

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Narrative scenes of the Buddha Shakyamuni*** ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

Cotton support with opaque mineral pigments in waterbased (collagen) binder

Ca. 19th century

Museum #: 97.268

By Wei Lin

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Several scenes of narrative stories surrounding the Buddha Shakyamuni are illustrated in this painting. The scenes are separated from one another by natural elements, such as rocks, hills, and clusters of trees. Each scene is set within its own background with buildings and landscape details. Nevertheless, all elements, including the central Buddha, the verdant landscape and human figures are well integrated, and thus, the whole painting can be read as a single unit.

The Buddha Shakyamuni is portrayed in the center of the painting. He wears a golden robe, and is seated in the meditative position on a lotus pedestal. An aura of radiant light is visible behind him. His hands make the *dhyana*, or meditation, gesture while supporting a begging bowl. Various offerings are depicted in front of the Buddha Shakyamuni.

Customarily, in such narrative paintings, each episode is identified by a brief inscription. However, this is not the case with the SAMA painting. Thus, the exact identification of the narrative scenes is not possible.

The scenes unfolding around the Buddha Shakyamuni may represent *avadanas*, or moralistic stories, associated with the Buddha, his disciples and other characters. The *avadanas* are essentially moral instructions which illustrate the inescapable nature of *karma*, and the way in which Buddhist teachings may lead one to enlightenment. Many *avadana* stories narrate the previous lives of the Buddha Shakyamuni, and are not distinguishable from the Jataka tales (Tucci, vol. II, 438). According to Buddhist literature, there are as many as 550 Jataka tales, during which the Buddha lived as a Bodhisattva in various forms, including animals, humans, and gods, demonstrating various virtues such as generosity, courage, justice and patience, all necessary for attaining Buddhahood.

Some of the scenes in this painting resemble the *avadanas* in the *Avadana-Kalpalata* by Kshemendra. A series of thirty-one prints based on this text are recorded in Rani's *Buddhist Tales of Kashmir* in *Tibetan Woodcuts* and Tucci's *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*. Although the stories in the SAMA painting are not identical in every respect to those illustrated in Rani's and Tucci's books, the relation between them is evident.

The story of Hitaisin is possibly shown in the bottom left corner of the painting (Rani, PL. 25, *Avadana* n. 85; Tucci, vol. II, 520, *Avadana* n. 85, vol. III, PL. 124). In this Jataka story, King Sibi is the Bodhisattva who offers his own blood to cure a sick man. As a result of his considerate ways, the king himself becomes seriously sick. After twelve years, physicians prepare the medicine that will cure him. The king, instead of taking the medicine himself, offers it to an infirm Pratyekabuddha. As a

result of Sibi's compassion, both are miraculously healed.

Although unclear, this is possibly the story depicted in the SAMA painting. The scene shows a) the king's palace, and several sick people outside it; b) inside the palace is probably the scene of the king offering his blood, and distributing the medicine.

In the bottom right corner, two scenes (a, b) of four animals, a monkey; a bull; an elephant; and a jackal; within the forest, are seen. These scenes probably represent a specific story, rather than simply serving as elements to suggest a forest setting. However, the exact story being depicted is unclear.

The closest possibility is the story of Kapinjala, a popular Jataka tale. The story records that there were four animals living in the forest: a hare, a monkey, a type of bird called Kapinijala and an elephant. They choose the Kapinjala as their chief and live in harmony and mutual respect. The Kapinjala is Sakyamuni, the hare Sariputra, the monkey Maudgalyayana and the elephant Ananda (Rani, PL. 25, Avadana n. 86; Tucci, vol II, 520, Avadana n. 86, vol. III, PL. 124). Although a jackal and bull appear in the SAMA painting, instead of the Kapinjala and hare, merely the representation of four animals may relate to the story of the four animal friends.

The story of Madhurasvara is probably depicted below the central Buddha (Rani, PL. 25, Avadana n. 84; Tucci, vol II, 518, Avadana n. 84; vol. III, PL. 124). Madhurasvara is a rich lay person who is hospitable to Ananda, with whom he goes to meet the Buddha. Madhurasvara invites the Buddha to his house and pays homage to him. Finally he enters the Buddhist *sangha* and becomes a monk himself. One day when he is in a monastery, Madhurasvara meets some robbers who are devotees of Durga, and in search of a monk to sacrifice for their goddess. Madhurasvara offers himself and is taken to the place of sacrifice. Touched by his words, the robbers eventually realize their mistake and are converted to Buddhism. They finally become arhats.

Beneath the central Buddha is shown c) Madhurasvara offering himself and accompanied by the robbers. On the left e) is a depiction of the place of sacrifice, and d) the robbers' conversion. On the right side of the painting, f) the converted robbers are seen in monk's robe carrying offerings. They make their way to a temple, g) where the Buddha is preaching. In the lower central scene, (b) Madhurasvara is probably shown meditating in a cave. The scene to its upper left a) may also belong to the same story and may depict Madhurasvara's invitation to the Buddha.

The scenes depicted to the right, above the central Buddha, may represent the story of a sinner who fell into hell (Rani, PL. 24, Avadana n. 82; Tucci, vol II, 517, Avadana n. 82; vol. III, PL. 123). A young person, blinded by love, kills his mother in order to meet a woman, and is thus, reborn in the most horrible of hells. The young man meeting his lover is seen b) directly above the Buddha. The hell he is reborn in c) is depicted above the meeting scene. The scene to the far right a) probably shows the mother being murdered. However, the principal figure is represented in a different costume, and does not agree with other depictions in the preceding scenes.

The scenes shown on the top section of the painting probably refers to the story of Kritajna (Rani, PL. 15, Avadana n. 46; Tucci, vol. II, 486, Avadana. n. 46, vol. III, PL. 114). Kritajna, a son of king Ratisoma, is very charitable and he gives away all his riches to the poor and needy. Thus, he and his brother, Akritajna, go to sea to regain the riches for Kritajna's marriage. On their way back, the boat is shipwrecked. However, the two brothers are saved. Akritajna, in order to take away all the treasures,

blinds his brother when the latter is sleeping, and returns home alone. The blind Kritajna lives as a wanderer. One day, he comes to King Matighosa's court and meets the king's daughter. As a result of the princess's love, as well as Kritajna's compassion to his wicked brother, both of his eyes are miraculously healed. Kritajna is the Buddha, and Akritajna, a reference to the Buddha's evil cousin, Devadatta.

The scenes shown in the SAMA painting represents the first part of the story. a) Buddha telling the story to his disciples is depicted on the far right of the painting. The two brothers' voyage, the shipwreck, and the brothers' being saved b, c), are depicted in the center and left.

There is no evidence for the identification of the rest of the scenes in this painting. All the episodes depicted in the painting seem to be random parts of various stories. As the painting belongs to a set of several paintings, removed from its context and without the other paintings from the set, the above discussion remains purely conjectural.

References:

Rani, Sharada. *Buddhist Tales of Kashmir in Tibetan woodcuts: Narthang series of the woodcuts of Kshemendra's Avadana-Kalpalata*. New Delhi: Hauzkhas Enclave, 1977.

Tucci, Giuseppe. *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*. Poma. Memxlix: LA Libreria Dello Stato, 1949.

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