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Nagasena ([Image](#))

Thangka, painting
Silk support with Chinese black ink
20.25 x 38.5 inches
North China
Ca. late 16th century
Chinese court monochrome school
Museum #: 92.062

By Lin Su-hsing
3 June, 1998

The arhats (T. *Gnas-brtan*) are the enlightened beings of Buddhism, who were disciples of Buddha Shakyamuni and attained freedom from the cycles of suffering and rebirth (Frederic 101; Rhie and Thurman, 102). In Tibet, there are a group of sixteen arhats and the two "adjuncts," Hvasang and Dharmatala, making it an eighteen-member group (Rhie and Thurman, 86, 102). The main figure shown in the midst of drawing a dragon up from the depths of rolling waters is the Arhat Nagasena, one of the sixteen arhats.

Nagasena (T. *kLu-yi sDe*), or "master of the Nagas," was a learned monk and lived about 100 years after Buddha Shakyamuni. He came from a Brahmin family in India and entered the Buddhist *sangha*, or monastic order, at the age of fifteen (The Shambhala, 153). Nagasena resided on Mount Pandava in Magadha with 1,200 disciples. He studied the Buddhist teachings in various places, among them Pataliputra, where he was considered to have attained the stage of an arhat (The Shambhala, 151-153). Nagasena was an expert in propounding the essentials of Buddhism. The discussions between him and the Indo-Greek king, Menander (Milinda), who ruled in western India during the second century B.C.E., is the subject of the text entitled *Milindapanha*, or "The Questions of Milinda" (Frederic, 104; Snellgrove, 54). This text records the conversations between the king and Nagasena regarding a wide range of Buddhist beliefs (Snellgrove, 54).

In the SAMA painting, Nagasena is shown seated at ease on a rock in a craggy mountain landscape, holding a *khakkhara*, or mendicant staff, in his right hand, and displaying the *vitarka mudra* (Frederic, 4). In this painting, the texture strokes used in depicting the rock recall Wu Bin's style. The light shading on the folds of the robe and the thin color wash suggest Wu and Chen's style. In addition, the landscape elements are typically Chinese. The composition of this painting is similar to the famous image of "Shakyamuni Descending from the Mountain After Asceticism" This kind of composition is a popular iconographic feature and is rendered in many Japanese and Chinese paintings; the artist who best known for this kind of painting is Liang Kai. It further supports a Chinese attribution to the SAMA painting.

In general, the term Sino-Tibetan art implies that Tibetan art was strongly influenced by China, and vice versa (Karmay, 1). Contact between China and Tibet has been a long tradition that can be traced back to the seventh century C.E. (Karmay, 2). Later, with the increasing imperial patronage during the time of the Yuan Emperor, Kublai Khan (1215-1295), the Buddhist works made during the Yuan

(1271-1368), Ming (1368-1644), and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties show great Nepalese and Tibetan influence. The increasing Sino-Tibetan contact, strong imperial patronage, and the significant Chinese stylistic characteristics of this painting suggest that it was made during the Ming period in China and was possibly given as a gift to a visiting Tibetan monk.

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