

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Shakyamuni and his two disciples presiding over the Confession Buddhas*** ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting

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

25.5 x 36.5 inches

Central Tibet

Ca. 17th century

Museum #: 92.049

By Lin Su-hsing

3 June, 1998

The Buddha in the center seated on a lotus throne within an elaborate shrine is Shakyamuni. The large figure of Shakyamuni clearly dominates the composition. He sits cross-legged and makes the *bhumisparsa mudra*, the earth-touching gesture with his right hand. Shakyamuni is flanked by two of his chief disciples, Sariputra and Mahamaudgalyayana, who are famous for their intellectual and mystical powers, respectively. The two disciples are shown in smaller size; they stand out by virtue of their bright orange robes, and each holds a begging bowl and a monk's mendicant staff, *khakkhara*.

Grouped around the central figure of Shakyamuni are the Thirty-five Confession Buddhas (T. bDe-gShegs-So-INga or ITung-bShags). The 35 Confession Buddhas should be recognized as a whole group. Each of them displays hand gestures, some similar and some different.

The principal characteristic of confession is reflected in the literal meaning of its Tibetan equivalent *shag-pa* (T. bshags-pa), which means "splitting open," "laying bare," or "declaring" (Beresford, 34). Opening up and honesty in every situation is the essence of the Buddhist path (Beresford, 34). A *sutra* about the Thirty-five Confession Buddhas is the Sutra of Three Heaps (Skt. Triskandhadharmasutra; T. Phung-po gsum-p'ai mdo). According to the Tibetan commentary, done by Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey and Thupten Zopa Rinpoche, the first of the "Three Heaps" is the heap of confession, the second, dedication, and the third, rejoicing. The reasons why they are called heaps (T. phung-po, skandha) are that a heap arises from many things being gathered together; here, heap implies that this practice is a synthesis of various methods of confession, dedication and rejoicing (Beresford, 37).

It is said that the Declaration of Downfalls of Awakening (Warriors), an Indian commentary by Nagarjuna, originated from an instance when thirty-five Awakening Warriors who were beginners went begging and caused the death of a beerseller's son. In order to lay this downfall bare they urged Upali, a superior disciple, to request this *sutra* from the Buddha Sakyamuni, who is called the Endowed Transcendent Destroyer in the *sutra* (Beresford, 10). When this *sutra* was first requested the Endowed Transcendent Destroyer radiated light rays which invoked the appearance of 34 Fully Awakened Beings from the 10 directions, along with a multitude of others. They remained there in space while the penitent Awakening Warriors went for refuge (Beresford, 10).

The Thirty-five Confession Buddhas actually form a spherical concept, emphasizing the omnipresence of the Buddha power in every direction, ever-available to help men to purify themselves from former and present sins (Olschak, 136). Because each of the 35 Buddhas has specific powers to eliminate

obstacles from residual wrong actions committed in past lives, through meditating on each and reciting the names of the Thirty-five Buddhas from the heart and with full comprehension, all sins may be forgiven (Huntington; Gyatso, 49; Beresford, 39). Usually there are only 34 buddhas with the central figure of Shakyamuni; Buddha Shakyamuni himself is the thirty-fifth. However, here 35 are represented.

In the Aryabadrakalpa Sutra, it is said that during the Auspicious Age there will be a thousand Buddhas (Huntington; Gyatso, 49). It is this idea that lead to the development of the Thirty-five Confession Buddhas in China and Tibet (Huntington). Because this time has not arrived yet, this concept represents the promise of every being's enlightenment (Huntington). Buddhas are perfect witnesses to confession; through the power of their blessings, it is possible to purify all of the negative karma we have accumulated since beginningless time (Gyatso, 49). All sins are evil deeds accumulating bad karman (Las-Ngam), and the omnipresence of the Buddha power to forgive sins is demonstrated by the number "thirty-five"(Olschak, 136).

In Mahayana Buddhism, the ideal being is a bodhisattva, or enlightened being, who has attained buddhahood but will not enter nirvana until every sentient being has been enlightened. With the bodhisattva vow, a bodhisattva provides active help. He is ready to take on himself the suffering of all other beings, and to transfer his own karmic merit to other beings. In order to lead beings on the path to enlightenment, Bodhisattvas appear in various forms. The three shown here are Vajrapani, Avalokiteshvara, and Manjushri. These three Bodhisattvas are thought of as protectors, representing the power (Vajrapani), compassion (Avalokiteshvara), and wisdom (Manjusri) of all the Buddhas of past, present, and future (Rhie and Thurman, 68).

Vajrapani, or "Vajra bearer", located on Shakyamuni's lower left side, is a complex deity with various forms and one of the oldest Bodhisattvas in the Buddhist pantheon (Pal, 197). As the companion of the Buddha, he is a familiar figure in early Mahayana Buddhist texts. In Tantric Mahayana tradition, Vajrapani is most frequently encountered in his fierce emanation, as shown here, in which he is a powerful protector and remover of obstacles (Rhie and Thurman, 68). In the Geluk Order in particular, Vajrapani is often grouped with Avalokiteshvara and Manjushri.

Avalokiteshvara, in the middle below Sakyamuni, is the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion. In this form the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara is known as Shadakshari. Shadakshari, who travels to all realms of the universe in his tireless quest to deliver beings from suffering through the use of his special *mantra*, *om mani padme hum* ("Hail the jewel in the lotus!") (Rhie and Thurman, 137; Pal, 199). His principal hands are raised to his chest in the gem-holding *mudra*. His upper right hand displays the rosary, and the left hand holds the lotus, the distinctive emblems of the Bodhisattva Shadakshari (Pal, 199).

The Four-Armed Manjushri, in Shakyamuni Buddha's lower right side, holds his main attributes, the flaming sword, which cuts the clouds of ignorance (Rhie and Thurman, 140; Olschake 52) in his upper right hand, and the lotus flower with the text of the Transcendent Wisdom (Prajnyaparamita Sutra) in the lower left. In the other pair of hands he displays bow and arrow, the double symbol of method combined with wisdom, leading to the full comprehension of the Twin-unity of Contrasts often symbolizes in Tantric art (Rhie and Thurman, 139; Olschak, 52).

To sum up, this Thangka tells us that if a devotee goes through the Thirty-five Confession Buddhas in the painting and meditates on each, the negative karma that they accumulated in the past lives will be purified through their vows. Such benefits derive from the pledge to help sentient beings that these Awakened Beings have made in their past lives, not from the mere repetition of their names (Beresford, 43).

References:

Beresford, Brian C. trans. And ed. *The Confession of Downfalls*. New Delhi: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, 1993.

Gyatso, Geshe Kelsang. *The Bodhisattva Vow: The Essential Practices of Mahayana Buddhism*. London: Tharpa Publications, 1991.

Olschak, Blanche Christine. *Mystic Art of Ancient Tibet*. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1987.

Pal, Pratapaditya. *Art of Tibet: A Catalogue of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art Collection*. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1990.

Rhie, Marylin M. and Robert A. F. Thurman. *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991.

This WWW server is provided by **The Huntington Archive of Buddhist and Related Art** (<http://kaladarshan.arts.ohio-state.edu/>), College of the Arts, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA.

Updated November 2004

URL http://kaladarshan.arts.ohio-state.edu/exhib/sama/*Essays/AM95.006PadmPar.html

© All images on this site are copyrighted. Unauthorized use or electronic dissemination is prohibited by applicable law.
© Text copyright as noted
© Front graphic copyright Andrew LaMoreaux

This Web page may be linked to any other Web pages; permission is not required. The contents, however, may not be altered. Unauthorized use or electronic dissemination is prohibited by applicable laws. Please contact the maintainer for permission to re-publish any material.