

[Back to Exhibition Index](#)***Descent from the Trayastrimsha Heaven*** ([Image](#))

Xylograph on paper

Paper and printing ink

21.0 x 29.5 inches

Original design from Tibet. This print is from Kathmandu, Nepal.

Mid 20th century

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By Wei Lin

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The Buddha Shakyamuni was a great teacher, and his life was a paradigm of the enlightenment process. Numerous episodes of the Buddha's life are described in Buddhist literature. Among them, the eight great events are the most common, and their representations remain a favorite theme in Buddhist art. The narrative scene depicted in this wood-block print represents one of the life events, namely, the descent from the Trayastrimsha heaven.

When Shakyamuni's mother dies, she is reborn as a *deva* in the Trayastrimsha heaven which is presided over by the Brahmanical god, Indra. After the Buddha attains enlightenment, he goes to Trayastrimsha to teach the Abhidharma to his mother and other celestial beings. After the three months of teaching in Trayastrimsha, the Buddha decides to return to his disciples and lay followers. His descent from the heaven takes place at Sankashya in modern Uttar Pradesh, India.

The Dhammapada-Atthakatha records that when the Buddha is ready to return, Indra makes three ladders for the Buddha's descent. The ladders connect the summit of Mount Meru, where the Trayastrimsha heaven is located, and the earthly human sphere, near Sankashya city. The ladder, made of jewels, in the middle is used by the Buddha; the right ladder of gold is used by Indra; and the left ladder of silver is used by Brahma (Burlingame, 53). Indra and Brahma are depicted as the Buddha's attendants in the SAMA print.

The most important message that the Descent from the Trayastrimsha has come to represent occurs with the Buddha's arrival at Sankashya. Crowds of people gather there eagerly awaiting the Buddha's return. Everyone wants to greet the great teacher. According to the narratives of the Chinese travelers Faxuan and Xuanzang, there is a nun called Utpali, who vows that she would be the first person to greet the Buddha when he descends from the stairs. However, a simple nun cannot compete against the powerful kings and princes with their elaborate entourages occupying the best spots near the ladders. Yet, as a result of Utpali's devotion, she is transformed into a universal monarch, accompanied by seven treasures and the most elaborate troops, and thus she is able to secure the best position to fulfill her vow. She is the first to greet the Buddha, upon which she reverts back to her original appearance. Recognizing Utpali's devotion, the Buddha predicts her future enlightenment (legge, 49; Beal, 205). As such, the event represents the archetypal prediction of one's enlightenment by a Buddha.

The story, represented in the print, begins from the right top corner. The Buddha is shown here

preaching in Trayastrimsha heaven. He is seated in a cross-legged manner, with his right hand in the *varada*, or bestowal, gesture while his left hand is in the *vitarka*, or teaching, gesture. There are four figures kneeling before him, listening to his teachings.

Below the heaven, Mount Meru is depicted rising from the center of the great ocean. The mountain is divided into four terraces. The first terrace is the home of the pitchers of water; the second one is the home of the bearers of flower garland; the third one is the home of those always intoxicated; and the fourth, or the highest one, is the home of four guardian kings of the four cardinal directions. This does not depict a physical structure, however, it suggests a sacred place in ones own heart-mind. The sacred place is defined by water, decorated by flowers, and then gathered around by ecstatic practitioners and guardian kings. This is exactly the process that one needs to go through in Buddhist rituals.

In the center of the print is the Buddha descending down from the heaven with Indra and Brahma. The Buddha makes the *varada*, or bestowal, gesture with his proper right hand. His left hand makes the *vitarka*, or teaching, gesture. The three-headed Brahma is seen on the left of the painting, and he carries a *chauri*, or a fly-whisk. Indra, on the right, carries an umbrella. Figures who carry *chauris* or umbrellas usually serve as servants or attendants to high ranking persons (Huntington, Susan, 53; Huntington, Susan & John, 132). The appearance of Indra and Brahma as the Buddha's attendants demonstrates the supremacy of the Buddha over the Brahmanical gods. The other lesser attendants hold various other offerings, including a *chakra*, a conch, food offerings, and lotus flowers. In the top left corner of the print, three flying celestial beings are shown pouring offerings, celebrating the Buddha's descent. Numerous treasures appear in the sky to mark this auspicious moment.

At the base of the triple stairs, a group of ten people are shown awaiting the Buddha's return. The figure in very front of the stairs is most probably the nun Utpali. She wears royal garb and rich ornaments. Her right hand holds lotus flowers, and her left hand extends to greet the Buddha. Other figures, waiting to greet the Buddha, hold various offerings including an umbrella, a fan, a *chakra*, a gem, a cymbal, lotus flowers, and a plate of fruit. Two elephants, probably belonging to a royal entourage, are shown beside these figures.

In the bottom center of the print is a stupa on a lotus base. The stupa bears triple stairs on it, commemorating this great moment, and honoring the sacred site of Sankashya. Numerous offering are placed on either side of the stupa, suggesting the peoples' veneration of this holy place.

In the lower right corner of the print is an image of a Buddha seated on a pedestal. Both of the Buddha's hands display the *varada*, or bestowal, gesture. Two figures kneel before him and hold up their offerings. The shaven-headed figure in monastic robe is undoubtedly the nun Utpali who has returned to her original form. The scene depicts the moment when nun Utpali receives the prediction of enlightenment by the Buddha. This indicates the promise of enlightenment for every Buddhist devotee, even a woman (Huntington, John, 62).

A stupa with the three-faced, eight-armed figure of Ushnishavijaya is shown above the prediction scene. Her primary right hand makes the *varada*, or bestowal, gesture and the primary left hand displays the *abhaya*, or fear not, gesture. She also holds an arrow, a rosary in her middle and upper right hands, and a vase, a bow, a water pot in her lower, middle and upper left hands. Ushnishavijaya

is the "Victorious Ushnisha," and she is shown here as the mother of all Buddhas.

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