

The Eighteen Arhats

Buddhism in Every Step B9

Written by the Buddha Memorial Center
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Eighteen Arhat Sculptures by
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The Eighteen Arhats

During his time on earth, the Buddha had thousands upon thousands of disciples. Among the *bhiksus*, the fully ordained male monastics, over two hundred and fifty became “arhats,” practitioners who attained enlightenment and achieved liberation. Among the arhats, there are two groups that have become particularly well known: the “ten great disciples” and the “eighteen arhats.”

While the identities of the ten great disciples are set in stone, the composition of the “eighteen arhats” varies according to the preferences of individual Buddhists. Today, at the Buddha Memorial Center in Taiwan, there stands a set of statues that comprise a brand new set of “eighteen arhats.” This set consists of the Buddha’s ten great disciples, five other well-known arhats (including the classical dragon subduing arhat and tiger taming arhat), and three enlightened *bhiksunis*, fully ordained female monastics.

The statues of these eighteen arhats are placed at the Buddha Memorial Center. These sculptures stand at the average height of three meters. Based on artist Wu Rongsi's wooden carvings, they are sculpted out of zhangpu cyan granite. The generous support of countless devotees allowed them to appear before the public in 2011, situated along the two sides of the Bodhi Wisdom Concourse at the Buddha's Memorial Center, watching over all sentient beings.

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Mahakasyapa

Mahakasyapa was one of the Buddha's earliest disciples, entering the monastic order three years after the Buddha had attained enlightenment. Mahakasyapa was born into a Brahmin family, the aristocracy. Even before he became a disciple of the Buddha, he was known for his noble bearing. He was aloof to worldly desires and material pursuits. When his parents pressured him into marrying, he and his wife agreed to have a celibate relationship and slept in separate beds. Later on, Mahakasyapa overheard the Buddha propagating the Dharma at the Bamboo Grove Monastery. At that moment, faith arose and he became a Buddhist.

On one occasion, when the Buddha was teaching, Mahakasyapa appeared in long hair and tattered clothes, the result of his ascetic practice. When the bhiksus saw him, they gave him disdainful looks. However, the Buddha offered him half of his seat and praised him for his diligence in practice.

After the Buddha entered final *nirvana*, Mahakasyapa inherited the Buddha's robes and alms bowl and organized the First Buddhist Council. Afterwards, he handed the Dharma transmission to Ananda and travelled to Kukkutapada Mountain, where he entered a deep state of meditative concentration to await the arrival of Maitreya Buddha. Among the Buddha's disciples, he was known as foremost in austerities.

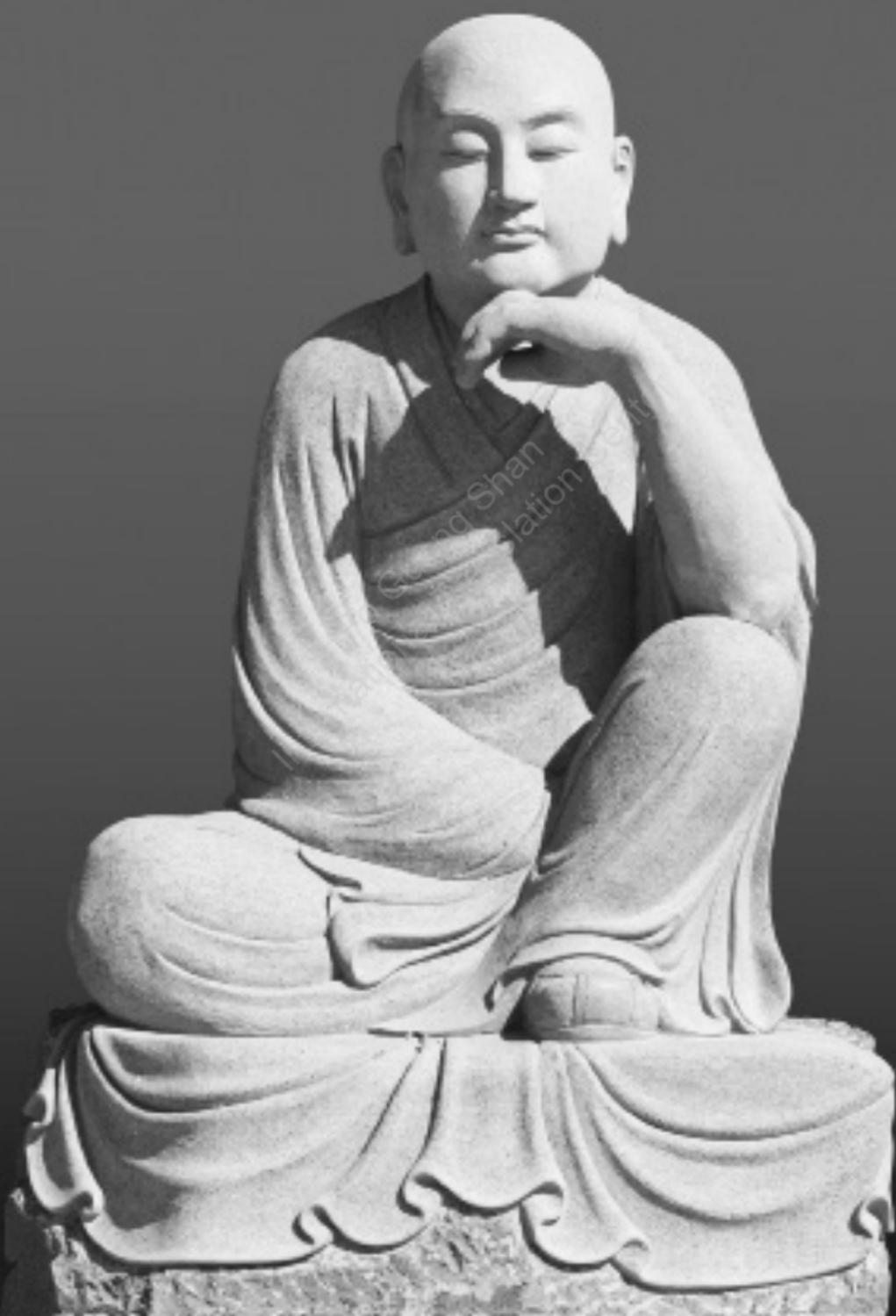


Sariputra

When Sariputra's mother conceived him, she underwent extraordinary changes, and was gifted with incredible wisdom. She was able to best her brother Mahakausthila, a skilled Brahmin scholar, in intellectual debates and discussions. Even as a child, Sariputra was sharp-witted and eloquent. At the age of eight, he was a skilled debater, receiving praise and recognition from the king.

One day, Sariputra overheard a monastic explain the Buddha's teaching on dependent origination, Amazed, he sought refuge under the Buddha and later became one of the chief disciples of the Buddha. The Buddha even entrusted Sariputra with teaching Rahula, the Buddha's son. Sariputra supervised the construction of Jetavana Monastery, and often taught the Dharma on behalf of the Buddha.

He was well-versed in the scriptures of other religions, and was able to speak with great eloquence, gaining many followers. Because of this, he earned the distinction of being foremost in wisdom. In the monastic community, Sariputra is one of the most respected figures, second only to the Buddha. He has always strictly adhered to the Buddha's teachings. Unwilling to see his mentor leave, he asked the Buddha for permission to enter *nirvana* before him.



Subhuti

Since he was young, Subhuti's intelligence impressed many others. However, he possessed a poor temper. After he heard the Buddha's teachings on the harmful effects of anger, he changed his ways and became known as the *bhiksu* least likely to argue with anyone.

Once, when the Buddha was returning from Trayastrimsa Heaven, Utpalavarna Bhiksuni used her supernatural powers so that she would be the first to welcome the Buddha back. But the Buddha later said that it was Subhuti who was the first to receive him, for he had received the Dharma body and understood that all phenomena are empty. Subhuti was one of the few who was able to fully grasp the concept of emptiness. Because of this, Subhuti was known as foremost in understanding emptiness.



Dragon Subduing Arhat

Stories of the Dragon Subduing Arhat's have been recorded since the Buddha's era. The tales followed the spread of Buddhism into China, where it became circulated in the Western Jin dynasty (265-316). Images of the Dragon Subduing Arhat can also be found during the Tang dynasty (618-907). By the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, he was a common figure among the eighteen arhats that adorned the sides of main shrines in Buddhist temples.

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Katyayana

Katyayana was born in a very wealthy Brahmin family; his father was the king's teacher. When Katyayana's uncle, Asita, was about to die, he asked Katyayana to go study under the Buddha. However, the scholarly and knowledgeable Katyayana was too proud, and ignored his uncle's last wish. Only when he found himself unable to decipher a mysterious inscription on a tablet did he turn to the Buddha.

After joining the monastic order, he practiced diligently and became skilled in analyzing and debating the Dharma. Using skillful methods and terse words, Katyayana unraveled difficult dilemmas for others. He taught a poor elderly woman how to avoid poverty by practicing generosity and utilized his wisdom to stop King Virudhaka from persecuting monks. Many outsiders were able to turn over a new leaf after Katyayana's skillful words. He convinced them to accept the teachings of Buddhism. Amongst the Buddha's disciples, Katyayana was foremost in debating.



Cudapanthaka

Cudapanthaka entered the monastic order along with his older brother. Being slow-witted and forgetful, he had trouble remembering the Buddha's teachings. As he saw how Cudapanthaka was making no progress, his brother ordered him to leave the monastery and return home, he wept in grief. But the Buddha taught Cudapanthaka to recite this verse as he performed his daily chores: "Sweep away the dust and remove the dirt."

Later, Cudapanthaka came to realize that, while the external environment can be cleaned with a broom, the defilements within the mind could only be cleansed with wisdom. Upon realizing this, he became an arhat. Afterwards, Cudapanthaka attained great supernatural powers and was capable of manifesting himself in various forms. On one occasion, he used his supernatural powers to teach the Dharma to six bhiksunis who had a reputation of behaving improperly.



Pindola

Pindola was originally a court official of King Udayana. In time, he joined the monastic order, and later became an arhat. Once, he vainly showed off his supernatural powers in public and was reprimanded by the Buddha, who forbade him from entering *nirvana*. Pindola was to stay in the world to uphold the teachings and to serve as a field of merit for human and heavenly beings by accepting their offerings. To better fulfill his role, he vowed to appear wherever he was needed. Due to the many years he has spent in the world, he is depicted with long, drooping eyebrows, and is thus also known as the “arhat with long eyebrows.”



Rahula

Rahula was the son of the Buddha, and the first *sramanera*, or male novice monastic. He became a novice six years after the Buddha attained enlightenment. When he first became a novice, Rahula was fond of telling lies and tricking others. To admonish him, the Buddha shared with him the simile of a wash basin: a person who tells lies is like a basin for foot washing; it is not loved or cared for. If one dies in this state, one will not attain enlightenment. One must not be this wash basin.

After the Buddha admonished him, Rahula recognized his mistakes. He became diligent in practice, and learned to endure insults and slander from others calmly. On one occasion, when his room was occupied by an older bhiksu, he stayed in the lavatory. On another occasion, he was attacked by rogues. Even after receiving a cut on his head, he endured their attacks in silence. Rahula followed the precepts strictly and practiced diligently every day. It is said that he was foremost in esoteric practices.



Mahaprajapati Bhiksuni

Mahaprajapati was the Buddha's aunt. Queen Maya, the Buddha's mother, passed away seven days after giving birth, so the prince was raised by Mahaprajapati. She became the first bhiksuni to enter the sangha, where she remained humble and diligent, strictly obeying the rules. She led the bhiksunis with enthusiasm and friendliness. She conferred the precepts for full ordination on new bhiksunis, all of whom complied with her guidance. After Mahaprajapati entered *nirvana*, the Buddha carried her coffin, a gesture of gratitude for the one who had nurtured him.



Aniruddha

A cousin of the Buddha, Aniruddha was humble and diligent. Due to his handsome features, women frequently tried to seduce him. However, he remained removed before their advances. He even used the Dharma wisdom to free his tempters from their own desires.

Once, he was caught dozing while the Buddha was teaching the Dharma. The Buddha reprimanded him, declaring that “Those who enjoy sleeping are like snails sleeping in their shells; with their heads curled in their shells, they miss the opportunity to hear the name of the Buddha.” Deeply ashamed, he vowed never to sleep again. He became blind from lack of sleep, but never lost his diligence. The Buddha taught him the “Illuminating Vajra Samadhi,” a deep state of meditation, and this practice led him to developing supernatural sight. Because of this, he became foremost amongst the Buddha’s disciples in the divine eye.



Ananda

As the Buddha's cousin, Ananda renounced soon after the Buddha attained enlightenment and served as the Buddha's attendant. His contributions to Buddhism were many, including advocating for the order of Buddhist nuns. Initially, the Buddha did not allow women to join the sangha, but Ananda pressed the matter until the Buddha relented. In this way, Ananda played a vital role in the establishment of the Bhiksuni Order.

In addition, the Buddha would oftentimes instruct Ananda in one-on-one sessions. Once, while the Buddha was visiting the state of Vrjji, he told Ananda that having a firm faith in the Triple Gem is of utmost importance, even more so than upholding the practice of precepts. In another instance, Ananda was following the Buddha's instruction to bow to Amitabha Buddha in the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss when he witnessed radiant light emit from Amitabha Buddha.

Foremost in hearing the Dharma, he was able to recite all the teachings spoken by the Buddha during the First Buddhist Council. This allowed the Dharma to be passed down to later generations.



Purna

Purna was born on the same day as the Buddha. After he joined the monastic order, he tirelessly taught the Dharma. The more remote the location, the harder it was to travel there and teach, the more enthusiastic he was to go.

Purna asked for the Buddha's permission to travel to Sronaparanta in the west, where people were known for their barbaric and violent behavior. As a result of his efforts, many people in Sronaparanta became Buddhists. Purna's fearlessness and self-sacrificial attitude demonstrate his courageousness. This, in addition to his eloquence, led to him being considered foremost in explaining the Dharma.



Tiger Taming Arhat

The Tiger Taming Arhat is seldom mentioned in the Buddhist sutras. His image probably originated during the Five Dynasties (907-960) or the early Song dynasty (960-1127), based on the story of Master Fenggan riding a tiger into the woods. During the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, he was regularly seen among the eighteen arhats adorning the main shrines of Buddhist temples. Apart from supernatural powers, he also signified the eradication of the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance.



Kalodayin

Kalodayin was one of a group of six bhiksus who often acted improperly. Despite this, he was a talented and eloquent teacher of the Dharma, and once instructed Queen Mallika. However, one evening, as he was collecting alms, a bolt of lightning struck. A pregnant woman was horrified when she saw his dark complexion in the light. She mistook Kalodayin for a demon and suffered a miscarriage. After this incident, the Buddha established the precept that forbade collecting alms after noon.

Even after Kalodayin attained arhatship, he felt deeply ashamed for his past wrongdoing and earnestly repented. He vowed to bring a thousand couples in Sravasti to enlightenment. He later fulfilled his vow and was known as the foremost in teaching.



Maudgalyayana

Together with Sariputra, Maudgalyayana was once a disciple of the famed ascetic Sanjaya. Unsatisfied with Sanjaya's inability to end suffering, they both later took refuge in the Buddha. In one instance, he asked for the Buddha's advice in the attempt to save his mother from the hungry ghost realm. The Buddha instructed him to make offerings to the sangha on the last day of the summer retreat, making use of the strength of virtues to rescue the suffering beings. This was the origin of the Ullambana service.

Later, Maudgalayayana became one of the Buddha's ten great disciples and was foremost in supernatural powers. He utilized these powers to teach sentient beings. Maudgalyayana is one of the most radical disciples of the Buddha. Whenever he ran into obstacles while teaching the Dharma, he would refuse to compromise or yield to others. Utilizing his supernatural powers, Maudgalyayana always succeeded in converting outsiders. In his old age, followers of other beliefs attacked him with sticks. Knowing that supernatural powers could not overcome karmic conditions, he calmly accepted the consequences of his karma. Because of this, Maudgalyayana entered *nirvana* before the Buddha.



Upali

Born into the lowest caste, Upali was an untouchable who served as a royal barber. But when he saw the princes joining the monastic order, he became interested in Buddhism. Initially, he thought he would not be allowed to follow the princes. But not only did the Buddha allow him to do so, he was tonsured ahead of the princes. This meant that the princes were required to pay homage to Upali, who had ordained earlier than them. This is the Buddha's first step towards establishing equality in society in opposition to the caste system. After Upali became a monk, he was noted for being foremost in upholding the precepts, and was chosen to recite the Vinaya canon at the First Buddhist Council.



Bhadra Kapilani Bhiksuni

Bhadra Kapilani was born with beauty and virtue. She wanted to lead a spiritual life, so she joined the monastic order soon after the bhiksuni order was established. However, her incredible beauty led to jealousy from others. When she was on alms rounds, she became the target of criticism due to her striking appearance. Bhadra could not help but feel aggrieved by her own beauty.

Fortunately, due to the wholesome karma she had accumulated from past lives, she did not lose faith in spite of her plight. Instead, it spurred her to concentrate on practicing the Dharma, and she soon attained arhatship.



Utpalavarna Bhiksuni

Utpalavarna underwent many tribulations before becoming a bhiksuni. Because of her exceptional strength of character, she became an arhat not long after she joined the monastery. She adhered strictly to the disciplinary rules and was respectful towards the bhiksus. She was courageous and righteous, and often used her powers to deflect false accusations from outsiders.

She was said to be foremost in supernatural powers amongst the bhiksunis. On one occasion, when the Buddha returned from Trayastrimsa Heaven, Utpalavarna disguised herself as a great king to receive the Buddha. When Devadatta rebelled and tried to harm the Buddha, she reprimanded Devadatta and was consequently murdered by him.