and envy, the six poisons and avarice, robbers and fanatical views, wild elephants, fire and hatred, demons and devils, and floods and lust.

Padmasambhava is seated in the top right corner. He is said to have introduced the cult of Amitabha, and therefore possibly Bhaishajyaguru, into Tibet. His association with Bhaishajyaguru may also be due to the attribution given to him of propagating medicinal texts in Tibet. His image further associates this work with the Nyingma Sect.

On a higher level, all three images together represent, from left to right, the Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya, and Nirmanakaya, or the Truth, Beatific, and Emanation Bodies of Buddhahood and therefore, ultimately, one's true nature.

In the bottom left corner is seated Simhananda Avalokiteshvara who is known as the "Curer of all diseases". To his left is Dam Chen Garba Nagpo, a fierce protector whose name means "the dark hued blacksmith bound by oath". (In ancient civilizations those who wrought iron were believed to possess magic power and hence were particularly feared.) This, coupled with "the Tibetan's religious reverence and awe of the underground world and its deities" established Garba Nagpo as a protector against black magic. Between these two deities, directly below Bhaishajyaguru, is an offering of seven items, including, from left to right: the king's earring, the rhino or unicorn's horn, the eight-branched coral, a precious jewel, the right-turning conch shell, the elephant's tusks, and the queen's earring. They do not represent any set iconographic grouping of symbols, but rather are a collection, seemingly drawn from different groups such as the Eight Auspicious Symbols and the Seven Gems.

The positioning of the deities reveals the analogy and potential relationship between healing and the realization of one's true nature. Along the bottom, the deities presented seem to be concerned with protection against and curing of negative forces. The beings across the top represent the various manifestations of Buddhahood itself. Positioned between these two groups and drawing them together is Bhaishajyaguru, the Master of Healing. The work presents a visual meditation concerning the true nature of the healing offered by Bhaishajyaguru, that being the healing of physical illness as a metaphor for and road to the healing of the illness of delusion.

References:

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