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**Arhats**

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3 June, 1998

Arhats are the "saints" or sages of Buddhism; they are the monks who have attained enlightenment through the teachings of the Buddha and are now freed from the cycles of suffering and rebirth. In early monastic, or Theravada Buddhism, the arhats were the major disciples of Shakyamuni and served as patriarchs of the sangha, or monastic community after the death of the Buddha. Among his numerous disciples, sixteen were chosen by the Buddha and entrusted with the task of protecting and preserving his teachings until the coming of the next Buddha Maitreya. Thus, the arhats remain alive indefinitely and reside with their numerous disciples in their reclusive abodes or paradises (Tucci, p.555).

The sixteen arhats protect also the four quarters together with the four lokapalas, or guardian kings, who watch over the four cardinal directions. As a result, the sixteen arhats are invariably depicted in paintings as a set with the historical Buddha Shakyamuni in the center. Included also in the paintings are Shakyamuni's two best disciples, Sariputra and Mahamaudgalyayana; Hwashang and Dharmatala and the four lokapalas. Hwashang and Dharmatala are laypersons who became the two religious supporters of the arhats. Although, the two supporters are sometimes included amongst the ranks of the arhats making a list of seventeen or eighteen, they should be differentiated from the group of arhats who were all monks. These two figures are most probably later additions as they are not mentioned in the original lists of arhats from India nor in the list from Atisha. As uniquely Tibetan additions, Dharmatala and Hwashang are also not included in the Chinese set of eighteen (Tucci, pp.556-558).

Representations of the arhats can be found quite commonly in Tibetan monasteries and they can be presented in various manners. For example, they can be depicted all together within one painting, or in sets of paintings where they appear as single central figures, or they can be portrayed in groups of just four or more within a single painting. These sets would include a central work depicting Shakyamuni Buddha with his two best disciples, other supplementary paintings would include Dharmatala, Hwashang and the four Lokapalas. In the SAMA collection are five works all from different sets of arhat paintings. One painting depicts a Buddha and five arhats. Two other paintings depict arhats grouped in fours, and two more portray single figures each.

In the first painting, [# 97.270](#), the large central figure of a Buddha dominates the Chinese blue-and-green landscape. He sits on a lotus throne, in the meditation posture with his hands in the *dharmachakra*, or teaching gesture. He wears a red and gold monk's patched robe. The samghati, or ritual monk's garb, is made of twenty-five pieces of cloth which commemorate the begging apparel of the first Buddhist monks. In addition, the Buddha has a green halo with a red outline and a blue aura around his body. Directly above the Buddha is a red Amitayus, the "Buddha of Infinite Life," dressed in his princely robes, making the *dhyana*, or meditation gesture while holding the vessel of the elixir of eternal life.

On either side of the central Buddha, there are four arhats. On his upper right, holding a jewel spitting mongoose, is Bakula, who resides in the northernmost mountains of Uttarkuru. He became a monk at sixty years of age and his mongoose is a symbol of his wish to liberate all suffering people. Below Bakula is Nagasena, who is perhaps best known for answering the questions of King Milinda recorded in the text, *Milindapanha*. He holds a staff which is used to heal sickness and a libation vase with the water of life which was presented to him by the four guardian kings to wash away the sins of all living beings.

On the central Buddha's upper left side is Rahula, the only son of Shakyamuni, who is said to have attained enlightenment just by walking into the presence of his father. According to legend, he ascended to Trayastrimsha, the heaven of the thirty-three Gods, to explain the Buddha's teachings to the children of the gods. In remembrance of his visit, the gods presented him with gifts of their own diadems, as a result of which Rahula is characteristically shown holding a jeweled crown. Directly below him is the arhat, Kanaka-bharadvaja, who is making the *samadhi*, or meditating gesture, by resting his hands one upon the other. This arhat is famous for always having golden coins available to distribute to the needy.

In the lower left and right corners of the painting are the two armor-clad lokapalas. In the left corner is Virudhaka, the guardian king of the south, who holds a sword as his attribute, and the one on the right corner is Dhrtarastra, guardian king of the east, who holds his characteristic lute. To Virudhaka's left is the arhat, Abhedha who holds the stupa that the Buddha Shakyamuni gave him when he went into the northern countries to convert the yaksas, or nature spirits. The stupa possesses magic powers which can control the calamities caused by the malevolent yaksas. On Abhedha's left is one of the religious supporters, Hva-shang. He is usually depicted as a rotund and jovial figure and holding a *mala*, or prayer beads in his left hand and a *sankha*, conch shell in his right. He is often considered a benefactor of children and is usually depicted with at least one or more playing children around him.

From the numbers of the arhats and lokapalas and their placement within the work, it can be deduced that this is probably one of the two side paintings of a set of three. Each painting would then consist of five arhats, two lokapalas and one supporter and the central painting would also have Shakyamuni flanked by Sariputra and Mahamaudgalyayana. The fact that the central Buddha in the SAMA work, [#97.270](#), is not flanked by these two disciples suggests that this Buddha is not Shakyamuni. With the Buddha Amitayus directly above this central Buddha, it can be further inferred that the other two paintings would also have the Buddha of the present *kalpa*, or eon above the central figure, making the set a depiction of the Buddhas of the past, present and future accompanied by the arhats.

The deities in the top register flanking Amitayus are Avalokiteshvara and Mahastamaprapta. The richly dressed figure to the left is Avalokiteshvara holding a *vajra* to his chest with his right hand and an upturned *ghanta*, or bell in his left. The blue Mahastamaprapta to the right is also depicted in fine costume and jewelry; he sits in the meditative pose holding the stalks of the two *padma*, or lotus plants behind him. These plants support a *vajra* and a *ghanta* on their blossoms. The placement of Hvasang in the lower register on the left suggests that Dharmatala the other religious supporter would be placed in the lower right of the corresponding painting. Therefore, this determines the SAMA painting as the left flanking work of the set, and most probably the Buddha of the Past is depicted as its central figure.

Another depiction of Hvasang can be seen in [#92.055](#) of the SAMA collection. He is shown as the central figure, with a few mischievous children vying for his attention around him. In the lower left and right of the painting are two lokapalas, Virudhaka and Dhritarashtra. This painting is probably part of a large set, with more than twenty paintings which would have contained arhats, the two religious supporters, the four lokapalas and a central painting of the Buddha Shakyamuni and perhaps two more with the images of the two best disciples.

It is unclear as to when Hvasang was included with the arhats. However, it is certain that he is a later addition than Dharmatala. The name Hva-shang is the Tibetan transcription of the Chinese, *ho-shang*, meaning monk. Hvasang in turn is a Central Asian transcription of the Sanskrit title, *upadhyaya*. This links Hvasang to the figure who introduced Chinese Buddhism at the council of Lhasa during King Trisong Detsen's time in competition with Padmasambhava's schools which introduced currents of Indian thought into Tibet (Tucci, pp.556-557, Rhie & Thurman, pp.110-111).

An other painting of an individual arhat in the SAMA collection is [#93.012](#). This shows the arhat, Bakula, with his mongoose as the primary figure. His story is mentioned above and will not be repeated here. Bakula appears in this painting with an attendant who offers him precious red coral. Above them are two Buddha figures- perhaps the medicine Buddha, Bhaishajayaguru on the left and the Buddha Shakyamuni on the right. Bhaishajayaguru is blue in color and dressed in a red robe with delicate golden designs on it. He holds the medicinal plant in his right hand and a begging bowl in his left. The Buddha Shakyamuni is also dressed in a red robe with golden floral designs, and he makes the *shramana*, or a monk's gesture in his right hand and holds a begging bowl in his left. The presence of these two Buddhas suggests that this painting may be a part of a set depicting the cycle of arhats with the thirty-five confessional Buddhas. However, the presence of Ushnishavijaya, the white deity in the lower left and Vajrapani, the green deity on the right is puzzling and cannot be explained. Ushnishavijaya has three faces and eight arms. In her principle left and right hands she holds a *vishvavajra* and a vase with the elixir of immortality respectively. In her other left hands from top to bottom, she holds a miniature image of a Buddha, an arrow and makes a bestowal gesture; and in her right hands, she holds a bow and a lasso. Vajrapani holds a *vajra* against his chest in his right hand and an upturned bell resting on his lap in his left.

The last two paintings of the arhats in the SAMA collection depict them in groups of four. In the painting [#95.143](#), the arhat with the mongoose is Bakula. To his left is the old monk, Panthaka, who is seated before a rocky mountain with flowers. He holds a *pustaka* or book in his right hand and makes the *vitarka* or argument gesture in his left. He lives in a beautiful rocky residence called "Flower Essence" in Trayastrimsha heaven, surrounded by 900 arhats to whom he teaches the Triptaka, or instructions on discipline and on the general and higher learning. The dark figure on Bakula's right is another depiction of the arhat Kanakabharadvja, seen in [#97.270](#), who holds his hands in the meditative gesture, placing them one over the other. Before him is probably Pindolabharadvja who has a book in his right hand, and holds his hand in the *abhaya*, or "fear not" gesture.

In the lower left corner of the painting is Vaisravana, the guardian king of the north, holding a banner and his mongoose. On the lower right corner is an archetypical depiction of the second religious supporter, Dharmatala. He is dressed in Chinese robes with his hair tied in a top-knot. He holds a fly-whisk and vase while carrying a book pack filled with religious texts on his back. He is usually depicted with an attendant tiger and a miniature image of a Buddha which are his common identifying

traits. Dharmatala was a pious Tang dynasty layman in charge of a temple where the Arhats images were displayed. Once Dharmatala was attacked by robbers while guarding the temple and as an incarnation of Avalokitesvara, he acquired assistance from a tiger who issued forth from his right knee and drove away the intruders. The tiger then became a constant companion of Dharmatala. Images like these of Dharmatala dressed with his back-pack of books are associated with pilgrims who traveled from China to India. There exists a Sung dynasty portrait of the famous Chinese pilgrim Hsuan-tsang dressed in the same robes and attitude as Dharmatala carrying his pack of books (Tucci, pp.558-562, Rhie & Thurman, pp.114- 115). The presence of the eight Buddhas in the top register of the painting suggests that this is a set of works presenting the thirty-five confessional Buddhas with Shakyamuni as one of the thirty-five Buddhas. The sixteen Arhats, two religious supporters, four lokapalas and two best disciples would also have been included in the set.

In [#92.047](#), the last of the SAMA arhat paintings, a group of four arhats and the guardian king of the west, Virudpaksa, are depicted. The central figure is Rahula who holds his diadem. A Buddha in his paradise with the various auspicious offerings is depicted below Rahula's throne. Directly above Rahula is another Buddha, perhaps Akshobhya, the jina, or victor Buddha, who makes the *bhumisparsa*, or earth-touching gesture with his right hand and *samadhi* or meditation gesture with his left. The presence of Akshobhya suggests that this painting belongs to a set of five each depicting one victor Buddha at the top center.

In the upper left corner of the painting, is the arhat, Vanavasin, who holds a fly whisk in his left hand and makes the *kuranda* gesture in his right. On the upper right corner is the arhat, Bhadra, who holds a gem in his left hand while making the *samadhi* or meditative gesture. He displays the *vitarka*, or teaching gesture in the right hand. Vanavasin was born in Kapilavastu, the Buddha's birthplace and taught the doctrine on the banks of the Yamuna river. The figure in the lower left corner, is Kanakavasta, who holds a jeweled *pasa* or noose made out of a string of gems. According to legend, the noose was given to Kanakavasta by the nagas when he went down into the naga realm to convert them to the Buddhist faith. Several nagas are depicted in the waters in front of Kanakavasta in this painting.

In conclusion, arhats may be depicted in a great variety of ways. Their paintings are invariably found in all Tibetan monasteries as vivification of the arhats' presence. As a group, the sixteen arhats, divided among the four quarters of the world, and the four lokapalas watching over the four directions, symbolize the diffusion of the Dharma throughout all space. Forsaking their own *nirvana* until the time of the future Buddha, the arhats maintain the Dharma and provide a temporal link between the present time and that of the future Buddha, Maitreya (Tucci, p.555).

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Updated November 2004

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