

Bhaishajyaguru or the Medicine Buddha in the Vaidurya Paradise – Banners and Silk Paintings from the Dunhuang Caves

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Published by Critical Collective, 2021

In Mahayana Buddhism, Bhaishajyaguru or the Medicine Buddha is popularly known to heal the body and the spirit. His name, therefore, is closely associated with the medicinal and therapeutic aspects of his teachings. In early Buddhist texts, he is invoked as Bhaishajyaraja and Bhaishajyasena; in fact, Bhaishajyaguru's representation is as old as the representations of the goddess Prajnaparamita, the mother of all Buddhas. A popular figure in early Mahayana Buddhism, Bhaishajyaguru reigns over the Vaidurya Paradise in the east. He has taken the twelve sublime vows or *dvadasha maha pranidhanani* for the welfare of beings. Other than eradicating calamities and prolonging life as recorded in the *Bhaishajyaguru-vaidurya-prabharaja Sutra*, the text is also referred to as the Medicine Buddha Sutra. The earliest manuscript of this *sutra* was found from the monastic ruins of Gilgit by Sir Aurel Stein in 1931, dated to the 2nd century CE. In the *sutra*, Shakyamuni Buddha cultivates a belief in Mahayana Buddhism by invoking Bhaishajyaguru's name, chanting his *dharani*, and making offerings to him. The cult of Bhaishajyaguru gathered momentum in Central Asia through banners, silk paintings, murals, and manuscripts reaching Far East Asia and Southeast Asia. It is interesting to note that while the itinerant Mahansaghikas were influential in spearheading the cult of Bhaishajyaguru in Central Asia, the Medicine Buddha cult gained less prominence in India. Only in the Western-Himalayan regions from the 10th century CE onwards, one finds murals, bronze sculptures, and thangkas of Bhaishajyaguru from monasteries in Ladakh, Himachal, Tibet, and Nepal.

Shakyamuni Buddha, as per the Pali Buddhist canon, is exalted as the first and foremost healer. In the Tripitaka discourse, Shakyamuni Buddha has iterated the importance of physical wellbeing to free oneself from bodily and karmic taints and reach nirvana. In the Magandiya Sutta of the *Sutta Nipata*, the Buddha says, health is the highest gain and nirvana is the highest bliss; and of ways, the Eightfold path leads to deathlessness, to security. Buddhism regards illness as the karmic outcome which stems from the unavoidable consequence of actions either in this life or in one's previous life. Mindfulness is further asserted by the body through charity or *dana*, cultivating righteous conduct or *shila*, and meditation or *samadhi* to strike a holistic balance between mind and body. In case of an illness in the human body, the Buddhists believe

the cure is two-fold: practising positive thinking and using medicinal herbs. One widely known Buddhist prayer for its healing effect is '*bojjhanga paritta*', as mentioned in the *Samyutta Nikaya*. *Paritta* signifies 'protection', and *bojjhanga* refers to the seven factors of enlightenment or *bodhigya*. The mantra is chanted to ward off illness and to promote healing among individuals. The restitution of physical form from a troubled or diseased state is often cured through spiritual healing by chanting and meditating on specific body parts. The Buddha expected his followers to look after the sick and recommended the contemplation of the seven limbs of enlightenment: mindfulness, investigation of factors, striving, joy, serenity, meditation, and tranquillity to overcome inner poisons of envy, anger, and illusion. For Buddha, liberation is the outcome of healing. Additionally, the Mahasatipatthana Sutta of the *Digha Nikaya* also stresses mindfulness through the *vipassana* meditation as the most crucial part for purification and overcoming of sorrow and for realising the goal of nirvana.

In the Mahayana Buddhist canon, the role of Shakyamuni Buddha as the karmic healer is further adapted by the Bodhisattvas, who forsake enlightenment for the wellbeing of those in suffering. The prominent position of karmic and spiritual healing is also shared by Bhaishajyaguru, who resides in the Vaiduryanirbhasa or the Pure Lapis Lazuli paradise in the east. In later Mahayana and Vajrayana texts, the apothecarial qualities of Bhaishajyaguru are merged with the Akshobhya Buddha, one of the transcendental Buddhas or *tathagatas* of the east residing in the Abhirati Paradise. In the *Bhaishajyaguru-vaidurya-prabha-raja Sutra*, the Buddha, while travelling to Vaishali, on the request of bodhisattva Manjushri, recites the sutra of the Bhaishajyaguru as the Buddha of crystal radiance which is limitless and unbound. Wanting to relieve beings from suffering and illness, Bhaishajyaguru sits in *samadhi* to eliminate the suffering of all beings. Upon entering meditative absorption, a great light emanates from the Buddha's forehead, and he is immersed in the trance to help all sentient beings. According to the three Chinese translations of *Bhaishajyaguru-vaidurya-prabha-raja Sutra* by Srimitra (317-322 CE), Dharmagupta (616 CE) and Hsuan-Tsang (650 CE), if one recalls the name of Bhaishajyaguru at the moment of death, the eight great bodhisattvas or the *ashtamahabodhisattvas* come down to take the devotee to his paradise.

The Sukhavati Paradise or the Pure Land Paradise of Amitabha Buddha, situated in the west, has been a subject of great devotion. Texts such as the *Pratyutpanna Samadhi Sutra*, *Sukhavativyuha Sutra*, and the *Amitayurdhyana Sutra* exalt Amitabha Buddha for a blissful rebirth without the karmic taint. These sutras were widely worshipped along the Silk Route

and were carried from Gandhara to China around 147 CE by a Kushan monk Lokakshema. Further on, Indian Buddhist monks such as Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu, between the 2nd-5th centuries CE, wrote commentaries on texts exalting the Pure Land Paradise. The significance of Amitabha Buddha's pure land realm or *buddhashetra* is also asserted in the *Bhaishajya-guru-vaidurya-prabha-raja Sutra*, stating that the Vaidurya Paradise is exponentially as powerful as the Sukhavati Paradise. The *Sukhavativyuha Sutra* also recalls two emanations of Bhaishajyaguru, which are also seen in Buddhist banner paintings. These figures are of Bhaishajyaraja, the King of Healing, and Bhaishajasamudgate or Supreme Healer, to grant solace against suffering. The staging of preaching scenes in Buddhist art has taken place from the earliest Gandharan representation of the first sermon delivered by Shakyamuni Buddha at the Deer Park, Sarnath. This formulation was adopted in Mahayana Buddhism as the inspirational ground for preaching scenes in paradise.



Plate 1: Shakyamuni/Amitabha Buddha Preaching to Bodhisattvas and Devotees
Dunhuang
7th-8th centuries CE
Silk banner
Acc. No. 1919,0101,0.6
British Museum



Plate 2: Shakyamuni/Amitabha Buddha preaching
Gandhara, Kushan period
2nd-3rd centuries CE
Grey Schist
Pvt. Collection, Japan

Found in Cave 17 at Dunhuang, the preaching of Shakyamuni/Amitabha Buddha is artistically rendered in Sui and early Tang stylistics (Plate 1). The central figure is identified as Shakyamuni Buddha, although it is also assumed to be a preaching scene of the Sukhavati paradise depicting Amitabha, with Avalokiteshvara and Mahasthamaprapta. Buddha's hands are in *vitarka mudra* or the gesture of exposition of the law, common to the representation of Amitabha and Shakyamuni Buddha. Similar scenes, belonging to the Sui period in the caves at Dunhuang point at the triad of Buddha with bodhisattvas, depicted from the Kushan period onwards in sculptural steles. A prominent example being the Muhammad Nari Stele and the Brussels Buddha triad (Plate 2). Along with the bodhisattvas, the presence of six monks probably represents the ten disciples of Shakyamuni Buddha. In Buddhist sculptures and

paintings, a number of five to ten seated monks are added as a schematic representation of the preaching scenes. There are no obvious formalised distinctions in this, but the artist has taken keen measures to bring out the variations in figural forms. All of the subsidiary figures are varied in pose and expression. A young lady demurely seated with a lotus flower in her hand, a donor figure recalls the funerary figurines from princely tombs. Above the Buddha's head is a canopy of floral arrangements, clouds ridden by *apsaras* or celestial figures.



Plate 3: Bhaishajyaguru
Dunhuang
7th-8th centuries CE
Silk banner
Acc. No. ch.1.001(99-17-4)
National Museum, New Delhi
Courtesy: Sama Haq

The cult of Bhaishajyaguru became prominent in Central and Far East Asia since, unlike the pure land paradise of Amitabha and Akshobhya Buddha offering rebirth in their respective paradise, Bhaishajyaguru offered relief from pain, suffering, and sorrow in this life itself. In Buddhist art, the Medicine Buddha is iconographically identified with dark blue colour, associating him with *vaidurya* or lapis lazuli known for its healing properties. Both Bhaishajyaguru and Akshobhya are represented in dark blue colours wearing a monastic garment or *kashaya*. In his right hand, he makes different *mudras* such as the gesture of fearlessness or *abhaya mudra*, the gesture of boon-granting or *varada mudra*, or the gesture of enlightenment or *bhumisparsha mudra*. The left-hand holds a gallipot with a myrobalan or *haritaki* herb, known for its healing properties. However, the mudras and the placement of the gallipot is also interchanged in the Medicine Buddha banners from Dunhuang, as seen in the banner from the National Museum, New Delhi, Acc. No. ch.1.001(99-17-4) (Plate 3). The plant is also an essential component of the *triphala* medicine in Ayurveda. In murals and silk banners from Dunhuang, he is also seen with staff or *khakkara* embodying the qualities of an ascetic spreading the message of dhamma. Two bodhisattvas of the Vaidurya paradise flank him. These are Surya-vairochana and Chandra-vairochana holding solar and lunar orbs representing the treasures of Bhaishajyaguru. In another Mahayana text exalting the Medicine Buddha, the *Sapta-tathagata-purva-pranidhana-vishesha-vistara*, written around 7th century CE, the seven Manushi Buddhas or Buddhas of the Past are also represented as the seven emanations of Bhaishajyaguru in seven different paradises. These are followed by a retinue of the twelve *yaksha* generals of different directions, also seen in paradise paintings of Bhaishajyaguru found in Dunhuang caves and museum collections. In scenes of Lapis Lazuli paradise, Bhaishajyaguru is often attended by various bodhisattvas, gods, and monks surrounded by fragrant and healing plants representing a paradisiacal setting where remedies exist for every ailment. A similar spatio-temporal environment can also be traced in the pure land paintings of Amitabha Buddha, perhaps creating a visual dialogue between the two paradise and the cults of the two Buddhas.



Plate 4: Paradise of Bhaishajyaguru

Dunhuang

7th-8th centuries CE

Silk banner

Acc. No. ch.Liii.002 (2003-17-348)

National Museum, New Delhi

Courtesy: Sama Haq

A painting of Bhaishajyaguru from Dunhuang in the National Museum, New Delhi, Acc. No. ch.Liii.002 (2003-17-348) depicts the Paradise of Lapis Lazuli (Plate 4). Bhaishajyaguru's cult centres around life in this world to achieve health and longevity in the present life instead of the promise of pure rebirth offered in the Pure land paradise sects. The Medicine Buddha is seen here seated in the *vajrasana* or the diamond posture on a lotus throne. He is attended by two Bodhisattvas, Suryaprabha and Chandraprabha, and two monks with haloes. On the left

side of the banner, nine forms of violent and untimely death have been shown. The Medicine Buddha saves his devotees from such despicable deaths. Bhaisajyaguru had taken twelve great vows for the welfare of beings and vowed to prevent nine forms of violent and untimely death. These are represented through a man and a woman beside a cauldron as a red-haired demon stretches out his hand towards them; a drowning man; man on a high seat who is being taken away by a demon; the sick man to whom two monks read from the scrolls: one who cannot procure a doctor should get a monk to read the sutras; man kneeling on a platform as a demon rushes towards him; a man with a falcon on the wrist; and a man encircled by flames or violent death. All glory and worldly possessions seem empty when one lies gravely ill. Fervent prayers for the recovery of the sick had a poignancy of their own in ancient times when medical aid was formative. Below them are Eight Bodhisattvas, four on the right and the other four on the left.

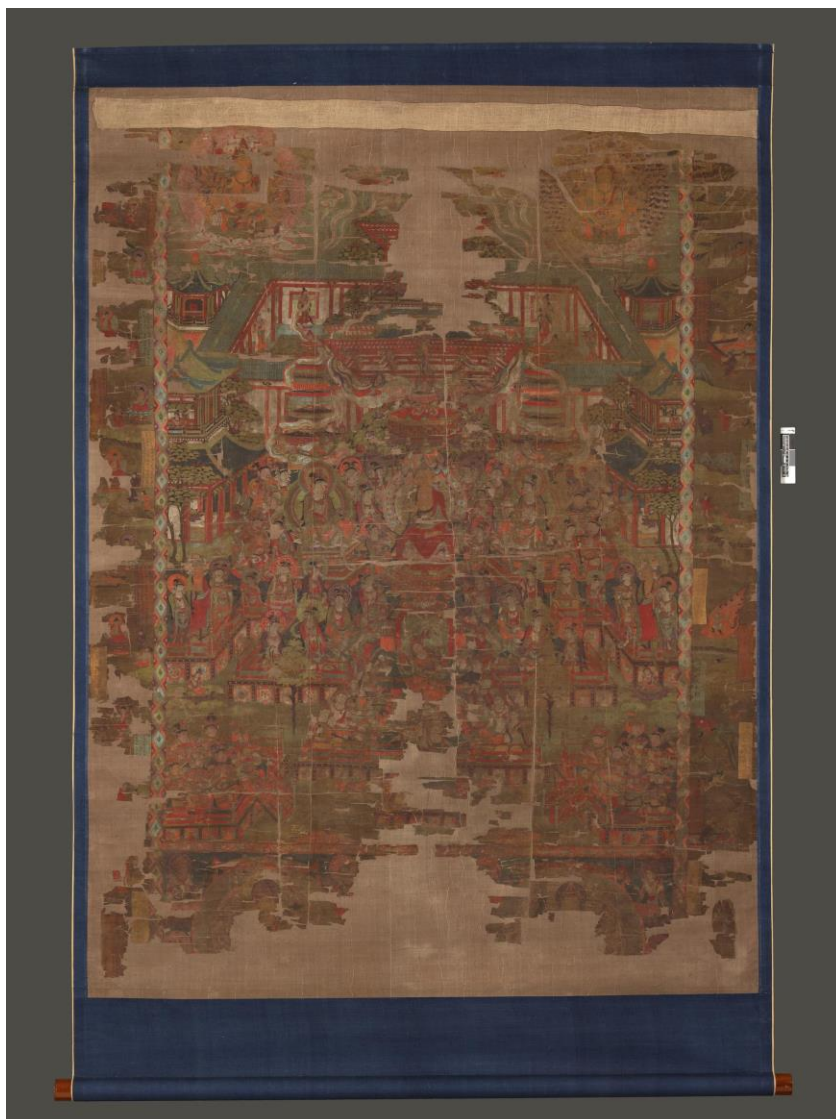


Plate 5: Paradise of Bhaishajyaguru
Dunhuang
9th century CE
Silk banner
Acc. No. 1919,0101,0.36
British Museum

Akin to the paradise scenes of Amitabha preaching in Sukhavati, the Vaidurya preaching scenes of Bhaishajyaguru follows similar stylistic features. The mudra and the presence of the medicinal pot in the lap of the Buddha becomes a strong determinant of defining the centrally seated figure as Bhaishajyaguru. Scholars also believe that the two acolytes of Amitabha Buddha, Mahasthamaprapta and Avalokiteshvara, have also influenced the iconic representation of bodhisattva Suryaprabha and Chandraprabha. The whole composition is laid out just like the depiction of Sukhavati, or the Western Pure Land, with rows of railings, with curtains and trees, seven lakes with golden sands and lotus flowers, music and singing birds, Here the Buddha is Bhaisajyaguru immeasurably bright and glorious instead of Amitabha. A dancer with flying ribbons and whirling scarves performs in the centre of the altar with its golden chakra on a golden tripod bowl. Around the throne of Bhaishajyaguru are six kneeling figures who make different offerings. The two attendant bodhisattvas, Suryaprabha and Chandraprabha, are surrounded by four *lokapalas* and six *yaksha* generals. The silk painting also uniquely depicts figures of Avalokiteshvara with a thousand hands and Manjushri with a thousand bowls. The side scenes complete the depiction of the Eastern Paradise: on the right, the nine forms of violent death and on the left, the twelve vows of Bhaishajyaguru.

The Central Asian banners and paintings of Bhaishajyaguru depict similar stylistics when compared to the paintings of Amitabha's paradise. As a Buddha of healing, the pharmacopoeia associated with worshipping Bhaishajyaguru gained prominence among the monastic and lay communities along the silk route. Further, the vow of protecting the sentient beings as well as to shelter from violent forms of death and disease also transforms Bhaishajyaguru as a saviour Buddha who protects from spiritual and physical harm. The cult of Bhaishajyaguru, through the peripatetic monks travels from the caves and grottoes of Central Asia to the monasteries of Tibet and China. In Nepal, Tibet, Korea, and Japan, till today Bhaishajyaguru is worshipped with great reverence. His iconic form, derived from the earlier prototypes of Shakyamuni Buddha and Amitabha Buddha continues to gain prominence through Nepalese *paubhas* and Tibetan *thangkas*, as a visual connect between the banner paintings of Central Asia and the later ceremonial paintings meant for monastic and lay worship.

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